

University of Pardubice
Faculty of Arts and Philosophy

The Republic of San Lorenzo: Political Satire according to Kurt Vonnegut
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Bachelor Thesis

2018

Univerzita Pardubice
Fakulta filozofická
Akademický rok: 2016/2017

ZADÁNÍ BAKALÁŘSKÉ PRÁCE

(PROJEKTU, UMĚLECKÉHO DÍLA, UMĚLECKÉHO VÝKONU)

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Studijní program: **B7310 Filologie**
Studijní obor: **Anglický jazyk pro odbornou praxi**
Název tématu: **San Lorenzská republika: politická satira podle Kurta Vonneguta**
Zadávající katedra: **Katedra anglistiky a amerikanistiky**

Z á s a d y p r o v y p r a c o v á n í :

Práce se zaměří na fiktivní svět San Lorenzské republiky, jak jej ve svém díle "Kolíbka" (Cat's Cradle) vyobrazil Kurt Vonnegut. Soustředit se bude zejména na dystopii a apokalypsu jako prostředky politické satiry.

Rozsah grafických prací:

Rozsah pracovní zprávy:

Forma zpracování bakalářské práce: **tištěná**

Jazyk zpracování bakalářské práce: **Angličtina**

Seznam odborné literatury:

Vonnegut, Kurt. "Cat's Cradle." New York: Dell, 1998. Bloom, Harold. "The Chaotic Age." In: The Western canon, the Books and School of the Ages. Harcourt Brace, 1994. Vonnegut, Kurt. "Conversations With Kurt Vonnegut." Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1988.

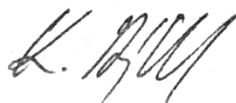
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Katedra anglistiky a amerikanistiky

Datum zadání bakalářské práce: **30. dubna 2017**

Termín odevzdání bakalářské práce: **31. března 2018**



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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to use this opportunity to express my gratitude to my supervisor, Mgr. Michal Kleprlík, Ph.D., for pointing me in the direction of this, in many ways, eye-opening topic and for his help throughout the writing process. I would also like to thank my family, my girlfriend Anna, and my closest friends for always being there for me throughout my life and studies.

ANNOTATION

This bachelor thesis analyzes the themes of satire and the use of apocalyptic and dystopian motifs in the book *Cat's Cradle* by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. The first chapter is devoted to presenting relevant literary terminology, while the second focuses on the historical and cultural context of the contemporary United States. The third chapter deals with the book itself, the ideas behind it and its literary features. Also, it concentrates on the narrator as the central apocalyptic element. The last chapter examines selected targets of Vonnegut's satire, especially scientific progress, the deceitful nature of religions and the role of the family within society.

KEYWORDS

Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle*, satire, Cold War, apocalypse, dystopia

ANOTACE

Tato bakalářská práce analyzuje témata satiry a použití motivů apokalypsy a dystopie v knize *Kolíbka* od Kurta Vonneguta. První kapitola je věnována seznámení čtenáře s relevantní literární terminologií, zatímco kapitola druhá se soustředí na historicko-kulturní kontext soudobých Spojených států. Třetí kapitola se zabývá knihou samotnou, jejími literárními aspekty a autorovou inspirací. Koncentruje se také na postavu vypravěče jakožto hlavní apokalyptického elementu příběhu. Poslední kapitola již přistupuje k jednotlivým cílům Vonnegutovi satiry, konkrétně vědecko-technologickému pokroku, podvodné podstatě náboženství a roli rodiny v rámci společnosti.

KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA

Vonnegut, *Kolíbka*, satira, studená válka, apokalypsa, dystopie

Table of Contents:

INTRODUCTION.....	8
1 RELEVANT TERMINOLOGY	10
2 AMERICAN SOCIETY IN THE EARLY ATOMIC AGE.....	13
3 KURT VONNEGUT’S CAT’S CRADLE	20
3.1 The Narrator.....	24
4 THEMES OF SATIRE IN CAT’S CRADLE	29
4.1 The Ethics of Scientific Progress.....	29
4.2 The True Essence and Value of Religion	34
4.3 The Role of Family within Society.....	39
CONCLUSION	44
RESUMÉ.....	48
BIBLIOGRAPHY	52

INTRODUCTION

The world wakes up into another day. The scientists of the research laboratories of the General Forge and Foundry Company are coming to their workplaces to deliver another breakthrough invention that will improve the lives of their fellow Americans. Several hundred kilometers southward, in the Caribbean, the people of the Republic of San Lorenzo are beginning a new day under the principle of Dynamic Tension, trying to cope with their sad existence. John, a freelance writer, travels from the former to the latter in order to complete a book that he set out to write. The book is to be called *The Day the World Ended*. That is the fictional world that Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. created to express his views of the contemporary American society, the society of the Long Sixties. His 1963 novel *Cat's Cradle* is the satirical image of the Cold War America that deals with many thorny issues of the period such as dangerous implications of scientific progress, the impact of family on the society or deceitful nature of religious teachings. Vonnegut's inventive satirical story even earned him a degree in Anthropology at the University of Chicago. The themes of satire included in this very book will be a subject to analysis in this thesis, whose chief aim is to analyze the political satire of the book, not only in the traditional sense of the word but proceeding from the Greek word *politikos*, which meant "of citizens."¹ Therefore, it will also concern social satire.

The first chapter aims to lay theoretical grounds for the subsequent analysis. Its first section provides the reader with a brief overview of the genre of satire, its definition, forms and types of satirists. The second section covers the definition of apocalypse and apocalyptic literature, while the third one deals with the term dystopia.

The second chapter intends to present a cultural portrait of the United States in the early Cold War, spanning from the end of the World War II up until the publication of Vonnegut's book. In the first part, the reasons that stood behind the conflict of the two global superpowers are covered as well as the influence of nuclear bombs, which the end of World War II brought, on the science in general. Then, the impact of the Cold War on the lives of ordinary Americans is described. What follows is a religious profile of the particular period in the United States. The chapter ends with several examples of the reaction of pop culture to the implications of the

¹ Online Etymology Dictionary, s.v. "politic", accessed June 14, 2018, https://www.etymonline.com/word/politic?ref=etymonline_crossreference.

Cold War use of science. The chapter also intends to provide cultural background and context for the literary analysis, pointing out key historical events and facts that are related to Vonnegut's satire in *Cat's Cradle*.

The purpose of the third chapter is to make the reader familiar with the book as a whole, mainly with where the author took the inspiration and what the book is like in terms of tone, style, and composition. Since the book is perceived as the catalyst of Vonnegut's transformation into a cult figure, the reasons for its popularity are also explored. The chapter also discusses the book's narrator, which serves as the main apocalyptic element of the story.

The last chapter is devoted to the analysis of Vonnegut's satire itself. Its first section deals with Vonnegut's view of scientific progress and its possible disastrous implications. The following section deals with the author's views of religion, its deceitful nature and parallels to science. The final section of the chapter presents the reader with Vonnegut's ideas regarding family and its impact on society as a whole.

At the end of the thesis, there is a conclusion that sums up the findings and tries to present a generalized verdict on the aim of Vonnegut's satire.

1 RELEVANT TERMINOLOGY

In order to find the meaning of the word satire, one can turn to an enormous number of dictionaries. The definition will always be just about the same. For example, *The Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms* defines satire as “a mode of writing that exposes the failings of individuals, institutions, or societies to ridicule them and scorn.”² The word also refers to literary works written to serve the aforementioned purpose. Satire as a genre is diverse and not limited to any particular literary form. Nonetheless, the most usual form that satire takes is that of a novel.³ In his book *The Anatomy of Satire*, Gilbert Highet characterizes the most fundamental attributes of satire. According to him, satire is “topical; it claims to be realistic (although it is usually exaggerated or distorted); it is shocking; it is informal and (although often in a grotesque or painful manner) it is funny.”⁴ It uses daring and eloquent language of the particular period, avoids clichés and rules. Where other genres tend to be formal and detached, it exhibits freedom, easiness, and directness.⁵ The chief method of satire through which it serves its purpose is telling the truth while having a laugh. It is not mere entertainment though. It also provokes the reader to examine the moral values of the author and possibly to implement them in their own moral codes.⁶ There are two types of satirists that differ in their view of the purpose of satire. One wants to admonish and remedy, while the other despises and punishes.⁷ The former, seemingly more altruistic one, is fond of most people but acknowledges the element of ignorance that is inherently present in human nature. That is what they try to point out and rectify. Horace is an excellent example of that. The latter, on the other hand, is significantly more negative. They despise humanity as a whole, despite liking individuals. According to them, people are not just ignorant; they are inherently evil. For example, Juvenal falls under this category.⁸ As Highet correctly points out, satire cannot be simply split into two halves. A satirist is likely to alternate between pessimistic and optimistic ideas, and it is solely up to them which approach they are going to adopt toward the particular issue.⁹ Satire also utilizes different methods of addressing the reader. It can do so directly or indirectly. Direct satire speaks directly to the

² Chris Baldick, *The Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms*, 2nd ed., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 228.

³ Ian Hall, “The Satiric Vision of Politics: Ethics, Interests and Disorders,” *European Journal of International Relations* 20, no. 1 (2014): 222.

⁴ Gilbert Highet, *The Anatomy of Satire*, (New Jersey, Princeton University, 1962), 5.

⁵ Highet, *Anatomy of Satire*, 3.

⁶ Hall, “The Satiric Vision,” 229.

⁷ Highet, *Anatomy of Satire*, 237.

⁸ Highet, *Anatomy of Satire*, 235.

⁹ Highet, *Anatomy of Satire*, 237.

reader and humorously criticizes particular issues. Indirect satire uses its story instead, creating fictional worlds to ridicule people's follies.¹⁰

Kurt Vonnegut had a specific view of the genre of satire. It did not matter to him at all. With his typical wit, he said that he had not been bothered to even look it up, and so he did not know whether he was a satirist or not.¹¹

As far as the words apocalypse and apocalyptic are concerned, they can now be encountered everywhere. Pop culture and movie industry, in particular, has made them so popular that almost everybody is familiar with them. Hardly anybody knows what the words mean or where they originate from. The Macmillan dictionary defines apocalypse as “a time when the whole world will be destroyed.”¹² That is what most people are familiar with. Originally, apocalypse was “another name of the Book of Revelations of Saint John, the last book of the New Testament.”¹³ The book contains a prophetic vision of the complete destruction of the world. The notion that apocalypse means the prophecy rather than the act of destruction is further backed by the etymology of the word itself. It was adopted into Old English from the Greek word *apokaluptein*, which means “to uncover.”¹⁴ Consequently, apocalyptic writing or apocalyptic literature prophetically reveals the future, especially the coming end of the world.¹⁵ Furthermore, other literary visions of violent and cataclysmic happenings such as wars or large-scale bloodsheds can be called apocalyptic.¹⁶

The definitions of the word dystopia do not always provide the same meaning. All of them, however, agree that dystopia is something bad as the prefix *dys-* suggests but there is a certain variety in the determination of what exactly is wrong. Macmillan defines it as “an imaginary place or situation in which everything in society is extremely bad.”¹⁷ Merriam-Webster

¹⁰ Kathleen Kuiper, *Prose: Literary Terms and Concepts* (New York: Britannica Educational Publishing, 2012), 164.

¹¹ Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., “Kurt Vonnegut, Head Bokononist,” interview by C.D.B Bryan, in *Conversations with Kurt Vonnegut*, ed. William R. Allen (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi: 1988), 4.

¹² Macmillan Dictionary, s.v. “apocalypse”, accessed May 14, 2018, <https://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/apocalypse>.

¹³ Martin Gray, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms*, 2nd rev. ed. (Beirut: York Press, 1992), 29.

¹⁴ Online Etymology Dictionary, s.v. “apocalypse”, accessed May 14, 2018, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/apocalypse>.

¹⁵ Baldick, *Concise Dictionary*, 16.

¹⁶ Gray, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms*, 29.

¹⁷ Macmillan Dictionary, s.v. “dystopia,” accessed May 14, 2018, <https://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/dystopia>.

focuses more on the aspect of human lives, stating that dystopia is “an imaginary place where people lead dehumanized and often fearful lives.”¹⁸ The Cambridge dictionary adds a perspective of human collaboration when characterizing dystopia as “(the idea of) a society in which people do not work well with each other and are not happy.”¹⁹ Specialized literary dictionaries mostly offer a limited definition of a bad place whose positive counterpart is a Utopia, which is the entry that the reader is then redirected to.

¹⁸ Merriam-Webster Dictionary, s.v. “dystopia,” accessed May 14, 2018, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dystopia>.

¹⁹ Cambridge Dictionary, s.v. “dystopia,” accessed May 14, 2018, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/dystopia>.

2 AMERICAN SOCIETY IN THE EARLY ATOMIC AGE

Right after the victorious end of World War II, the United States faced yet another conflict, one that was to be fought behind closed doors rather than on open battlefields. The Cold War was set to shape both American politics and lives of ordinary people for the upcoming decades. It was the two of the very last American military actions of World War II that proved defining for the Cold War – the 1945 bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. However, the catalyst for these events is of a much earlier date. In 1939, Leo Szilárd, a Hungarian-German-American physicist, wrote a letter (later signed by Albert Einstein) that informed President Roosevelt of the possibilities to set-up a chain reaction that would generate a large amount of power that could later be used in extremely destructive bombs. What was even more disturbing was that the letter pointed out that Germans might have already started such research.²⁰ A very unsettling observation, given that Germany had just commenced World War II. That prompted President Roosevelt to take actions leading to the establishment of the Manhattan Project. Its goal was to develop the first nuclear weapons.

Not only did the Manhattan Project (and its aftermath in Japan) provide humanity with its most powerful weapon to that date, it also revolutionized the understanding of science – both by the public and scientists (especially chemists and physicists) themselves. Even Albert Einstein started regretting penning the letter to President Roosevelt, stating that had he known that the German attempts to develop the bomb would turn out unsuccessful, he would never have done what he had done.²¹ Prior to the war, physicist were mainly academics and the research they conducted offered little to no practical application. The bomb changed that. In the post-war period, the number of physicists quadrupled, but the profession saw a shift from the academic environment to private industry or military.²² The researchers started understanding that their concept of evil-free research that produces no impact on daily lives was not the case. Should such an impact crop up, they thought, it would only push humanity forward and improve the quality of life.²³ The live performance of what research can cause when put into practice tore that belief in innocuousness asunder. However, only a few scientists thought it their fault.

²⁰ Albert Einstein to Franklin D. Roosevelt, August 2, 1939, in *Atomic Archive*, accessed May 7, 2018. <http://www.atomicarchive.com/Docs/Begin/Einstein.shtml>

²¹ “The Einstein Letter That Started It All; A message to President Roosevelt 25 Years ago launched the atom bomb and the Atomic Age.” *The New York Times*, August 2, 1964, accessed June 26, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/1964/08/02/archives/the-einstein-letter-that-started-it-all-a-message-to-president.html>.

²² R.L. Meier and E. Rabinowitch, “Scientists Before and After the Bomb,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 290, no. 1 (November 1953): 118.

²³ Meier and Rabinowitch, “Scientists,” 124.

The majority tried to absolve themselves from the guilt, likening themselves to soldiers who merely carry out orders.²⁴ Trościanko supports this perspective when arguing that desperate situations often require desperate measures, especially during wartime, which does not allow much time to ponder ethics. All people, including scientists, face the immense pressure of maximal contribution to the cause of their side. Other options are, of course, much less desirable.²⁵ Either way, science lost its image of a universally harmless pursuit of goodness and truth. Instead, as Meier and Rabinowitch labeled it, it also became “playing with hell-fire.”²⁶ The military-industrial complex was quick to soothe hesitant scientists by providing them with relatively high salaries and abundant resources. The target was simple – to make the scientists overlook the potentially catastrophic results of their research so that they could focus entirely on making a breakthrough discovery, which is the goal of any scientist.²⁷ In a way, scientists did not have much choice since, after the war, most research activities in nuclear physics were financed by military organizations.²⁸ For example, General Electric (Vonnegut’s employer-to-be) thrived thanks to a handsome number of military contracts.²⁹ That, of course, carried a substantial risk of contributing to the creation of more advanced and even more lethal weaponry. Those who have possessed strong moral values refused to take part in any military-related research and came together to establish the Society for Social Responsibility in Science.³⁰ Additionally, the postwar public regard for scientists decreased as well since the immediate associations that the word “scientist” brought to mind of an average American were “spy” and “bomb.”³¹

One the verge of the new conflict, Americans and Soviets, once fighting shoulder to shoulder against the Triple Alliance and subsequently the Nazis, became fierce rivals. The foundation for such a rupture had roots in the very nature of the two adversaries – their contradictory ideologies. As Isserman and Kazin put it, there were considerable differences as far as morality was concerned. Persecution of political opponents was against the very values Americans held dear. In the Soviet Union, on the other hand, silencing of those who did not conform to the ideology was a customary practice of the Communist government.³² The United States tried to

²⁴ Meier and Rabinowitch, “Scientists,” 124.

²⁵ Tom Trościanko, “Smart Bombs and Dumb Scientists?”, *Perception* 22, no. 6 (November 1993): 632.

²⁶ Meier and Rabinowitch, “Scientists,” 124.

²⁷ Meier and Rabinowitch, “Scientists,” 125.

²⁸ Meier and Rabinowitch, “Scientists,” 123.

²⁹ Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin, *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 9.

³⁰ Meier and Rabinowitch, “Scientists,” 125.

³¹ Meier and Rabinowitch, “Scientists,” 120.

³² Isserman and Kazin, *America Divided*, 14.

maintain democracy in their sphere of influence, whereas the Soviets sought power and ultimate control over the neighboring states. Fortunately, both administrations were conscious enough of the unprecedented damage to the world that resorting to an open conflict would bring about, with both states armed with their state-of-the-art nuclear warheads.³³ Nevertheless, many ordinary people could not get rid of that “what-if” feeling at the back of their minds. In a newspaper article, Thomas E. Dewey, the 47th Governor of New York, claimed that war could come “whenever the fourteen evil men in Moscow decide to have it break out.”³⁴ These words resonated with many. The potential nuclear conflict instilled fear in people regardless of their age. Even the youngest were not spared. “I am 9 years old. I don't like the plans that you are planning. I am too young to die,”³⁵ wrote one little boy to President John F. Kennedy.

On a less geopolitical note, the very foundation of the society was to be adjusted to the nuclear age – the American family. Elaine Tyler May defined this new kind of family as “isolated, sexually charged, cushioned by abundance, and protected against impending doom by the wonders of modern technology.”³⁶ At that point, *containment* became a political buzzword of the period. Although it referred mainly to the American foreign policy, it soon started influencing American households as well. If there was one thing that could frighten the American capitalists even more than the bomb, it surely was the spreading of communism. If containment could serve well abroad, why not try it also on the home front? For the legislators, it became a sort of universal solution for dealing with both Soviet aggressors around the world and potential revolutionaries stateside.³⁷ The basic tool of *home containment* was marriage. The demography of the period shows that people were keener than ever on starting families;³⁸ partly out of the postwar sentiment and partly out of ideological reasons. The vision of a safe world vanished due to nuclear proliferation, whereas the ideology of *home containment* was on the rise. In the age where the arms race was gradually increasing humanity’s capacity to annihilate itself, home

³³ John Lamberton Harper, *The Cold War*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011), 110.

³⁴ “Dewey Bids Public Back Civil Defense,” *The New York Times*, June 21, 1951, quoted in Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb’s Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 534, <https://www.scribd.com/read/322769926/By-the-Bomb-s-Early-Light-American-Thought-and-Culture-At-the-Dawn-of-the-Atomic-Age>.

³⁵ Bill Adler, *Kids’ Letters to President Kennedy*, (New York: William Morrow, 1961), quoted in Alice L. George, *Awaiting Armageddon: How Americans Faced the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 245, <https://scribd.com/read/322772809/Awaiting-Armageddon-How-Americans-Faced-the-Cuban-Missile-Crisis#>

³⁶ Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 3.

³⁷ May, *Homeward Bound*, 113.

³⁸ May, *Homeward Bound*, 3.

became the prime place of safety, or at least of feeling safe. It was a shelter in a crazy and chaotic world, early marriage and many children provided psychological carapace protecting people from the doom that was looming large.³⁹ In order to achieve such domestic harmony, the ideology proposed that the couples adhere to their predefined gender roles. That meant a male breadwinner and a female housewife. While the man was at work, busy providing for the family, the wife took the responsibility of being the full-time manager of the household. All in all, the role that women played in the Cold War American society was a significant one. Even more important than the role of women as such was their role of a mother. The society saw motherhood as something vital and, as May points out, “the primary source of woman’s identity.”⁴⁰ Women’s adherence to their traditional role would allow them to raise children who behave well, perform well at school and may become future scientists who will help America to bring the Cold War to a victorious end.⁴¹ In contrast, being a mother also posed a great danger to American values. A mother who was too protective of her child (or children) risked raising a sissy. A sissy, as defined by Dr. Luther E. Woodward quoted in May, “is a boy (or girl) who gets too much satisfaction from what his mother does for him and not enough from what he does for himself.”⁴² Such sissies were allegedly more likely to move towards communism and subvert the American society. That is where fathers come into play. Fatherhood did not serve only as a source of meaning for men’s lives outside work but also to offset the excessive care the mother provided. Fathers would motivate and encourage their children to be more independent.⁴³ Apart from the establishment of a happy and secure home, marriage served another important purpose – to contain sexual behavior of Americans. A substantial number of puissant people of the time believed that there was a relationship between sexual behavior and inclination to the doctrine of communism.⁴⁴ People who were not married and indulged in premarital sex were seen as vulnerable. Only a marriage in which the man is the dominant figure and the woman provides sexual fulfillment would hold strong against omnipresent subversive threats. The men for whom their wives were attractive sexual partners were much more likely to resist the seduction of pornography or prostitution and therefore preserve the American capitalist values.⁴⁵

³⁹ May, *Homeward Bound*, 24.

⁴⁰ May, *Homeward Bound*, 142.

⁴¹ May, *Homeward Bound*, 109.

⁴² May, *Homeward Bound*, 147.

⁴³ May, *Homeward Bound*, 146.

⁴⁴ May, *Homeward Bound*, 94.

⁴⁵ May, *Homeward Bound*, 97.

American people have always been deeply religious. After all, it was religious reasons that led the Pilgrims to sail away from England to the New World. Religion had always played an important part in the society, and the early stages of the Cold War were no different. In the period after World War II, the interest of Americans in religion reached unparalleled heights. Both the optimism of the postwar period and the anxiety that the arms race brought pointed people into the direction of religion. Settling down also went hand in hand with frequent visits to church.⁴⁶ The typical representative of that spiritual boom was a young man who had been a teenager during the Great Depression, had served as a soldier of low rank in World War II and now wanted to start anew and enjoy being a typical middle-class consumer. Churchgoing was an essential aspect of that lifestyle.⁴⁷ Even though the most substantial portion of people claimed that they visited their church for spiritual and inspirational reasons, others saw it as more of a social activity that allowed them to set a good example and meet people.⁴⁸ As Putnam and Campbell point out “churchgoing was the thing to do.”⁴⁹ However, the greater the number of regular churchgoers, the less the original ideas of their religion were important for them.⁵⁰ Moreover, religious activities helped people fight loneliness and rootlessness when, thanks to advancing industrialization and increased upward mobility, they were leaving their original residences and were moving to cities, hoping to start fulfilling their American dream. May explains that even though people may not have been too interested in the spiritual core of their particular religion, the church provided a social environment, therefore helped to overcome the feeling of alienation that these people had.⁵¹ On the brink of the Sixties, people appeared more zealous than ever before, regularly went to the church and when asked in a Gallup poll, the overwhelming majority of them claimed that they prayed and said grace before eating.⁵² This religious heyday soon projected itself into the national identity as the nation came “under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance and put “In God We Trust” onto its currency. There is a question though. Did all that happen out of spirituality or was it, as Isserman and Kazin ask, “a little more than a device for keeping the social order together?”⁵³

⁴⁶ Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Unites and Divides Us* (New York, Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2010), 83.

⁴⁷ Putnam and Campbell, *American Grace*, 85-86.

⁴⁸ Putnam and Campbell, *American Grace*, 87.

⁴⁹ Putnam and Campbell, *American Grace*, 87.

⁵⁰ Isserman and Kazin, *America Divided*, 243.

⁵¹ May, *Homeward Bound*, 26.

⁵² Gallup Report, “Religion in America: 50 Years,” 1935-1985, in Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin, *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 242.

⁵³ Isserman and Kazin, *America Divided*, 242.

The anxiety that the arms race and the mutually assured destruction doctrine brought penetrated all types of pop culture. For example, the 1962 song by Louvin Brothers called *The Great Atomic Power* contains the exact anxiety of not knowing whether humanity will annihilate itself together with a lament for bringing the potential doom upon itself:

Do you fear this man's invention
That they call atomic power
Are we all in great confusion
Do we know the time or hour?⁵⁴

At the same time though, it offers a solution to those fears, genuinely consistent with the nation's spiritual state of mind of the time:

There is one way to escape it
Be prepared to meet the lord
Give your heart and soul to Jesus
He will be your shielding sword.⁵⁵

In 1965, P.F. Sloan topped the charts with a song famously performed by Barry McGuire that seemed to warn the administration that there would be no way back once a nuclear conflict has started:

Don't you understand
What I'm trying to say
Can't you feel the fears
That I'm feeling today
If the button is pushed
There's no running away
There'll be no one to save
With the world in a grave.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ "The Great Atomic Power," Spotify, track 7 on The Louvin Brothers, *Weapon of Prayer*, Capitol Records Nashville, 1962.

⁵⁵ The Louvin Brothers, "The Great Atomic Power."

⁵⁶ "Eve of Destruction," Spotify, track 1 on Barry McGuire, *Eve of Destruction*, Geffen Records, 1965.

America in the early nuclear age was a geopolitical superpower of high living standards, beautiful pop culture and state-of-the-art technology in many fields, but at the same time, it was a country blindly believing in its worldwide supremacy. Its massive hatred toward the Soviet Union might have cost it everything that its people worked for since the Pilgrims, and more importantly, it could have seriously damaged the whole world.

3 KURT VONNEGUT'S CAT'S CRADLE

Cat's Cradle was released during a period that was a turbulent one. The United States had been deeply involved in the Cold War, the nation was still digesting the closest of its calls represented by the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, and its beloved President Kennedy was to be assassinated cold-bloodedly in broad daylight of Dealey Plaza, Texas. By then, Kurt Vonnegut had no longer been a PR man and reporter for the General Electric Corporation in Schenectady, New York, a job that he had enrolled for, having returned from the war. Although this job may seem minor when compared to Vonnegut's future writing career, it was, together with his involvement in the 1945 firebombing of Dresden, immensely influential for the book that is going to be analyzed on the following pages. It was the laboratories of his new employer where he stumbled upon the idea of Ice-9, a modified molecular structure that he would later use as the central symbol of *Cat's Cradle*. He possessed a perfect mix for the job at General Electric since he was a talented writer and prior to the war, he majored in biochemistry, and so science was not a completely foreign field for him. In the laboratories, Vonnegut joined his brother, Bernard, who had been working there as a scientist. As Vonnegut recalled, his job revolved around regular visits to laboratories and enquiring the scientists about their research. Once in a while, the process would generate a good story.⁵⁷ At that time, Kurt's brother was working on a serious project that was set to revolutionize various aspects of human life. The project was called Cirrus and concerned methods of weather manipulation. Bernard's superior for the project, a Nobel Prize winner, Dr. Irving Langmuir played one of the most – if not the most – essential parts in Vonnegut's mosaic of thoughts leading up to the creation of *Cat's Cradle*. What proved to be the catalyst for the creation was H.G. Wells' visit to the laboratories of General Electric where he met with Langmuir. As Vonnegut revealed in a 1974 interview, Langmuir told Wells about a redesigned molecular structure of ice that had an exceptionally high melting point. However good an idea for a science-fiction story it may have been, Wells was not interested or at least never published such a story.⁵⁸ After both Wells and Langmuir passed away, Vonnegut came to a conclusion: "Finders, keepers – the idea is mine."⁵⁹ Not only did Langmuir provide the central symbol for *Cat's Cradle*, but he also became a model for one of the main characters of

⁵⁷ Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., "There Must Be More to Love than Death: A Conversation with Kurt Vonnegut," interview by Robert Musil, in *Conversations with Kurt Vonnegut*, ed. William R. Allen (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi: 1988), 233.

⁵⁸ Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., "Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.," interview by Joe David Bellamy and John Casey, in *Conversations with Kurt Vonnegut*, ed. William R. Allen (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi: 1988), 161.

⁵⁹ Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., "Kurt Vonnegut, The Art of Fiction LXIV," interview by David Hayman, David Michaelis, George Plimpton and Richard Rhodes, in *Conversations with Kurt Vonnegut*, ed. William R. Allen (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi: 1988), 182.

the novel – a nuclear physicist Dr. Felix Hoenikker. The particular similarities will be pointed out later in the thesis when Vonnegut’s satiric vision of science is being discussed.

The tone of the book could be best described as contrasting. While being exceptionally funny and witty, it is also very pessimistic. Vonnegut had been through a lot in his life. Many of those experiences would be enough for anybody to lose hope for the future. Be it the loss of the family fortune during the Great Depression, his mother’s subsequent, depression-driven suicide or being taken prisoner of war and witnessing the complete destruction of the city of Dresden by his fellow countrymen, having to clean up the corpses of innocent civilians. All that left a bitter trace in Vonnegut, one that he would try to cope with by laughter. After all, as James Lundquist points out, for Vonnegut, laughter is the most effective means of tackling both personal and global tragedies. The equation is simple in this case – if laughter is a weapon against sadness and grief, then the most hilarious of jokes come from the biggest of tragedies.⁶⁰ No matter how much Vonnegut’s laughs, he is still unable to be hopeful about the future of our world, and *a fortiori*, in the age where humanity exponentially increases its capacity to annihilate itself. Such pessimism is contradictory to the grand narrative of American individualism and, in fact, the American dream itself. Vonnegut acknowledges that by saying that there are people who plainly cannot solve their problems because they do not have what it takes. Therefore, it is shocking to him that Americans always expect that everybody can get out of their trouble just by being a little more persistent or energetic. It is a huge misconception, something to cry about. Again, crying is something not very American, and so Vonnegut does what he does best – he laughs.⁶¹

Genre-wise, there are two brackets that the book can be put into. If one examines *Cat’s Cradle* as a work of satire, it can be seen that the book is a prime example of it. The key to Vonnegut’s satirical expertise lies within the first years of his life. In fact, Vonnegut was unintentionally taught some of the principles of satire already as a small boy. As he described, he was the youngest member of the family with his parents and siblings being very prominent in their respective fields of work. When the family gathered around the table, little Kurt strived for their attention. In order to succeed, he learned to make jokes, which was something that he

⁶⁰ James Lundquist, “Cosmic Irony,” in *Kurt Vonnegut’s Cat’s Cradle*, ed. Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2002), 151.

⁶¹ Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., “Playboy Interview,” interview by David Standish, in *Conversations with Kurt Vonnegut*, ed. William R. Allen (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi: 1988), 91.

was getting increasingly better at.⁶² In Vonnegut's case, the old saying rings true – necessity is the mother of invention. His having to draw the attention to himself helped him to become exceptionally good at one of the centerpieces of satire – the ability to wittily draw attention to the follies of humanity. As a result, *Cat's Cradle* is a collection of short jokes, rather than a conventional novel or a type of work that the word “novel” traditionally evokes. Not only the content, but the arrangement of the chapters itself serves as a joke as well. When the reader opens the book of approximately 250 pages, they will find inside a ridiculously high number of chapters – 127. The book presents the reader with a wonderful satirical account of contemporary America and all of its thorny issues. The narrator's prophetic quest together with Dr. Hoenikkers lack of concern about the implication of his actions show the danger of scientific research directed by careless people. The playfully crafted religion of Bokononism exposes the failings of religion while stressing out its helpful features. The Hoenikker family serves as an example of how not to behave toward one another and how parenting can influence not only the family itself but the whole society. The other bracket that is suitable for *Cat's Cradle* is that of science-fiction. The concepts like Ice-9 and constant use of scientific themes makes the books correctly anchored in a genre that deals with the impact of science, be it existing or imaginary, upon the society.⁶³ Vonnegut, however, disagreed with being labeled a science-fiction writer. He did not disagree with it because it was not what he was doing. What he disagreed with was the critical view of science fiction writers since it sheds a negative light on them, portraying them as mere short story writers of poor quality. Vonnegut himself attributed that to colleges, which encourage English majors to despise technology and since those majors often become critics, they naturally despise science fiction. He claimed that there was a feeling that one cannot be a reputable author and know how machines work.⁶⁴ On top of that, to him, science was an inherent part of our time, and so if a writer wanted to depict our time accurately, they naturally had to understand it.⁶⁵

Although *Cat's Cradle* explores extraordinarily serious topics, it is accessible to a wide spectrum of people thanks to the style that Vonnegut employed. The book is written in simple language, spiced up by an occasional vulgarity to make it as common as possible. Vonnegut

⁶² Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., “An Interview with Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.,” interview by Frank McLaughlin, in *Conversations with Kurt Vonnegut*, ed. William R. Allen (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi: 1988), 69.

⁶³ Kuiper, *Literary Terms and Concepts*, 44.

⁶⁴ Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., *Vampeters, Foma & Granfallons* (New York: Rosseta Books, 2014), 1, Kindle.

⁶⁵ Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., “A Talk with Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.,” interview by Robert Scholes, in *Conversations with Kurt Vonnegut*, ed. William R. Allen (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi: 1988), 120.

does not use complex sentences or ostentatious phrases, anything that the reader might get lost in.⁶⁶ For example:

The whore, who said her name was Sandra, offered me delights unobtainable outside of Place Pigalle and Port Said. ... We talked about truth. We talked about gangsters; we talked about business. We talked about the nice poor people who went to the electric chair; and we talked about the rich bastards who didn't. We talked about religious people who had perversions. We talked about a lot of things.⁶⁷

The simplicity of Vonnegut's writing is crucial for getting his messages across. That is for the following reasons. Vonnegut thinks that a writer should serve their society.⁶⁸ In order to become such "agents of change," they have to make people think about specific important issues. The more people they prompt to do so, the better. When a literary work, especially a satirical one, is reader-friendly, it is all the more likely to pick up a following and subsequently make its audience think about what the author has on their mind, provoking a desire for a change in the process. Also, Vonnegut is aware of the fact that not everybody is able to read with ease. He takes into account the difficulties that the reader might encounter and wants to make the stories as easy as possible for the reader to enjoy and to understand them.⁶⁹ By that, he ensures the excellent readability potential of his books, which allows him to speak to masses and thus fulfill the role of a social writer he viewed himself as.

As mentioned earlier, the book came out only a few months after the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. Back then, Kurt Vonnegut was close to being an obscure writer since his first novel *Player Piano* had achieved only moderate success that was not to last forever and the other two novels of his were overlooked by the critics because they came out as paperbacks. However, *Cat's Cradle* changed that, found its audience and made him a cult hero.⁷⁰ Especially young people started being interested in Vonnegut. Regarding that, several factors come into play. Firstly, it can be attributed to the accessibility of his writing, which has already been discussed earlier in this chapter. Secondly, with the rise of counter-culture, in particular, the Hippie movement, which was known for their drug and sexual escapades and pacifism, Vonnegut's pacifistic

⁶⁶ Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., "Running Experiments Off: An Interview," interview by Laurie Clancy, in *Conversations with Kurt Vonnegut*, ed. William R. Allen (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi: 1988), 47-48.

⁶⁷ Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., *Cat's Cradle* (New York: Rosseta Books, 2014), 29, <https://www.scribd.com/read/177086446/Cat-s-Cradle#>

⁶⁸ Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., "The Conscience of the Writer," interview by Publishers Weekly, in *Conversations with Kurt Vonnegut*, ed. William R. Allen (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi: 1988), 45.

⁶⁹ Vonnegut, "Running Experiments," 48.

⁷⁰ Thomas F. Marvin, *Kurt Vonnegut: A Critical Companion* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002), 1146. Kindle.

views, humanism and plea for humanity to love each other must have been very appealing to many young rebels. Thirdly, the events of October 1962 brought new life perspectives into the minds of many Americans, particularly the younger ones since youth is generally perceived as – and objectively is – the most hopeful stage of human life. At that time, however, their dreams and aspirations were overshadowed by the feeling of futility and emptiness: “After President Kennedy announced the decision to establish the Cuban quarantine, I felt numb, afraid and helpless. . . . I felt that everything I was doing now doing was unimportant–meaningless–and I felt a fear, for us and for the world.”⁷¹ Those are some of the responses of undergraduate students gathered in a study conducted at the University of Michigan. In *Cat’s Cradle*, Vonnegut deals with the meaningfulness and meaninglessness of human endeavors in the wake of the end of the world orchestrated by humanity itself. For this reason, it could have been attractive for and could have resonated with young people who were afraid of what the Cold War future holds. The book, of course, offers limited – if any – optimistic prospects for the future, but at least it shows people a hilarious perspective of their helplessness. Vonnegut himself attributed his popularity among young people to the simplistic content of his writing and his defiance of the popular image of maturity: “I suppose I talk about things that are on people’s minds . . . Why are we on earth, what’s really going on, and all that, which you’re supposed to stop talking about when you get older.”⁷²

3.1 The Narrator

“Call me Jonah,”⁷³ the narrator asks the reader at the beginning of the very first line of the novel. Jonah, whose actual name is John, is a freelance writer. He smokes a lot, drinks a lot and stable marriage is nothing for him. After he introduces himself, he informs the reader that when he was much younger, he decided to write a book called *The Day the World Ended*, which should be an “account of what important Americans had done on the day when the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, Japan.”⁷⁴ John’s request to be called Jonah connects him to the biblical Jonah. The biblical Jonah, who was ordered by God to travel to Nineveh with a prophecy that the city would be destroyed unless its people stopped doing evil, tries to evade his divine mission. However, a series of unfortunate events arranged by God forces Jonah to

⁷¹ Mark Chesler and Richard Smuck, “Student Reactions to the Cuban Crisis and Public Dissent,” *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (Autumn, 1964): 467.

⁷² Vonnegut, “Running Experiments,” 48.

⁷³ Vonnegut, *Cat’s Cradle*, 11

⁷⁴ Vonnegut, *Cat’s Cradle*, 11.

complete his mission.⁷⁵ John reveals his doom-prophesying potential when he asserts that he is Jonah “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.”⁷⁶ He is hinting that his actions are guided by a higher force.

The narrator’s request does not connect him only to the Bible; it points in the direction of Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* as well. The opening line of *Cat’s Cradle* precisely follows the structure of its counterpart in *Moby Dick*: “Call me Ishmael.”⁷⁷ Unlike Jonah, the prophet, Ishmael’s destiny is not to tell people about what is going to happen, but to inform them about what happened, so that they could learn from it and avoid repeating the same mistakes. Ishmael becomes the only survivor of Captain Ahab’s self-destructive quest to kill the white whale, and so he can warn other people who might have the same plans that Captain Ahab had. Vonnegut’s John synthesizes in himself the elements of both Jonah and Ishmael. Although he is not a conventional prophet who ends up being at some place delivering a prophecy to people, his Jonah-like, divine-directed journey foreshadows that something detrimental is about to happen. When the foreshadowed disastrous event of complete destruction takes place, John transforms into Ishmael. Although not being the only survivor of the cataclysmic event, he lives to share what led to such disaster. One more thing that connects the three characters – John, Jonah, and Ishmael – is the image of a whale, through which all three works teach the reader to be humble. In the Bible, the whale represents God’s punishment of those who think that they can outsmart him or evade his will. In *Moby Dick*, the whale embodies nature and the immeasurable force that man tries to conquer without ever understanding it in its entirety and how small man is compared to it. Vonnegut, whose whale is not like the other two since it is intangible and only refers to the shape of the highest peak of San Lorenzo, uses it in the same way as Melville. The difference is that, as Thomas Marvin notes, nobody has killed Moby-Dick because it cannot be done.⁷⁸ Mount McCabe has not been climbed because nobody has tried. For Melville, the attempt to slay the leviathan represents the human lack of humbleness and respect toward nature, compared to which people are small and paltry. The ignorance of the challenge to climb Mount McCabe presented by Vonnegut demonstrates his vision that people should not try to conquer

⁷⁵ Charles H. Patterson, “Summary and Analysis Jonah, Ruth, Esther,” Cliffnotes.com, <https://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/o/old-testament-of-the-bible/summary-and-analysis/jonah-ruth-and-esther>, accessed June 10, 2018.

⁷⁶ Vonnegut, *Cat’s Cradle*, 11.

⁷⁷ melville mobydick

⁷⁸ Marvin, *Critical Companion*, 1421.

nature, not because it will destroy them as Melville hints, but because people should live in harmony with nature.

Another element that is implemented into John's character – probably the most important one for the satiric vision of the whole story – is Vonnegut's self-projections into the narrator. Vonnegut, as he proclaimed, was a pessimist, mainly on the grounds of his World War II experiences. He had to conceal his pessimism in order to persuade his wife to marry him, and he had to conceal it time and time again when she thought she could not cope with such a pessimist any longer.⁷⁹ John has the same problems. When describing what was happening with his apartment during his two-week trip to Ilium, he says: "My second wife had left me on the grounds that I was too pessimistic for an optimist to live with."⁸⁰ Little did Vonnegut know back then about his future divorce with his first wife caused by disagreements in their views of life. Alternatively, he might have smuggled a little prophecy of his own private life into the story. Regardless, a similarity between the life views of Vonnegut and John is evident. One more connection between Vonnegut and John surfaces when John comes to the tombstone shop in Ilium where the driver of his cab wants to buy an old tombstone shaped like an angel. When the driver asks the owner where he would put a name on the sculpture, he says that there already is one. The name belongs to a German immigrant, and on top of that, it is the same as the narrator's last name.⁸¹ Vonnegut is of German ancestry, and what is more, he originally intended to put his name onto the sculpture, but he was diverted from it by his editor, who said that it would be so distracting that it would be counterproductive.⁸² Nevertheless, the rest of this self-projection (the element of German ancestry) and especially Vonnegut's original intent to make the narrator's name the same as his own places him into the position of a 20th century Jonah. In the same way, *The Book of Jonah* tells the story of what will happen to Nineveh if its people will not stop their wrongdoing, *Cat's Cradle* tells the story of what awaits humanity if it does not think about the implications of its behavior. This intertextual connection between the two books; and Vonnegut's self-projection into the narrator are the most apparent features that qualify *Cat's Cradle* as a work of apocalyptic literature.

⁷⁹ Kurt Vonnegut Jr., "Address to Graduating Class at Bennington College" (speech, Bennington, 1970), Speakola.com, accessed April 15, 2018, <https://speakola.com/grad/kurt-vonnegut-bennington-college-1970>

⁸⁰ Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle*, 80.

⁸¹ Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle*, 76.

⁸² Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., "Two Conversations with Kurt Vonnegut," interview by Chris Reilly, in *Conversations with Kurt Vonnegut*, ed. William Rodney Allen (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi: 1988), 204.

Additionally, there is an interesting parallel between *Cat's Cradle* and its narrator's book *The Day the World Ended*. At the end of the former, John finally gets to meet Bokonon himself, who is writing the last sentence of *The Books of Bokonon*. It reads as follows:

If I were a younger man, I would write a history of human stupidity; and I would climb to the top of Mount McCabe and lie down on my back with my history for a pillow; and I would take from the ground some of the blue-white poison that makes statues of man; and I would make a statue of myself, lying on my back, grinning horribly, and thumbing my nose at You Know Who.⁸³

At the beginning, when John introduces himself, it is immediately evident that the story that he is going to tell will not be happening simultaneously, but it is going to be done retrospectively. He looks to the past, before the moment he started writing his book: "When I was a much younger man, I began to collect material for a book to be called *The Day the World Ended*. The book was to be factual."⁸⁴ Several lines later, he states that he never finished the book.⁸⁵ These statements of John's and the advice given to him by Bokonon intertwine *Cat's Cradle* and *The Day the World Ended* in a brilliant yet confusing manner. In his book, Vonnegut presents an image of humanity that is unable to learn from its mistakes and is indifferent to the consequences of its conduct – traits due to which it could be seen as stupid. The interesting moment comes before the opening line of John's story, which is preceded by the following sentence: "Nothing in this book is true."⁸⁶ That allows him to interweave the book with various hidden meanings. Consequently, John's book may not necessarily be factual and it also may not be true that he did not finish it. Again, there is an equals sign between Vonnegut and John. *Cat's Cradle* ends with the world being destroyed by Ice-9, and so it is, at the same time, *The Day the World Ended*. Considering all that has been written in this chapter about Vonnegut's self-projection into the narrator, John (Vonnegut) actually took Bokonon's advice since *Cat's Cradle* clearly is a history of human stupidity. A history of humanity which is incorrigible and on the road to ruin. While pointing out follies for people to become aware of them, he is as pessimistic as ever as far as the corrigibility of people is concerned. His pessimism toward this particular issue is illustrated in one of Bokonon's Calypsos: "Without accurate records of the past, how can men and women be expected to avoid making the same mistakes in the future?"⁸⁷ Although Vonne-

⁸³ Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle*, 284.

⁸⁴ Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle*, 11.

⁸⁵ Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle*, 11.

⁸⁶ Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle*, 9.

⁸⁷ Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle*, 234.

gut wrote such a history, he is not particularly hopeful about its impact. The answer to Bokonon's question is simple. They cannot, not even with them. However, Vonnegut still gives it a shot and tries to educate people, no matter how pessimistic he may be about it.

4 THEMES OF SATIRE IN CAT'S CRADLE

4.1 The Ethics of Scientific Progress

Vonnegut's father was an architect and great pre-nuclear believer in technology. He was adamant the Kurt should study something worthwhile. So, Kurt enrolled at Cornell to study biochemistry.⁸⁸ Even though Kurt started studying a scientific discipline, he still wanted to foster his lust for writing, and so he began working for *The Cornell Sun*, the school's newspaper. Later, when the deaths of both Langmuir and Wells enabled him to use the idea of a version of ice that is stable at room temperature, his scientific background could come forward in full cry. Similarly to his father, Vonnegut had pinned hopes on science, which he recalls in an address to a graduating class at Bennington College:

I thought scientists were going to find out exactly how everything worked, and then make it work better. I fully expected that by the time I was twenty-one, some scientist ... would have taken a color photograph of God Almighty—and sold it to *Popular Mechanics* magazine. Scientific truth was going to make us so happy and comfortable.⁸⁹

He was profoundly shocked by how the events unfolded: “What actually happened ... was that we dropped scientific truth on Hiroshima. We killed everybody there.”⁹⁰ This event proved to be defining for the course that the whole world would follow in the future and, most importantly for this thesis, it had an immense influence on Vonnegut's views of science. Since Vonnegut was a technological enthusiast once, he does not entirely dismiss the idea of tremendous contribution of science to human well-being. Rather than that, he draws attention to disastrous implications that science carries when mishandled.

In *Cat's Cradle*, science is represented by the fictional city of Ilium, New York. It is the location of the state-of-the-art research laboratories of the General Forge and Foundry Company (the conspicuous resemblance to the General Electric Corporation is, of course, not accidental.) Its staff, most notably Dr. Hoenikker, is a caricature of the indifferent, pre-Hiroshima scientists, as described by Meier and Rabinowitch in the second chapter. The late Dr. Felix Hoenikker, a Nobel Prize laureate, is a fictional member of the team of scientists who stood behind the Manhattan Project. Since John's goal is to gather information about what prominent

⁸⁸ Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., “The Now Generation Knew Him When,” interview by Wilfred Sheed, in *Conversations with Kurt Vonnegut*, ed. William R. Allen (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi: 1988), 13.

⁸⁹ Vonnegut, “Address.”

⁹⁰ Vonnegut, “Address.”

Americans were doing on the 6th of August 1945, one of the authors of the atomic bomb naturally tops the list. Being the pre-war type of scientist, Dr. Hoenikker sees science only as a universal pursuit of truth that serves exclusively virtuous purposes. On top of that, he is a very playful man. He wants to have fun. Research is only a game to him, and once he finishes a project or becomes bored, he shifts to a different challenge. He does not care about the implications of what he is doing; the result is not important to him as long as he is having fun. Thanks to all that, his family suffers. Not only because he is so caught up in his scientific work, but also because he is indifferent to literally everything except for research. As has already been stated, Dr. Hoenikker is based on Vonnegut's brother's supervisor, Dr. Irwing Langmuir. Langmuir, as well as Hoenikker, was a Nobel Prize winner, but what is the essential quality that connects these two physicists is their absent-mindedness. Felix Hoenikker is so isolated from the values and mechanisms of the ordinary world that, as his son Newton recalls, once, after his wife made breakfast for him and returned to clean the dishes later, she found money on the table – a tip.⁹¹ As Vonnegut claims, this event really took place. The only difference is that the tipping man was Langmuir.⁹² Although Vonnegut admitted that Dr. Hoenikker is based on Dr. Langmuir, another interesting comparison arises. What if the fictional father of the atomic bomb is somehow connected to the actual one? To begin with, both have a German-sounding name. Julius Robert Oppenheimer started working on the Manhattan Project in 1941. When describing the feelings of the scientists after witnessing the destructive capacity of the atomic bomb, he said: "We knew that the world would not be the same. ... I remembered the line from the Hindu scripture, the *Bhagavad-Gita* ... 'Now, I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds.' I suppose we all thought that one way or another."⁹³ Vonnegut clearly used this pattern to further exemplify the indifference of Dr. Hoenikker to whatever his inventions might cause, which is illustrated by an anecdote presented by Newton Hoenikker: "After the thing went off, ... a scientist turned to father and said 'Science has now know sin.' And you know what father said? He said, 'What is sin?'"⁹⁴ Although Vonnegut's inspiration by Oppenheimer is clear, there is a significant difference between the two. Having witnessed what the atomic energy can cause should it fall into the wrong hands, Oppenheimer started advocating for large-scale nuclear disarmament. Hoenikker, on the other hand, does not show even the slightest glimpse of interest or understanding. Apart from seeking entertainment, Dr. Hoenikker is curious. He wants to

⁹¹ Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle*, 21-22.

⁹² Vonnegut, "The Art of Fiction," 182.

⁹³ J. Robert Oppenheimer, *The Day after Trinity*, directed by Jon Else (1981; Santa Monica: The Voyager Company, 1995), CD-ROM.

⁹⁴ Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle*, 24.

know how things work and prove that he can create. No matter the consequences, he embarks on the quest for complete understanding. With respect to that, a similarity to Oppenheimer can be observed. In his testimony in front of the United States Atomic Energy Commission, Oppenheimer claimed:

... when you see something that is technically sweet you go ahead and do it and you argue about what to do about it only after you have had your technical success. That is the way it was with the atomic bomb. I do not think anybody opposed making it; there were some debates about what to do with it after it was made.⁹⁵

Oppenheimer's view of the process of research is in line with Hoenikker's – having fun discovering and pushing one's ability to bring things into existence and worrying about what to do with their implications afterward. In a letter to his brother, Oppenheimer mentioned that he needed “physics more than friends,”⁹⁶ which is one more trait that is brought *ad absurdum* in the character of Hoenikker. His disinterest in consequences of his research is furthered by his disinterest in people, which is illustrated by yet another Newton's recollection: “He was one of the best-protected human beings who ever lived. People couldn't get at him because he just wasn't interested in people. I remember one time ... I tried to get him to tell me something about my mother. He couldn't remember anything about her.”⁹⁷

Hoenikker's supervisor at the General Forge and Foundry Company, Dr. Asa Breed, could be described as a transition between the pre- and post-Hiroshima scientist. On the one hand, he is a firm believer in science being, as Meier and Rabinowitch labeled it, “a pure intellectual enjoyment, from which nothing but good can arise for mankind.”⁹⁸ He stubbornly promotes the concept of what he calls pure research. The essence of pure research is to increase knowledge, to uncover the secrets of nature, to uncover the truth.⁹⁹ He believes that “new knowledge is the most valuable commodity on Earth,”¹⁰⁰ and so people should do everything to foster its acquirement. On the other hand, unlike Dr. Hoenikker, he expresses a certain degree of awareness of the consequences that such approach can trigger. After the eloquent description of the principle of Ice-9, he denies its existence.¹⁰¹ His denial signifies the bipolar nature of his

⁹⁵ *In the Matter of: J. Robert Oppenheimer: Hearing before the Personnel Security Board*, United States Atomic Energy Commission (1954) (testimony of J. Robert Oppenheimer, member of the Manhattan Project)

⁹⁶ J. Robert Oppenheimer to Frank Oppenheimer, October 14, 1929, in *Robert Oppenheimer: Letters and Recollections*, ed. Alice Kimball Smith and Charles Weiner (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 135.

⁹⁷ Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle*, 21.

⁹⁸ Meier and Rabinowitch, “Scientists,” 124.

⁹⁹ Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle*, 46-47.

¹⁰⁰ Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle*, 47.

¹⁰¹ Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle*, 51-54.

character. He feels apprehensive about the destructive potential of such substance, even though it would have been developed in humanity's best possible interest, but, at the same time, he is extremely naïve in thinking that no scientist would bring it into existence simply because of its inherent disastrous repercussions. Breed's talk about the immediate consequences of the use of Ice-9 in open nature is Vonnegut's satirical parallel to nuclear weapons. Even though the analogy is significantly exaggerated, considering the inability of nuclear weapons to devastate the whole planet in an instant like Ice-9 would be able to do, a quote by President Reagan, which, however, is of a much later date than *Cat's Cradle*, comes to mind: "A nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought."¹⁰²

Another folly of science that Vonnegut wants to expose comes to light when Newton recalls one of the pastimes of his brother Franklin. Frank would place various species of insect into a jar and shake it forcibly in order to make the insect held captive fight one another. When their sister came and asked what he thought he was doing, Franklin replied that he was experimenting. Newton also adds that it was Frank's universal answer to such questions.¹⁰³ Franklin's vicious behavior disguised as research reveals the threats of science being thought of as a universal means of amelioration of human lives. This view of science helps to conceal dishonest intentions, mental deviancy, or the absence of moral values. Such abuse of science puts humanity at risk of producing another Dr. Mengele or alike. The correlation between science and crime is hidden in the location of the headquarters of General Forge and Foundry. When going there, Dr. Breed tells John that before the company was there, the place was used for public hangings. In 1782, a man named George Minor Moakley, who had killed twenty-six people, faced his death sentence there. For Dr. Breed, the death toll is hard to believe.¹⁰⁴ The ironic juxtaposition of the two uses of the place expresses the ignorance of the scientists toward the possible criminal use of their inventions. He is astonished by the number of people that the murder had on his conscience, but does not care at all about the inventions that killed hundreds of thousands of people in Japan. Vonnegut wittily expresses his opinion on the magnitude of each crime in the middle name of the culprit – Minor. In his entreaty, Vonnegut further develops the satirical image of what happens when science or scientific inventions are put into wrong hands. The characters of each of the three Hoenikker offspring exhibit a flaw that makes them

¹⁰² Ronald Reagan, "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union," January 25, 1984, *The American Presidency Project*, accessed June 10, 2018, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=40205>

¹⁰³ Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle*, 22.

¹⁰⁴ Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle*, 34.

dangerous when presented with the enormous, devastating power of Ice-9. Franklin's lust for control and inability to reflect on his actions gives rise to the exchange of his portion of the destructive invention for the opportunity to control the lives of the people of a poverty-stricken country. Angela's shortage of affection renders her defenseless against the dangers of being exploited, making her chip of Ice-9 available to whoever will make her become fond of them. Lastly, Newton's inferiority syndrome and his overly caring sister provide the recipe for disaster because Newton subsequently uses his piece of his father's legacy to buy understanding and recognition of his manly qualities. Vonnegut seems to be hinting that the lust for power and control is the worse of all those follies since whereas the chips previously owned by Newton and Angela respectively only put the world at risk by being given away to two global super-powers, the one of Franklin's directly causes the end of the world.

Speaking of power and control, which were prevalent themes of the Cold War as the United States and the Soviet Union were struggling against each other to establish themselves as the world's number one superpower, Vonnegut warns the reader about yet another of his science-related worries – its militarization. As outlined in the second chapter, the 1945 bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki changed the way scientists went about their work. That, undoubtedly, was something that a country in the situation of the United States did not need. Prior to that, Vonnegut says, various interest groups were keen on exploiting scientists' unconcern about the possible misuse of their inventions.¹⁰⁵ During the interview with Dr. Breed, John asks him whether there is anyone who directs the course of the research. Dr. Breed replies: "People suggest things all the time, but it isn't in the nature of a pure research man to pay attention to suggestions. His head is full of projects of his own, and that's the way we want it."¹⁰⁶ It can be seen that Breed is naively idealistic about how private research facilities should work and does not take into account diverse influences that can emerge. It has to be noted that after the war, private research laboratories such as General Electric Company were largely sponsored by American military organizations. The military influence pictured by Vonnegut as the admiral who hounded Dr. Hoenikker to solve the persistent problem of Marines having to fight in mud¹⁰⁷ acts as a force to appeal to the aforementioned Oppenheimeresque lust of scientists for technical sweetness. Being aware of that, Vonnegut urges scientist to be cautious towards what they are working on and to always try to think out thoroughly the possible aftermath of their

¹⁰⁵ Vonnegut, "Playboy Interview," 97.

¹⁰⁶ Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle*, 48.

¹⁰⁷ Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle*, 48.

research activities. Nevertheless, he is pessimistic as usual since, as he claims, there is a rule that “if you turn up something that can be used violently, it *will* be used violently.”¹⁰⁸ The image of the militarization of science is even more evident when Jonah accompanies doctor Breed to his office located in the building of General Forge and Foundry, which is guarded by “two heavily-armed guards.”¹⁰⁹ When John smiles at one of the guards, who does not smile back, he concludes that “there was nothing too funny about the national security, nothing at all.”¹¹⁰ The scene serves as a satirical demonstration of the shift of science from a joyful pursuit of knowledge and attempt at improving human lives to an area of utmost importance, where the interests of the population are overshadowed by the interests of rulers and their lust for global dominance. Additionally, as Newton remembers, when the military wanted Dr. Hoenikker to work on the bomb, “he said he wouldn’t work on it all unless they let him work where he wanted to work.”¹¹¹ Because Hoenikker eventually helped to create the bomb, it means that the government listened. Through this scene, Vonnegut appeals, as others did, to scientists who should not yield to governmental offers of lavish resources. Rather than that, they should concentrate on the ethical side of the thing and restrain from helping to commit crimes disguised as science. Unfortunately, the issue of the indifference of scientists is a double-edged sword because when they actually start caring, they face the unimaginable force of the American military and industrial lobby. For example, Dr. Oppenheimer had a first-hand experience of it when he opposed the creation of the hydrogen bomb, which led to the revocation of his security clearance and accusations of working with the Communists.

4.2 The True Essence and Value of Religion

The primary instrument that Vonnegut uses to launch his all-out attack on religion is the impoverished fictional Caribbean state called the Republic of San Lorenzo. While designing his imaginary religion called Bokononism, Vonnegut’s inventive genius is in full cry. The nature of Vonnegut’s religious satire lies in the very origin of Bokononism itself. Into its center, he places two shipwrecked sailors who landed on the shore of San Lorenzo. They find the country in the state of total poverty since it had been colonized continuously by various states. Lionel Boyd Johnson and Corporal Earl McCabe came to San Lorenzo with the “glittering treasures of literacy, ambition, curiosity, gall, irreverence, health, humor, and considerable information

¹⁰⁸ Vonnegut, “Playboy Interview,” 97.

¹⁰⁹ Vonnegut, *Cat’s Cradle*, 41.

¹¹⁰ Vonnegut, *Cat’s Cradle*, 41.

¹¹¹ Vonnegut, *Cat’s Cradle*, 18.

about the outside world.”¹¹² Having seen the level of poverty and horrendous living conditions of San Lorenzans, they decided that they would rule the country and improve the lives of the populace. When they realized that no kind of reform would improve the *status quo*, Johnson decided that religion would fit the bill and bring hope to people’s lives.¹¹³ To ensure the maximum effect of the newly-invented religion, Johnson, now known as Bokonon, ordered McCabe, the new ruler of San Lorenzo, to outlaw his religion. People would then have something to believe in, and their lives would be far more bearable.¹¹⁴ With the help of a principle called Dynamic Tension, which Vonnegut borrowed from a bodybuilder by the name of Charles Atlas, he introduces the reader to his view of religion, which is that there is no spiritual value in it. Rather than that, it serves for comforting people who are enduring various hardships in their lives. He implies that it is just a collection of lies that people decide to live by to feel better and to draw hope from it. In addition to that, he depicts religion as a ploy to keep the social order together. After all, religion on the verge of the Sixties did not seem to contain too much spirituality. In lieu, it was used to bring the nation together “under God” to fight atheistic communism. Vonnegut further illustrates his point when he satirizes the role of the sacred texts of practically any given religion. In the very first line of the holy scripture of Bokononism, *The Books of Bokonon*, its author writes: “Live by the foma that make you kind and healthy and happy.”¹¹⁵ Foma is one of the neologisms coined by Vonnegut for his religion and stands for “harmless untruths.”¹¹⁶ This opening line ridicules the importance attributed by believers to the scriptures of their particular faith (*The Bible* and its Ten Commandments seem to be an especially fitting example). Vonnegut suggests that people should search for strength and resilience to overcome sufferings in themselves without having to rely on a higher force. Likewise, people should know how to behave well toward each other and serve the community without anyone setting rules for them. By creating a religion that openly acknowledges that its teachings only consists of lies, he exposes the deceitful nature of such faiths.

There, however, are lies of religion that are far less harmless than the others. Their dangerous implications are hidden in the image of the Sanlorenzan priests. They are described as being butterball, which is a derogatory term for someone who is overweight. By making those religious figures overweight, Vonnegut satirizes the dishonesty of the Church. He views the

¹¹² Vonnegut, *Cat’s Cradle*, 124.

¹¹³ Vonnegut, *Cat’s Cradle*, 173.

¹¹⁴ Vonnegut, *Cat’s Cradle*, 173.

¹¹⁵ Vonnegut, *Cat’s Cradle*, 10.

¹¹⁶ Vonnegut, *Cat’s Cradle*, 284.

priests and other dignitaries as people who only pretend to understand God and his intentions and use this pretense to exploit people for their own good. Vonnegut points out a thorny issue since the Church is known to have followed various dishonest practices, e.g., the selling of indulgences. The matter of physical weight juxtaposes the rich and bohemian life of the priests and the diseased and deprived existence of the sheep that they pretend to shepherd. Instead of helping people and making their lives better, the Church only sells them invented stories and exploits their desperate living conditions to make a profit. In their attempt to make their new religion honest, Johnson and McCabe “threw out the priests.”¹¹⁷

For Vonnegut, religion is also a solution to the instinctive human need to find meaning in absolutely everything, including their existence, which he portrays in one of the Calypsos of *The Books of Bokkonon*:

Tiger got to hunt,
Bird got to fly;
Man’s got to sit and wonder, “Why, why, why?”

Tiger got to sleep,
Bird got to land;
Man got to tell himself he understand.¹¹⁸

He acknowledges the intrinsic nature of such pursuit of meaning in the creation myth of Bokkononism:

In the beginning, God created the earth, and he looked upon it in His cosmic loneliness. And God said, “Let Us make living creatures out of mud, so the mud can see what We have done.” And God created every living creature that now moveth, and one was man. Mud as man alone could speak. God leaned close as mud as man sat up, looked around, and spoke. Man blinked. “What is the *purpose* of all this?” he asked politely. “Everything must have a purpose?” asked God. “Certainly,” said man. “Then I leave it to you to think of one for all this,” said God. And He went away.¹¹⁹

The significance of such necessity to search for meaning is that it presents a weakness that religion, if mishandled, can exploit. Vonnegut warns the reader that their questions could easily

¹¹⁷ Vonnegut, *Cat’s Cradle*, 173.

¹¹⁸ Vonnegut, *Cat’s Cradle*, 182.

¹¹⁹ Vonnegut, *Cat’s Cradle*, 262-264.

lead them astray and make them vulnerable to someone's dishonest intentions disguised as profound answers. The consequences of blind faith in a holy man who claims that he has such answers are illustrated when Sanlorenzans finally meet their prophet: "...they commanded him to tell them exactly what God Almighty was up to and what they should do now. The mountebank told them that God was surely trying to kill them, ..., and that they should have the good manners to die." It may, therefore, seem that Vonnegut suggests people accept the inherent meaninglessness of their lives and shift towards the nihilistic view of life. Moreover, various scholars, such as Peter A. Scholl, argue "that all of Vonnegut's fictional religions may be characterized as ... 'near nihilisms.'"¹²⁰ On the following lines, I will argue that Vonnegut's philosophy regarding the meaning of life is more existentialist, rather than nihilistic. First of all, Vonnegut dismisses nihilism himself when he describes what a poet called Sherman Krebbs, a nihilist and John's acquaintance, did in John's apartment when he let him stay there: "... he had run up three-hundred-dollar' worth of long distance calls, set my couch on fire in five places, killed my cat and my avocado tree, and torn the door of my medicine cabinet. He wrote this poem, in what proved to be excrement..."¹²¹ Having seen what Krebbs had done in his apartment, John is directed away from nihilism,¹²² and so is the reader. Krebbs' nihilistic behavior seems to be a warning against what people can be capable of when adhering to doctrines like nihilism, which render them prone to anarchistic conduct and potentially dangerous for their communities. Furthermore, in *Existentialism is a Humanism*, one of the fundamental works of the philosophical movement, Jean-Paul Sartre defines man as being "... undefinable, ... because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself."¹²³ In other words, Sartre states that existence of a particular human being is inherently meaningless and that nothing is supposed to give it its meaning, except for the human being itself. Unlike traditional religions, in which the most sacred thing is its particular deity or deities, for a Bokononist, the only sacred thing is a human. By placing the human element in the center of his fictional religion, Vonnegut degrades the importance of divine figures, making people realize that there is no need to pay attention to anyone who claims they know why people were created and what that "creator" wants them to do. Instead, people should seek the meaning of their own. One that comes from them and not an external source, because

¹²⁰ Peter A. Scholl, "Vonnegut's Attack upon Christendom," *Newsletter of the Conference on Christianity and Literature* Vol. 22, No. 1 (Fall 1973), 5.

¹²¹ Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle*, 80.

¹²² Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle*, 81.

¹²³ Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism," in *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, ed. Walter Kaufman (Sevenoaks: Pickle Partners Publishing, 2016), 415, <https://www.scribd.com/read/308455653/Existentialism-From-Dostoevsky-To-Sartre>.

ultimately, man is what is the most important. Finding the meaning of one's own also protects the person against influences that might exploit their existential dilemmas.

The last aspect of Vonnegut's satirical vision of religion that is going to be discussed in this section is the parallel relation of religion to science. Before humanity gained the ability to examine natural phenomena and prove and understand their principles, it often resorted to believing in the supernatural. Throughout history, the ruling classes had used this scientific illiteracy to their advantage and to exercise their power over the nations they governed, e.g., the divine right introduced by James IV, the king of Scotland. Despite all the negative facets of religion that were presented throughout this section, it serves, as Peter Freese characterized it, as "an essential antidote against the most dangerous "religion" of all, the belief in unbridled technological progress, ... and its built-in tendency toward ultimate self-destruction."¹²⁴ The parallel that Freese makes is an important one. Although a serious critic of religious systems, Vonnegut, too, acknowledges the peril of replacing religion with its already scientifically disproved teaching by seemingly omniscient science, which can generate far more negativity and violence than religion has ever managed to do, including the Crusades or, more recently, Islamic terrorism. Science has given people the possibility to make their lives easier. While being thankful for it and accepting it as an ordinary part of everyday life, people often forget the threats that it poses. Similarly, Vonnegut observes that the improvement of people's living standard by scientific inventions causes people to blindly accept anything that science produces, believing that it will make them happier or improve their lives. The following excerpt about Dr. Breed's speech will illustrate the point:

"The trouble with the world was," she continued hesitatingly, "that people were still superstitious instead of scientific. He said if everybody would study science more, there wouldn't be all the trouble there was." "He said science was going to discover the basic secret of life someday," the bartender put in. ... "Didn't I read in the paper the other day where they'd finally found out what it was?" ... "I saw that," said Sandra. "About two days ago." ... "What is the secret of life?" I asked. "I forget," said Sandra. "Protein," the bartender declared. "They found out something about protein." "Yeah," said Sandra, "that's it."¹²⁵

Not only does this conversation show the blind acceptance of everything that science serves to people, it also utterly debases religion as something close to being Neanderthal. In his speech,

¹²⁴ Peter Freese, "Vonnegut's Invented Religions as Sense-making Systems," in *Kurt Vonnegut's Cat's Cradle*, ed. Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2002), 101.

¹²⁵ Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle*, 30-31.

Dr. Breed almost despises people who are religious and looks down on them since to him, religion is only a pack of superstitions and has long been disproved. Instead, science should be the only thing to believe in. The basic division that he makes is that science is for the intelligent and religion for the simple-minded. However, that is the ultimate pitfall since putting all of one's hopes into science and believing that it will grant them some kind of ultimate redemption, makes it the same as putting one's hopes into a deity. That makes science another religion, the most dangerous so far. Also, it makes the intelligent, science-oriented people simple-minded as well, for they rely on something that can potentially ruin their lives instead of saving or improving them. While harshly criticizing the deceitful nature of religious systems, Vonnegut also sees beneficial parts to it as he mentions in his address at Bennington College:

A great swindle of our time is the assumption that science has made religion obsolete. All science has damaged is the story of Adam and Eve ... Everything else holds up pretty well, particularly the lessons about fairness and gentleness. People who find those lessons irrelevant are simply using science as an excuse for greed and harshness.¹²⁶

Vonnegut, as in the case of scientific progress, sees numerous dangerous aspects of religion. However, there is one quality in which scientific pursuits of truth can never beat religion – lies will always be better at comforting people than any scientific invention or breakthrough discovery ever will.

4.3 The Role of Family within Society

Kurt Vonnegut was a family man, and so when both his sister and her husband tragically died he adopted all their children.¹²⁷ His orientation toward family is evident also in *Cat's Cradle*. As the popular belief stands, the family is the foundation of society. The image of Dr. Hoenikker and his three children shows the reader - in a significantly exaggerated manner - how the concept of family can affect the whole society, particularly as dysfunctional a family as the Hoenikkers. The father, who in his working hours endangers the world through his carelessness, takes this carelessness home where it transforms into a lack of interest in his children. The element that usually represents the source of the utmost care for children – the mother – is missing in this family. None other than Felix is to blame or, to be exact, his carelessness. One day, when he was traveling to his laboratory at the General Forge and Foundry Company, he

¹²⁶ Vonnegut, "Address."

¹²⁷ Marvin, *Critical Companion*, 164.

got stuck in a traffic jam. He decided that he did not want to wait anymore, and so he left his car and continued on foot. When the police contacted him, he said that they could keep the car, that he did not want it anymore. So, his wife, Emily, came to pick it up. She was not used to driving such a big car, had an unfortunate accident, and, as a result, died while giving birth to their youngest child, Newton.¹²⁸ The absence of the maternal element gives rise to several issues. Felix's disinterest in his children prevents them from creating a relationship with their father, and furthermore, thanks to this lack of relationship, when Felix wants to play with his children, he makes it even worse than if he carried on in his disinterested ways. It is exemplified by the recollection of Newton, the youngest child, from his formative years:

He all of a sudden came out of his study and did something he'd never done before. He tried to play with me. Not only had he never played with me before; he had hardly ever even spoken to me. ... So close up, my father was the ugliest thing I had ever seen. ... I burst into tears. I jumped up and I ran out of the house as fast as I could go.¹²⁹

Angela, whose formative years are long gone, has a relationship with their father, though the most fitting way to call her relationship to him would be a state of denial. She idolizes their father as a hero, someone who helped to win the war, someone with incalculable value for humanity. So, when she asks Newton what happened between father and him, Newton tells her. As a result, she slaps him, exclaiming: "How dare you say that about your Father?" ... "He is one of the greatest men who ever lived!"¹³⁰ A few moments later, when Franklin joins the fight and punches her, she cries for the father. What he does is that he only sticks his head out of the window and then pulls it back again without the slightest interest in what was happening.¹³¹ The inequality between Felix's contribution to the progress of humanity and his contribution to the well-being of his own family is later projected into the scene where John visits the graveyard where both Felix and Emily are buried. When John arrives at the graveyard to see the Hoenikker graves, he is shocked to find out that on the memorials is shaped as "an alabaster phallus twenty feet high and three feet thick."¹³² First and foremost, the appearance of the marker is a joke on the narrator and the reader as well since the reader is expected to think – in the same way that John did – that the phallus stands over Felix's grave. In reality, the engraving on its pedestal says: "Mother."¹³³ The engraving is accompanied by two poems written by Angela and Frank

¹²⁸ Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle*, 36.

¹²⁹ Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle*, 20.

¹³⁰ Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle*, 23.

¹³¹ Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle*, 24.

¹³² Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle*, 65.

¹³³ Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle*, 66.

and the imprints of Newt's baby hands. Next to the phallus marker, there is "a marble cube forty centimeters on each side,"¹³⁴ which bears the epigraph: "FATHER."¹³⁵ This is where Ice-9 comes into play again, even though not in its traditional scientific role. The shape that people ordinarily associate with ice is a cube. The heritage that Dr. Hoenikker left for his children and the whole humanity was ice. While for the humanity, it symbolizes a breakthrough invention (no matter how dangerous), for his family it only epitomizes his coldness and lack of affection toward the ones closest to him. Through the disproportional size of the grave markers, Vonnegut gives the reader insight into the family values that he stands for. Despite the fact that Felix was a scientist of tremendous importance, to his children it matters little. He might have been a physical mastermind that pushed humanity forward, but for his family he did nothing, and so he does not deserve a large monument. On the contrary, Emily was there for her family, not only for the children but also for Felix, who, in fact, was another child of hers. She did not do anything to make the world fall at her feet, but more importantly, she devoted herself to her family. That makes her far more important for the society or at least for her children. Regarding the shape of her tombstone, a couple of symbols can be observed. The size has already been discussed. The image of a phallus is used to symbolize the masculine power and dominance in numerous cultures. The head of the family is usually represented by a strong male figure. In the case of the Hoenikkers, the one who is – or was – in charge of everything is the mother. Another symbol that the phallus represents is that of male idiocy, to which Emily fell victim. The level of Felix's ignorance and carelessness was colossal and so colossal is the phallus over his wife's grave.

With Emily's death, the maternal element of the family was delegated to Angela. As Newt recalls, "she has been the real head of the family."¹³⁶ That, together with her undesirable appearance, caused her social life to suffer. In depicting the relationship between Angela and Newton, Vonnegut seems to adhere, probably unintentionally, to some principles of the Cold War doctrine of *home containment* as defined in the second chapter. As mentioned on several occasions, the role of the father in the Hoenikker family is practically non-existent since Felix does not care about virtually anything. For the doctrine, the role of the mother, presently occupied by Angela, represented the fundamental formative force for the future Americans. It, however, has to be offset by paternal motivation, which is not present due to Felix's indifference.

¹³⁴ Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle*, 66.

¹³⁵ Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle*, 66.

¹³⁶ Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle*, 22.

This imbalance may result in raising a sissy, and it is exactly what happened to Newton. Although Newton is a grown-up, Angela still treats him as an infant. For example: “‘Honey, you don’t remember anything about that day, do you? You were just a baby.’”¹³⁷ Or: “‘There was nothing little New could say. Angela spoke first. ‘You’ve got paint all over your face, honey. Go wash it off.’”¹³⁸ The interesting part comes when one examines the part that Newt played in the end of the world or more precisely, in jeopardizing the national security. His being overly cared for only reinforces his inferiority syndrome, which originates from the fact that he is a midget. He lies to and ensures himself that he has a happy, perspective relationship with his girlfriend, who turns out to be a Russian spy. Because of his longing for a proof that he is as equal as anybody in terms of leading successful and independent life, Newt succumbs to the temptations of having an affair with Zinka, a Russian spy disguised as a midget dancer, giving away his portion of Ice-9 to her and the Soviets. This plotline exactly follows what the advocates of *home containment* feared. A sissy that succumbs to subversive threats and voluntarily or involuntarily helps the Communists. Such theme was not a novelty in Cold War literature. As May writes in *Homeward Bound*, Mickey Spillane, a crime novelist, made a fortune in the 50s, writing stories about “foolish or evil women working for the communists [who] try to steal atomic secrets from hapless men who are unable to resist their seduction.”¹³⁹ I dare not say that Vonnegut used Newton’s part of the story as a warning against the threats of communism, for he was not the biggest of advocates of capitalism. He even expressed his wish for America to try socialism.¹⁴⁰ Therefore, I evaluate this similarity of themes as purely coincidental, although it represents an exciting opportunity for further intertextual exploration. On the other, the relationship between Newton and his sister should serve as a warning against being over-protective of one’s children or those whom one looks after.

Lastly, the image of the three Hoenikker children shows the reader the immense importance of careful and quality parenting. The paternal element is careless and indifferent, and the maternal element is missing, which is extraordinarily harmful to the progeny. Angela’s personal life suffers, because of her devotion to caring for her family. Objectively, it has to be said that she is extremely unattractive, which does not help her to socialize well. On top of that, there is no one in her family to comfort her and to teach her to cope with her physically ill-

¹³⁷ Vonnegut, *Cat’s Cradle*, 112.

¹³⁸ Vonnegut, *Cat’s Cradle*, 170.

¹³⁹ May, *Homeward Bound*, 97.

¹⁴⁰ Vonnegut, “Address.”

favored appearance. Therefore, she does everything to socialize, make friends and find a partner. In her desperate longing for these relationships, she behaves irrationally and cannot distinguish whether she is being exploited or the other person is genuinely interested in her. Consequently, she ends up marrying a handsome man, who is clearly out of her league, and loses her chip of Ice-9 in exchange for the marriage. Newton lies to himself to boost his self-confidence, which is downgraded by being overly cared for by his sister, and ensures himself that “there is love enough for everyone in this world for everybody, if people will just look.”¹⁴¹ He believes that so blindly that he does not realize he is only being used and robbed of the mighty substance that he owns. Franklin is a prime example of the impact of the monkey-see-monkey-do learning process – a process during which children replicate the thing that they see without comprehending how the things work and what their consequences are. As a result, Franklin does not care about morality or implications of his behavior. The main problem emerges when his miscarried upbringing mixes with a dangerous trait of his character – lust for power and control. As a youngster, Franklin fostered his hunger for power by building model worlds over which he had complete control. The real-world power that he gained by acquiring Ice-9 enables him to influence the lives of real people, which makes him exceedingly dangerous. What’s more, the perilous blend of his failed upbringing and genetically intrinsic features of his character contribute, although indirectly, to the complete destruction of planet Earth.

The imagery of the Hoenickers manifests the disastrous implications of insufficient upbringing. Even though Vonnegut evidently exaggerates it, it is not far from the truth. If we do not educate the coming generations properly and if we do not invest enough time in them, we are heading going down a dangerous route. Conversely, if we do, we are better off in every aspect of the future of our kind.

¹⁴¹ Vonnegut, *Cat’s Cradle*, 25.

CONCLUSION

Kurt Vonnegut was a humanist. He liked life and viewed people who did not as hypocrites.¹⁴² Therefore, it was profoundly saddening for him to have witnessed and taken part in such events that displayed unparalleled violence of one human being toward another. It had a tremendously powerful effect on his writing.

In *Cat's Cradle*, he is as pessimistic as ever as to whether people will destroy themselves or make it out alive. No wonder though, given what he had been through. His primary concern in the book is science, which is increasingly exploited by various military and political influences. Having been a great technocrat before the war, he is forced to steer clear of putting high hopes into science. He exposes the threats of the indifference of scientists to the consequences of their scientific work. Most importantly, he appeals to the child-like excitement of theirs in which they are wearing blinkers and care only about solving a problem that excites them without pondering the implications that the solution will bring about. The childish, unconcerned character of Felix Hoenikker serves as a deterrent example of the threats that such behavior poses to the whole humanity. An ideal scientist (or physicist, for that matter) according to Vonnegut is what he called a humanistic physicist. One who would not knowingly contribute to hurting people. If their research generates something potentially harmful, they keep it to themselves.¹⁴³ Unfortunately, the issue is not as simple, which corroborated by the revocation of Dr. Oppenheimer's security clearance. Even if all scientists cared about the well-being of the society, the pressure that the military lobby can develop is so big there is hardly anybody who can resist it.

Vonnegut's atheism provided him with a fittingly detached vantage point, which allowed him to view religion clearly, with all its faults and all its benefits. The core of his satirical portrayal of religion lies in the deceitful nature of such faiths, especially the belief that there is a supernatural being, a deity, who cares about the well-being of people and has a carefully prepared plan for the whole humanity. The inclination to such beliefs is largely intrinsic in human character due to the questions that people have about the meaning of their existence. Therefore, Vonnegut does not dismiss religion completely. Alternately, he draws attention to its dangerous elements for people to become aware of them. He places human in the center of

¹⁴² Vonnegut, "There Must Be More," 232.

¹⁴³ Vonnegut, *Wampeters*, 96.

his fictional religion to let people know that they are the most important and no other person who only pretends to know what the particular deity has in mind should control their lives. At the same time though, Vonnegut acknowledges that lies are irreplaceable in our lives, for they have immense ability to comfort us. Even though lies are evil (at least that is what the conventional morality teaches us), are used to deceive and more often than not, they do not last too long, there is some sort of human need to have them in life. Vonnegut illustrated that beautifully in the paradoxical nature of Bokononism: “The heartbreaking necessity of lying about reality, and the heartbreaking impossibility of lying about it.”¹⁴⁴

For someone as concerned as Vonnegut about the well-being of human beings and treating one another fairly and gently, the issues of the family were of utmost importance. *Cat's Cradle* exemplifies the connection between the behavior toward our closest ones and toward the rest of our kind. His plea for people to be kind to each other, to be attentive, to help each other in the common goal of pleasant existence is as relevant today as it was in the 60s. Vonnegut makes it clear that the way that we will treat the next generations will shape the destiny of our kind. As the story of the Hoenikker family implies, saving the world is not always a matter of colossal heroic deeds. Often, it takes only a smile or open arms for the people in need. Having a functional family is a small but key step in forming a stable society that is not easy to break down – either by external factors or from within. The kinder we will be and the more we will listen to one another, the more likely we are to cooperate well and avoid potential disasters. After all, that is what Bokononists do during their ritual of *book-maru*: they become more aware of other people.

All the elements above form a dystopian world that Vonnegut tried to fight against in his writing. Taking into account the definitions adumbrated in the first chapter, the one from the Cambridge dictionary seems to be the most fitting. Vonnegut did not depict a world where everybody is unhappy or lives in terrible conditions. He depicted a world where some people are happier than the others and are ignorant of and blind to the needs of their compatriots. A world where people care only about themselves, where politicians do not make any effort at improving people's lives but wage their meaningless wars without realizing that they can end up with nothing left to fight for or against. It is the greed and disinterest of people in others that makes the world of *Cat's Cradle* dystopian. Furthermore, as Maus explains, dystopias stem

¹⁴⁴ Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle*, 280.

from failed attempts at creating utopias.¹⁴⁵ That is exactly the case of *Cat's Cradle*, in which the attempt to create a technological utopia results in a dystopian world full of danger and violence. Vonnegut said that he had been criticized for pointing out the weakness of society without offering solutions, to which he responded that he might once add his thoughts on Utopia.¹⁴⁶ I would like to object to that label. I must admit that Vonnegut's solutions are not always too explicit and one has to search in between the lines. After all, that is what indirect satire is all about – letting the reader find the connections and decide for themselves. It is the dystopian image of the world that prompts the reader to think. Vonnegut does not have to present a Utopia which displays the ideal state to show people what is right. In the section about religion, I pointed out the reasons why I think that Bokomonism is an existentialist philosophy and I adopt the same stance on his image of dystopia. By showing people the evils of the society, he lets them see it, think about it and then decide what would be the best way to tackle it. It may not be the most effective of solutions, but it gives people freedom, which is, in my opinion, one of the most important assets a human being can have. After all, Vonnegut's vision of the primary function of writers was to inform, not to remedy.

The apocalyptic element of *Cat's Cradle* realized through Vonnegut's self-projections into the narrator places him into the role of a 20th century Jonah or simply a prophet. The aim of his satire was to try and predict potential disasters that could afflict our society and deliver a prophecy for people to stop and think: "What are we doing? We should rethink our ways or something bad is going to happen." He adhered to a beautiful analogy that he once used. He spoke of coal miners who took birds into the mines to detect gas before it poisoned them. Although he was not much optimistic about the impact of the artists on important people, he thought that artist should carry on in being such alarms.¹⁴⁷ Such views are the reason why Vonnegut's satire is a magnificent example of Horatian satire. He liked life, he liked people, and he wanted only the best for them. So, his satire is not autotelic as it is the case with Juvenal, it does not make fun of people only for the sake of making fun. He wants to see people happy and cooperating well, not violent, greedy, and careless. His writing is educational. He wants to instil humanity in people before they become rulers and influencers.¹⁴⁸ Even though he depicts

¹⁴⁵ Derek Maus, "Series and Systems: Russian and American Dystopian Satires of the Cold War," *Critical Survey*, Vol. 17, No. 1 Representations of Dystopia in Literature and Film (2005): 72.

¹⁴⁶ Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., "'Unstuck in Time' ... a Real Kurt Vonnegut: The Reluctant Guru of Searching Youth," interview by William T. Noble, in *Conversations with Kurt Vonnegut*, ed. William R. Allen (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1988), 60.

¹⁴⁷ Vonnegut, "Playboy Interview," 77.

¹⁴⁸ Vonnegut, "A Talk," 123.

apocalyptic endings and disastrous events, he does that with the best possible intention. To make the world a better place. Julian Castle, a character in *Cat's Cradle*, once said that life is "as short and brutish and mean as ever."¹⁴⁹ So, we should be thankful to the Vonneguts of our world for being selfless and trying to make our existence a happy one.

¹⁴⁹ Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle*, 176.

RESUMÉ

Tato bakalářská práce se věnuje prvkům apokalypsy a dystopie v satirickém obrazu společnosti Spojených států za studené války tak, jak ho ve své knize *Kolíbka* vykreslil americký autor Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.

První kapitola se zaměřuje na seznámení čtenáře s relevantní literární terminologií, která je používána v pozdější analýze; v první řadě s pojmem satira. Nejdříve je pojem na základě vybrané slovníkové definice vymezen a poté jsou nastíněna žánrová specifika satiry vlastní, například její metody. Dále se kapitola věnuje typům satiriků, kde rozlišuje mezi satirou Horatia a Juvenalise. V posledním odstavci jí věnovaném je obsažen názor samotného autora na satiru. V dalším odstavci je definován pojem apokalypsa a apokalyptická literatura. Je zde načrtnut rozdíl mezi populárním vnímáním zmíněných slov a jejich skutečným významem. Na základě etymologie slova apokalypsa je vyvozen závěr, že ve svém pravém významu apokalypsa spíše než destruktivní konec světa denotuje prorocké vize takovýchto událostí. V závěru kapitoly je shromážděno několik definic slova dystopie za účelem jejich použití v analýze toho, co pro autora dystopie vlastně znamená a co jejím použitím sleduje.

Kapitola druhá se věnuje vyobrazení společnosti Spojených států amerických, aby tak poskytla dobový kontext pro analýzu autorovi satiry. Ve svém úvodu se soustředí na začátky studené války a zejména na jeden z klíčových momentů tohoto konfliktu – vyvinutí a svržení prvních atomových pum na japonská města Hirošima a Nagasaki. Po sléze je zkoumán vliv těchto událostí na americkou vědu, postoje vědců před a po Hirošimě a reakci vládního establishmentu na značné pochyby vědců o tom, jak by mělo být s vojenským výzkumem dále nakládáno. Dále je stručně popsán dopad hrozící nukleární války se Sověty na myšlení běžných Američanů. Následující část se věnuje rodinnému prostředí Američanů za studené války, především doktríně *home containment* definované profesorkou May. Popisuje vztah manželství, výchovy dětí a péči o domácnost ve vztahu k hrozící nukleární válce a především k americkému strachu z komunismu. Poté je nastíněn obraz amerického náboženství zkoumané doby, v níž náboženství přestávalo mít tak značnou spirituální hodnotu jako mívalo v obdobích předešlých. Stala se z něj spíše jakási sociální událost a také prostředek pro udržení Amerického národa při sobě, viz přídavek fráze „under God“ do Slibu věrnosti. Závěrem druhé kapitoly je na několika písňových textech ilustrována reakce americké pop kultury na nukleární nebezpečí a také vzkaz vládě, aby si dávala pozor na to, jak chce bojovat, protože by také posléze nemusela mít za co

a proti komu.

Kapitola s pořadovým číslem tři již přistupuje ke knize *Kolibka* jako takové. Na začátku jsou představeny události, které autora vedly k sepsání této knihy – jeho válečné zkušenosti, zaměstnání v General Electric a následné objevení námětu, který jiný autor, H.G. Wells, jemuž byl původně sdělen, ignoroval nebo nestihl ve své tvorbě použít. V dalším odstavci se kapitola věnuje tónu, jakým je kniha napsána. Autor sám si v životě prošel, ač už přímo nebo nepřímo, mnohými těžkostmi, které ho posunuly na pesimistickou stranu v rámci spektra náhledu na život. Avšak ve Vonnegutově případě je pesimismus roznětkou velmi kreativních procesů, protože, jak podotýká James Lundquist, smích je jeho nejefektivnější zbraní proti osobním i globálním tragédiím. Což znamená, že ty nejlepší vtipy pocházejí z těch největších hoří. V následujícím odstavci je probíráno žánrové zasazení knihy. Nejdříve je kniha klasifikována jako dílo satiry a zároveň je popsáno, proč Vonnegut ve své satirické tvorbě dosahuje takových kvalit. Pozornosti neuchází ani značně postmoderní členění knihy, která na svých zhruba 250 stranách čítá 127 kapitol, což na mnoho čtenářů působí jako vtip sám o sobě. Na základě použití konceptů jako je led typu 9 a konstantního laškování s vědou je kniha zařazena také do žánru science-fiction, jelikož to pro Vonnegutovu kariéru mělo značný význam. Díky nálepce „autor vědeckofantastické literatury“ se mu nedostávalo takové pozornosti ze strany kritiků, jakou by si patrně zasloužil. Vonnegut sám vnímal obeznámení s vědou jako nutnou průpravu spisovatelů, kteří chtějí věrně zobrazovat dobu, o které píší, protože věda se stále více a více stává součástí našich životů. Co se stylu psaní týče, je kniha napsána velmi prostým a jednoduchým jazykem bez složitých větných konstrukcí. Zřídka se objeví vulgarismus, který textu dodá na běžnosti. Díky tomuto mixu je kniha velmi přístupná pro většinu čtenářů a autor sám tak svá díla cílil, protože si uvědomoval, že ne každý člověk umí číst dobře a pozorně, a tak se mu snažil čtení a pochopení co nejvíce ulehčit. V další části se kapitola věnuje aspektům, které knihu učinily jedním z nejpobulárnějších Vonnegutových děl a *de facto* tak nastartovaly jeho kariéru. Přístupnost širokému spektru čtenářů již byla zmíněna. Kniha se také zabývá významem lidské existence, což bylo velmi horké téma těsně po Kubanské krizi, kdy spousta lidí hledala význam života při myšlení na to, že může v jakoukoli vteřinu skončit pohledem na atomový hřib. 60. léta byla také periodou různých kontrakulturních hnutí, jejichž mladým rebelům musely být Vonnegutovi pacifistické a humanistické názory velmi po chuti.

Navazující podkapitola zkoumá vypravěče děje *Kolibky* jakožto hlavní apokalyptický ele-

ment knihy. Prochází několik intertextuálních pojítek, které Johna (vypravěče) váží jak k biblickému Jonášovi, tak k Ishmaelovi, hrdinovi knihy *Moby-Dick* od Hermana Melvilla. Spojení s biblickým Jonášem dává tušit, že John bude mít za úkol zvěstovat něco nemilého, což podporuje i analogie s Ishmaelem, který jako jediný přežil zběsilý lov bílé velryby, aby poté mohl lidi varovat před podobnými pokusy. Po prozkoumání autorova života lze spatřit místa, kde se promítá do svého vypravěče a tím ze svého knihy činí proroctví a sebe pasuje do role ať už Jonáše či Ishmaela 20. století. Zaplacením několika knih do sebe jak v rámci *Kolíbky*, tak v rámci literatury jako takové Vonnegut tvoří dokonalé dílo nepřímé satiry. Po zjištění, že Johnova kniha *Den, kdy skončil svět* je vlastně *Kolíbkou* a obráceně nemůže být pochyb, že ten, kdo pro nás má proroctví není ani John (Johnův svět totiž skončil a tudíž nemá komu prorokovat), ani Jonáš, dokonce ani Ishamel. Je to Kurt Vonnegut sám.

Čtvrtá kapitola se věnuje třem vybraným tématům satiry, které ve Vonnegutově knize lze pozorovat. Prvním z nich je věda. Respektive postoj vládnoucího establishmentu a vědců samotných k ní. Vědu v knize reprezentuje fiktivní město Ilium, kde se nachází laboratoře společnosti General Forge and Foundry. Zde pracoval Vonnegutův fiktivní otec atomové bomby, Dr. Felix Hoenikker. Felix je ztělesněním předhirošimského vědce, který absolutně nedbá následků své práce. Přestože Vonnegut několikrát označil Irwinga Langmuira za inspiraci pro tuto postavu, bylo zjištěno několik zajímavých paralel se skutečným autorem atomové pumy, Robertem Oppenheimerem. A je to právě Oppenheimerův citát, který dokonale ilustruje hlavní cíl Vonnegutovy satiry vědy: hlad po technické líbeznosti bez ohledu na její následné implikace. Dále se také Vonnegut opírá do vlády a toho jak lehkomyšlně vědu využívá pro své militantní účely. Druhým tématem Vonnegutovy satiry je náboženství. Autorův Bokononismus je dost možná tou nejobdivuhodnější částí knihy. Jedná se o náboženství, které otevřeně říká, že veškeré jeho učení je lež. Ale protože lidé na San Lorenzu nezvládají realitu svých životů, Bokononistické lži jim pomáhají přežít. Tímto Vonnegut atakuje podvodnou podstatu náboženských učení, které nabízí lidem odpovědi na jejich otázky, ale zároveň je činí náchylné k využití. Ač Vonnegut náboženství tvrdě kritizuje, uvědomuje si prospěšnost jeho lži pro snesitelnější bytí. V obrazu sanlorenzských knězů však tvrdě kritizuje církevní vykořisťování věřících skryté za distribuci informací o tom, co s jejich ovečkami Bůh doopravdy zamýšlí. Přestože mnoho hlasů klasifikuje autorova fiktivní náboženství jako nihilistické, jsou poskytnuty podněty pro vnímání těchto jako spíše existencialistických. Posledním vybraným tématem je role rodiny ve společnosti, kde se opět objevují Hoenikkerovi. Felix, který je slepý nejen vůči následkům své práce, ale také vůči své rodině, způsobí smrt své ženy, připraví tak rodinu o matku, a tím pádem fatálně

naruší výchovu svých dětí. Jejich povahy tak utrhá zásadní rány, které nepřímou vyústí v konec světa. Na tomto evidentně hyperbolickém příkladu je viditelný autorův názor na důležitost fungující rodiny v rámci společnosti. Pokud totiž fungují rodiny, funguje i celá společnost a lidstvo má tak větší šanci žít mírumilovně pospolu.

Závěrem práce jsou shrnuty poznatky z předešlé analýzy témat satiry. Následuje vyjádření ohledně toho, co autor sleduje svým dystopickým vyobrazením společnosti a jaká řešení z toho vycházejí. V následujícím odstavci je shrnut element apokalypsy v příběhu a autor je na základě předešlého výzkumu přiřazen do Horatiánské satiry, neboť jeho cílem je vtipně poukazovat na nedostatky lidstva, aby si je lidstvo uvědomilo, pokusilo se o jejich nápravu a směřovalo tak za lepšími zítřky.

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