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Postmodern Humanism in Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle (1963)*

انسانية مابعد الحداثة في رواية مهد القط (1963) لكورت فونيجت

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Abstract

This research paper aims to highlight Kurt Vonnegut's humanist concerns in *Cat's Cradle* (1963). Even though the novel's main theme is the possible catastrophic damages of misusing nuclear substance, the novel also provides statements about individuals' responsibilities towards their societies and their ability to improve their environment with the slightest decisions they make. This paper follows the argument that Vonnegut's novel is an expression of postmodern humanism that does not regard the world in terms of perfectness and idealization but rather in terms of simple decent everyday human action or ethical decisions made by an individual for no earthly or heavenly rewards. This type of humanism stems out of humans' kindness, natural goodness and ethical framework wherein the welfare of the whole society is regarded as a priority.

Keywords: Postmodern Humanism _ individuals' responsibilities _ ethical decision _ welfare of society

الملخص : تهدف هذه الورقة البحثية إلى تسليط الضوء على الاهتمامات الإنسانية لكورت فونيجت في قصة مهد القط(1963) . بالرغم من أن الموضوع الرئيسي للقصة هو الخسائر الكارثية الممكنة لسوء استخدام المواد النووية، إلا أن القصة أيضا تعطينا إفادات على مسؤولية الأفراد نحو مجتمعاتهم وقدرتهم على تحسين محيطهم بأبسط القرارات التي يتخذونها. هذه المقالة تعتمد على الحجة أن رواية كورت فونيجت هي تعبير لإنسانية ما بعد الحداثة التي لا ترى العالم بالصورة الكاملة و المثالية، إنما تراه في صورة ابسط عمل يومي مهذب للإنسان و قرارات متخلقة يتخذها الفرد لا لأي جزاء دنيوي أو سماوي. هذا النوع من الإنسانية ينبع من اللطف الإنساني و طيبة القلب الطبيعية والنظام الأخلاقي حيث تكون مصلحة المجتمع ككل هي الأولى.

الكلمات المفتاحية: إنسانية ما بعد الحداثة _ مسؤولية الأفراد _ قرار متخلق _ مصلحة المجتمع.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Throughout his career of writing, Kurt Vonnegut explored, with hidden sadness, light comedy and zealous philosophy, the moral and social disintegration of the American society in the aftermath of the Second World War. He perceived the decline of humanity as a sign of humans' inability to act freely or to resist the domination of science, evolution and divine intervention over their lives. However, within the chaos that colours his characters' lives and surroundings, there is a lightening hope that those controlling powers are basically human-made and hence can be managed. Thus, along with a general faith that life is worthless and purposeless, there is also a declaration that a simple human awareness of this condition and a mere recognition of one's responsibility towards his society can make a change. This intellectual thought, which is the result of both historical and personal experiences, is what makes up the main theme of his novel *Cat's Cradle* (1963).

Accordingly, the purpose of this article is to highlight Vonnegut's fierce criticism of human irresponsible behaviours and his outcry that people should consider the outcomes of their actions upon their societies. Like all his novels, the main themes of *Cat's Cradle* revolve around certain great errors committed by major social institutions such as science, religion, and foreign policies that finally bring the characters and their society into their final decay. These concerns have been the focus of a number of papers written about Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*.

The focus of the article, however, is Vonnegut's portrayal of individuals as not only representative of major institutions, but also as simple social beings whose simple actions and character traits can significantly influence their societies. This socialism stems from Vonnegut's unique act of postmodern humanism; one that does not merely exhibit the problems of society in an absurd manner, but also one that heartily seeks to solve those societal problems even with the simplest actions and decisions.

2. Kurt Vonnegut's Postmodern Humanism in *Cat's Cradle*

Even though it was *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) that established Kurt Vonnegut's fame, his reputation as a prominent contemporary writer was well initiated in *Cat's Cradle*. The novel, like all his other works, portrays a dystopian society disintegrated by great communal errors that a narrator attempts to record in search of a meaningful understanding of human action. The novel is about the attempts of Jonah, the narrator, to write an account of the life of Felix Hoenikker, one of the developers of the atom bomb, and what "important Americans" were doing the day the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. Jonah meets Felix's three children and his life becomes entangled with the hilarious

events that the three children experience under the shadow of their father's moral and material legacy.

More significantly, setting the novel amidst the Cold War atmosphere enabled Vonnegut to explore not only the responsibility of governmental institutions, but also the responsibility of individuals towards their societies. In other words, the events of the story do not merely accuse the American governmental institutions—represented basically by the Research Laboratory where the Atom bomb and other destructive substances were developed—for the destruction caused by the atom bomb dropped on Hiroshima, it further calls into question the intentions and everyday habits of ordinary American people who seem to contribute, in one way or another, to other tragedies like the one of Hiroshima. The novel, hence, reveals Vonnegut as a morally engaged writer.

2.1 Vonnegut as Morally Engaged Writer

Scholars have adequately discussed the moral content in Vonnegut's novels in general, and *Cat's Cradle* in specific. The two important studies relevant to the purpose of this article are Cadnace Anne Strawn's 1972 research paper entitled *Vonnegut's Criticisms of Modern Society* and a more recent article entitled "A blend of Absurdism and Humanism: Defending Kurt Vonnegut's Place in Secondary Setting" (2018) by Krisandra R. Johnson. These two works highlight divergent views about Vonnegut's treatment of human morality. While Cadnace A. Strawn saw pessimism, Krisandra R. Johnson saw hope in Vonnegut's work. In this article, however, I argue that regardless of the author's tone and attitude towards the subjects of his novel, the significance of his work lies in his attempts to induce people to adjust the world around them even through slightest actions and decisions.

Strawn (1972) read Vonnegut in the light of what historians, such as Oswald Spengler, Arnold Toynbee and Henry B. Adams, expressed about the demise of Western civilization. While these historians differed in their manner of explaining the process of decline, all came to the same conclusion that Western civilization is moving towards its decline just like previous great cultures. Strawn believed that Vonnegut's fiction fits well with those historians' models of the demise of cultures and their prophecies about the decline of Western civilization (p. 15). Krisandra Johnson (2018), on the other hand, argued the contrary. She believed that within the absurd worlds and situations of Vonnegut's work, there is always a hope that people can change their world (p. 100).

Essentially, Vonnegut's own attitude towards the issues he rose in his fiction is of minor importance with regards to the larger aim he intended. Thus, regardless of his insistence on envisaging images of decay, dystopia and

apocalypse and the sudden twists of point of view he makes to dramatise to existentialist concerns of his characters, Vonnegut's fiction points to serious moral wrongs in society and implicitly invites the audience to adjust them in an attempt to improve society. Thus, like a historian whose aim is to tell the story of the past to make better the present, and a sociologist who studies social change and evolution to explain society for the benefit of its people, Vonnegut, as a writer, opted for satire, absurdity, nihilism and so on as means towards the same end which is social improvement. Vonnegut, in this vein, expressed a unique vision of postmodern humanism.

2.2 The Definition of Postmodern Humanism

It is first important to highlight what is meant by postmodern humanism. While many believed that postmodernism in art and literature conveys the lack of social relevance, different contemporary scholars, such as Hans Bertens, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, have defended postmodern literature and emphasized the moral and social content of the majority of postmodern literary works. Postmodern texts display irony, absurdism, and black humour...etc as both formal techniques and ways to express a pessimistic view of the world. Yet, deep within this pessimism, there is a genuine concern about the possibility of improving the world regardless of religious dictates. This kind of humanism is a secular one, a postmodern one. This model of postmodern humanism finds its bases in the approaches of some contemporary scholars of postmodern literature.

Hans Bertens' article, "Postmodern Humanism" (2012), is a defence of postmodernism against accusations held against it by many theorists (including the Marxists Frederic Jameson and Terry Eagleton). Detractors of postmodernism, and postmodern literature in particular, believed that obsession with techniques, lack of referentiality and excessive objection to realism dismiss postmodern literature from the realm of humanism. Bertens (2012), on the other side, assumed that the aforementioned aspects "are balanced by far more traditional elements that point in a wholly different direction and that are ignored in the criticism that sees literature as the literary processing of postmodern thematic" (p. 305). Otherwise said, postmodern literature maintained a strong link with reality despite its over preoccupation with the aesthetic qualities.

Bertens (2012) dismissed the claim that postmodern literature did not concern itself with morality. He said:

> Postmodern fiction's wild improbabilities, dazzling displays of self-reflexivity—including unsettling asides to the reader—and, occasionally, general authorial zaniness, does not exclude moral seriousness. It is certainly the case that in some texts that are widely seen as postmodern the potential referentiality that their language inevitably carries is so

> overwhelmed by a barrage of metafictional devices that we cannot seriously connect them to the world as we know it. (p. 305)

Thus, serious concerns are simply overshadowed by techniques.

For Bertens (2012), postmodern literature created "a balance between referentiality and non-referentiality" by juxtaposing textual elements that create the illusion of reality and self-reflexive elements that disrupt this illusion. These "two incompatible sets of reading instructions" create a unique postmodern experience of reading wherein the reader finds "elements that suggest depth and meaning and invite traditional interpretation, while practically simultaneously other elements will block and even ridicule attempts at interpretation" (p. 306). Accordingly, postmodern writers held the burden of creating distinctive literature in terms of both form and content.

In a 1948 book entitled *What is Literature?* Jean-Paul Sartre argued that writers should assume the responsibility of creating socially and politically committed art. He argued that "the writer has chosen to reveal the world and particularly to reveal man to other men so that the latter may assume full responsibility before the object which has thus been laid bare" (p. 24). Sartre's idea is that the writer should confront power structures by committing to a cause and taking full responsibility over his art. Even though Sartre's argument was confronted by Theodor Adorno (1962) who insisted upon the autonomy of art, several works by postmodern writers fall under Sartre's model of committed literature.

Thus, along with the artistic responsibility of creating new and distinctive works in terms of form and content, certain postmodern writers, including Kurt Vonnegut and Robert Coover among others, also demonstrated a moral responsibility toward their societies. For instance, about the responsibility of the artist, Kurt Vonnegut suggested that a humanist writer should have a natural sense of goodness and work accordingly. In *A Man Without A Country* (2005), he declared that "We humanists try to behave as decently, as fairly, and as honourably as we can without any expectation of rewards or punishments in an afterlife …We serve as best we can the only abstraction without which we have any real familiarity, which is our community" (p. 80). Thus, for the welfare of one's community, decency and honesty must be the driving force of the writer.

Absolutely, regardless of the poststructuralist aspects related form and language, Vonnegut's work is important postmodern fiction due to its preoccupation with matters related to human morality and responsibility towards community. This "balance" created between "referentiality and non-

referentiality" fits the model of postmodern humanism that Bertens suggested. This overriding theme is much obvious in Vonnegut's 1963 novel *Cat's Cradle.*

3. Postmodern Humanist Concerns in *Cat's Cradle*

Vonnegut's statements about humanity construct the major themes of his story *Cat's Cradle*. Thus, despite the postmodern aspects of the novel, such as metafiction, self-reflexivity, and narrative playfulness, the text deals with serious moral subjects. Most importantly, the novel fits the model of postmodern humanism defended by Hans Bertens (2012) and earlier identified by Todd Davies (2006) who argued that "Unlike the modernist, the postmodernist does not believe in the perfectibility of humanity or final, static position such as utopia; rather the postmodern humanist concentrates on daily, local activity that may improve human life" (p. 32). Thus, the novel does not try to suggest a model of a perfect world. But, instead, it attempts to invoke people's sense of morality that can, in one way or another, improve the world.

The story is set partly in Illume and partly on San Lorenzo Island in the Caribbean. In Illume, Jonah meets the acquaintances of Felix Hoenikker to collect material for his book, *The Day the World Ended*. He hears a rumour about Felix's invention of a substance called 'ice-nine' that would freeze any liquid that touches it. In San Lorenzo, Jonah meets in person the Hoenikker children and there he witnesses events that are not different from what happened when the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. He realizes that the substance really exists and that each one of the three children used it for certain earthly benefits. An accidental use of the substance leads to an ecological catastrophe when the substance touches the ocean causing everything to freeze. Jonah, among the few survivors of the catastrophe, survives mainly to tell the tale of the apocalyptic incident he witnessed (Vonnegut, *Cat's cradle*, 2000). The narrative shows to what extent humans' errors can negatively affect humanity and therefore seems to incite some sense of responsibility to avoid future calamities.

3.1 Humans' Folly as Destructive to Humanity

The story with the tragic fate of almost all of its characters comments on certain human follies. The first of these is Felix Hoenikker's lack of sound judgment of his actions. Felix Hoenikker is a scientist who, fictionally, invented two disastrous substances: the atomic bomb and 'ice-nine'. He is a dedicated scientist, hard worker, and enthusiast of scientific puzzles. However, all these seemingly good qualities are juxtaposed with disastrous and devastating outcomes of his scientific inventions. The atom bomb he helped in developing led to a human catastrophe when it was dropped on Hiroshima on the 6th August 1945. He also created a chemical substance called 'ice-nine' to solidify mud. Yet,

giving the substance insecurely to his children led, also, to another human and ecological catastrophe that almost ended life on earth. Felix is ironically portrayed as naïve, kind, and very gentle and this emphasizes the lack of sound judgment that characterises some scientists. Jonah calls him and the like scientists "criminal accessories to murder most folk" (Vonnegut, *Cat's cradle*, 2000, p. 40).

Felix's story is reminiscent of the story of Alfred Nobel, who invented dynamite for beneficial reasons. Yet, unable to control his scientific creation, Nobel was obliged to stand his mouth open witnessing the human catastrophes that resulted from using his invention to wage wars and kill people. What was left for Nobel was merely to grant the money gained from his invention to promote pure scientific research. The action is charitable but the prize is still "Blood money" as the narrator, Jonah, keeps calling it.

The novel attempts to highlight the fact that human reason, technological advent and nuclear discoveries can uncontrollably damage the world. Scientists, like all human beings, are deprived from their free will and ability to control the world in the face of a universe that is full of hidden secrets no matter what people knew about it. In that vein, Vonnegut tried to warn that scientists' attempts to change the world, improve it, or affect its natural order would instead destroy life on earth. In one of his speeches, Vonnegut advocated that "young people should not accept responsibility for reforming the world. In practical terms that is an impossible duty to bear for any human being. The answer lies rather in our attitudes, our philosophies in short what comes from our imagination" (as cited in Klinkowitz, 1973, p. 63).

Vonnegut implied that if each one did his bit of social responsibility, everything would settle down correctly. After the human disaster of the Hiroshima event, Dr. Asa Breed, who was previously the supervisor of Dr. Felix, quits his job at the Research Laboratory concluding that "anything a scientist worked on was sure to wind up as a weapon, one way or another" (Vonnegut, *Cat's cradle*, 2000, p. 29). Not willing to participate in further human tragedies, the narrator says that Dr. Breed "didn't want to help politicians with their fugging wars anymore" (Vonnegut, *Cat's cradle*, 2000, p. 29) It is important to highlight that before the disaster, Dr. Breed is quoted (by Sandra) as saying "The trouble with the world was … 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" (Vonnegut, *Cat's cradle*, 2000, p. 27). Dr. Breed, a typical scientist, does not consider anything as important as science. For him, science can find the secrets of life. However, being a typical humanist too, he realizes

that scientific development can also run out of humans' control and can also be misused and here lies the drama. He, thus, does his bit of social responsibility and gives up scientific research.

On the other side, Dr. Felix was taken over by his proficiency as a scientist. Unfortunately, his proficiency did not only affect humanity, it had also a regrettable impact on his children. In Newt's letter to Jonah and the stories that the town's people tell about Felix Hoenikker, we learn that engaged scientists such as Felix are indifferent people. Newt tells that his father has never played with him and that when he approached him for the first time to play cat's cradle the child was totally frightened by his father's face and rashly runs away crying. The event is hilarious yet it hints to Felix's indifference and lack of the basic human emotions.

Vonnegut was aware that it is daring to talk negatively about scientists, yet he did. One of the characters expresses this awareness when he says:

> I suppose it's high treason and ungrateful and ignorant and backward and anti-intellectual to call a dead man as famous as Felix Hoenikker a son of a bitch. I know all about how harmless and gentle and dreamy he was supposed to be, how he'd never hurt a fly, how he didn't care about money and power and fancy clothes and automobiles and things, how he wasn't like the rest of us, how he was better than the rest of us, how he was so innocent he was practically a Jesus—except for the Son of God part…. (Vonnegut, *Cat's cradle,* 2000, pp. 64-5)

The speaker, Marvin Breed, pauses. Yet, feeling that what is to be said is more important than what has been said, Jonah insists that Marvin should continue his thought for in it lies the essential value of Dr. Felix Hoenikker. Marvin, upon Jonah's insistence, resumes his thought and cries:

> But…But…but how the hell innocent is a man who helps make a thing like an atomic bomb? And how can you say a man had a good mind when he couldn't even bother to do anything when the best hearted, most beautiful woman in the world, his own wife, was dying for lack of love and understanding… Sometimes I wonder if he wasn't born dead. I never met a man who was less interested in the living. Sometimes I think that's the trouble with the world: too many people in high places who are stone-cold dead. (Vonnegut, *Cat's cradle*, 2000, pp. 64-5)

Felix did not have much affection for his wife even though she was beautiful and lovable. Even after her death, Felix did not bother to purchase any monument to mark his wife's grave.

This carelessness and lack of emotions, which are basically the outcomes of his proficiency as a "dedicated" scientist, contribute to Felix's irresponsibility

as a social man. This is obvious, for instance, through his flaws as father. He does not give much time to his children. Angela, Felix's daughter, recounts to Jonah how her father carelessly stopped her from her studies to take care of him and her brothers. More significant is Felix's disregard for people around him. Thus, in addition to being negligent to his wife's as well as his children's existence, he considers his wife and daughter mere caretakers. His busy scientific life alienates him from the people that he is supposed to love and care about. He spends very little time with his family, never plays games with his children, and never reads books or magazines. He is an uncaring and an unloving scientist whose only occupation is solving scientific puzzles.

The irony is that even though they are victims of his indifference, Felix's three children are as unmoved and apathetic as their father is. Angela, the oldest of his children, inherited from her father his lack of sound judgment. During his interview with her in San Lorenzo, Jonah is surprised to learn that Angela is so sad that her father did not receive the due respect that he should have received. She is even inconsiderate of what people say about him regarding his contribution to the Hiroshima Bomb. Newt, in a letter to Jonah, also tells that when he ran away from the house in the cat's cradle event, Angela slapped him in the face simply because she felt that Newt's childish reaction hurt her father.

Felix's sons also inherited their father's negative traits. Frank, for instance, inherited his father's boldness and cold-heartedness. On the day of his father's funeral he stops a taxi and leaves before the funeral is over. He was the first to leave the graveyard. Newt, the youngest of the children, inherited his father's lack of responsibility. He is a midget who loses his piece of ice-nine to buy fake happiness with a Russian midget who turns out to be a spy.

Other characters also represent moral errors that should be recognized. Crosby, a businessman whom Jonah meets in the plane, is a typical American capitalist. Interested only in material success and growing wealth, Crosby thinks that modern time America, that grants more freedom to its people, is no longer suitable for his business career. He considers removing his work to San Lorenzo mainly because its dictatorship regime is advantageous for people like him.

Lying and fantasising images of idolization about America and the American people is also another target of the text. A short conversation in the plane scene evokes this issue when the Mintons reveal that the American press and media are controlled so as not tell truths about America and the American people that would disrupt their image as a perfect nation. Mr. Minton, an Ambassador, recounts how he was fired from his work for a blatant letter his wife wrote. In the letter, Claire, Minton's wife, said that she "was very upset

about how Americans couldn't imagine what it was like to be something else, to be something else and proud of it ... Americans … are forever searching for love in forms it never takes, in places it can never be" (Vonnegut, *Cat's cradle*, 2000, p. 89). Minton explains the graveness of his wife's ideas saying "The highest possible form of treason…is to say that Americans aren't loved everywhere they go, whatever they do. Claire tried to make the point that American foreign policy should recognize hate rather than imagine love" (Vonnegut, *Cat's cradle*, 2000, p. 90). Claire's letter was sent to the *Times* and published during the era of Senator McCarthy and caused her husband to be fired only twenty four hours after it was printed.

Claire's ideas about Americans find ample manifestations in the novel. Clearly, Felix's children are hated. They are looking for happiness in places it cannot be and through inappropriate ways. For instance, Angela's married life is a failed one because her husband married her solely for the piece of ice-nine she possesses. Frank, also, is hated everywhere. Jonah learns from the town's people how he was hated in school. He becomes an official in San Lorenzo after he gives his piece of ice-nine to the Island's leader, Papa Monzano. Newt, being a midget, was desperate to find true love. The only enjoyable relationship with a midget turned out to be fake after the girl stole Newt's piece of ice-nine and ran away.

Also, the brief experience that Jonah goes through in the plane provides other examples of Americans "hated everywhere". Jonah meets American people who represent different values that make them hated. H. Lowe Crosby and his wife Hazel are described as "heavy people", "they spoke twangingly" (Vonnegut, *Cat's cradle*, 2000, p. 82). Being a man of business, Crosby says that he gained nothing from Chicago but "ingratitude from his employees" (Vonnegut, *Cat's cradle*, 2000, p. 82). He wants to remove his business to San Lorenzo because its people "got discipline" and "don't have their government encouraging everybody to be some kind of original puissant nobody ever heard of before" and "the people down there are poor enough and scared enough and ignorant enough to have some common sense" (Vonnegut, *Cat's cradle*, 2000, p. 82).

These examples of human flaws suggest that everyone is ruining the world in his own specific way. Nuclear invention and materialism make Americans "hated everywhere" because rather than improving the world, they are actually damaging it, or, at least, threatening its stability. Felix's children exemplify the idea that what children need from their parents is not a material legacy as much as an ethical one. Therefore, Vonnegut juxtaposed his pessimist views about the decay of the world with much more implicit ideas about how human individual responsibility should be.

3.2 Vonnegut's View of Human Individual Responsibility

Actually, Vonnegut saw wisdom in exhibiting the breakdown of human life in the worst manner. Cadnace Anne Strawn (1972) suggested that "The American writer, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., writes satirically about our contemporary culture and sees no possibility in the future for anything but decay and self-destruction" (p. 1). She further justified her view with the claim that

> Vonnegut worries about man's inability to control science because he believes that modern man is incapable of judging between the scientific discoveries which benefit mankind and those which do not. To Vonnegut, giving man the products of scientific knowledge is comparable to giving a child a loaded gun_neither one is wise enough to use his new possession prudently. (p. 20)

Thus, according to Strawn, Vonnegut believed that technology and the Cold War atmosphere are leading the world towards its apocalyptic end.

However, this is not the final end intended by Vonnegut. Thus, although the novel portrays a decaying world and asks philosophical questions about morality and human free will, it does so to invite the reader to consider his own ethical framework to assume responsibility towards his society. It is imperative in this way to portray a dystopian world, a world of follies, shames, greed and exploitation, to show the possible ways humans' lack of morality can affect their environment.

Strawn (1972) drew her conclusion from the assumption that humour in Vonnegut's work is all that is left to face the world. She claimed that "Vonnegut appears to have an affection for the world and desires to improve it, but sees little hope for improvement. He seems to believe that all human can do is comfort people" (pp. 23-4). Indeed, Vonnegut combined the funny with the mundane to create humour. Yet, this humour is not the end itself. Thus, for Vonnegut, the humorous is the means that incites the reader to pause and think wisely.

Krisandra R. Johnson (2018), on the other side, focused on the harmony between absurdism and humanism that sets Vonnegut apart from his contemporaries. She observed that "Vonnegut's novels surpass absurdism and transcend to a hopeful stage of humanity, making Vonnegut's work genuinely distinct. Vonnegut's unique characteristic… remains in his response to the absurd" (p. 101). This harmony is what lights hope for change and improvement in the demoralized world of *Cat's Cradle*.

This hope is transmitted to the reader who is urged to ask philosophical questions about the purpose of living and man's role in life and then take action to improve society. Johnson (2018) said:

> Vonnegut's message insinuates that if man does not care about the consequences of his actions, the world will come to an end. Although this is a literal end for the characters of *Cat's Cradle*, Vonnegut is urging his readers to realize that they must consider their decisions before society devolves into chaos. (p. 105)

In this regard, social responsibility could be either passive or active. A passive action is exemplified by Mona Monzano's suicide and the active one is exemplified by Jonah's decision to write an account of the events he witnessed. Emerging out of their shelter after the corpse of Mona's father was contaminated by ice-nine and then caused all water and liquids on contact to freeze, Mona and Jonah find out that almost all inhabitants of the island committed suicide by swallowing pieces of ice-nine. Frightened by the sight and feeling unable to participate in a demoralized human life, Mona also commits suicide. Jonah would have also committed suicide if absurdity and pessimism were the ultimate goals of Vonnegut. Jonah, instead, survives for the obligation to tell the tale of the people he lived with and to demonstrate what happens when people act without any sense of morality or responsibility.

Thus, Vonnegut's novel evokes human responsibility by juxtaposing characters whose actions spoil the world and characters who, even in the slightest choices they make, improve it. As highlighted above, Dr. Felix Hoenikker is juxtaposed by Dr. Asa Breed who quits scientific research after the Hiroshima event. Frank and Angela are also juxtaposed by Jonah and Mona Monzanoe whose moral decisions aim to end the drama caused by ice-nine. In this manner, Vonnegut's story fits the model of committed literature proposed by Jean-Paul Sartre wherein the writer confronts society and power structures to make changes.

Finally, it is safe to say that the story is a tale of caution that does not only warn individuals but also governments. *Cat's Cradle* was published a year after the Cuban Missile Crisis during a time of anxiety about the role of America in international relations. At that time, the U.S and the Soviet Union were disputing about nuclear interventions in war zones. Both powers were ready to attack but none dared to take the initiative. The story, written and published amidst this atmosphere, centres on the worry that a slightest decision, a simple click on the button, can bring the world to an end.

4. CONCLUSION

From what has been said above, one can conclude that Kurt Vonnegut's writing is humanist par excellence. Even though the majority of his work is categorized as science fiction, the concern in his work is much more moralist and ethical. Science, in particular, is attacked as Vonnegut believed that it is very much misused. Science, the key foundation of modernity, is actually the craze that is leading the world towards its end. Morality for him is the key to overcome the final decay.

Vonnegut's model of morality is a secular one. Thus, he implied that one should consider the welfare of his society and humankind without expecting heavenly rewards. A simple consideration of the consequences of one's actions can push people to make better choices in their lives.

In *Cat's Cradle*, Vonnegut used the technique of juxtaposition in characterization. Thus, characters who contributed to the damage of the world because of their lack of responsibility, such as Dr. Felix and his children, are juxtaposed with characters, such as Jonah and Dr. Asa Breed, who assume a high sense of responsibility and make simple decisions that significantly make positive improvements.

This technique of juxtaposition created not only a hilarious text but also insinuated an excellent statement about human responsibility. Thus, despite the obvious pessimism and absurdity that pertain Vonnegut's fiction, hope and adjustment are also hard-pressed within his demoralized world.

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