



## Bad Faith and the Theatre of the Absurd in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*

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Received: 03/07/2021

Accepted: 22/08/2021

*Abstract ;(not more than 10 Lines)*

*The theatre of the absurd is a theatre about the meaninglessness and hopelessness of modern life, as well as the different ways in which humans attempt to give themselves reasons for survival. It depicts characters that are loners, who feel lost and seek to control their lives in the easiest ways. *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett and *Cat's Cradle* by Kurt Vonnegut represent the dilemma of the meaning and purpose of life in a very humourist but also deceiving style. Death is presented as a freedom to control life since it is the only decision the characters in both works manage to make. Bad Faith is a central theme as it is presented as a way to justify human decisions.*

*Article info*

*Received*  
03/07/2021  
*Accepted*  
.../.../2020

### **Keyword:**

- ✓ *Bad Faith*
- ✓ *Theatre of the absurd*
- ✓ *Free will*

### **1. Introduction**

Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle* are two different literary texts from two different literary genres. The first one is a play about two men who are instructed to wait for a man named Godot, and who never shows up, yet, the waiting the two men do becomes their only purpose in life. The second literary work is a science fiction novel written in 1963 about a scientist who creates an ice that freezes water in room temperature. The ice falls in the ocean and brings the end of life on earth. The novel is narrated by a journalist, Jonah, who collects information about the scientist and meets different people in his journey, whom he realizes have no

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purpose in life but pretend they do for their survival. At the end of his novel, most of these Karasses and Granfalloon (terms coined by Vonnegut that are explained in the analysis), face the truth about life and are obliged to abandon the lies by which they give meaning to life. The novel begins with a very famous and symbolic line, “nothing in this book is true” (Vonnegut, 1963, p.7), to attract attention to the fake truths it carries. The author proceeds by defining *foma*, another term he coined, which means harmless untruths. They are untruths that the characters in *Cat’s Cradle* live by to tell themselves that their lives have meanings. Most of these lies occur in a religion made by a man, which becomes the only existing hope for all the characters of the novel. It is a bad faith in absurdist terms.

The play *Waiting for Godot* also includes many religious allusions which validate the idea of the bad faith. Religion is presented as the bad faith both in *Waiting For Godot* and in *Cat’s Cradle*. In both works the characters sustain their lives by the idea of God and religious belief they choose to submit to. In both cases the characters are innately aware that their belief are not as much products of faith, but as previously argued by Wilson, “to evade having to face up responsibility for it” (qtd. in Graver 15). They decide to live in continuous loops they are aware will lead them nowhere. Yet, they find a certain stability in it. At the end, in both literary works, the end of faith is followed by a decision to end life. Religious faith is presented as a form of existentialist bad faith, which gives them a temporary reason to believe they found meaning in their lives.

In Vonnegut’s fiction the world is depicted as dystopian. It is heading towards the apocalypse, where life is ended on earth and man wanders in a post-apocalyptic world. The literature of the two World Wars is characterized by madness related to the savagery of war both works present human hopes for meaning in a humorous yet sad manner, that is the theatre of the Absurd.

## **2. Absurd Hopes and Bad Faith in *Waiting for Godot*:**

*Waiting For Godot* is a controversial play whose reception in its early days fluctuated between ambition and rejection due of its unusual form. It is a play that is plotless and whose characters are dull and simple, that nobody would think to identify with. The play enjoyed growing popularity as it was performed in different cities and raised heated debate among critics after interpretations started to relate it to Christianity (Graver, 2004, p 10).

It is a play of two men that are referred to as “tramps” and “clowns” by critics (Graver, 2004, p.19), who spend their time daily in the same place waiting for an unknown man named Godot to show up. At the end of each day a boy appears to inform them that Godot was not coming on that day and that they should return the next day to meet him. Vladimir and Estragon keep visiting the same place each day, to wait for the unknown Godot, although somewhere inside them they know he would never arrive. Whenever they feel the insignificance of their waiting and their existence as a whole, and the possibility that Godot is never coming, they think about ending their lives. Suicide does not present itself as a possible option either, the thought of death makes them think about whether only one of them dies and not the other, and raises fears about the possibility of survival, they choose to remain alive.

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Although Beckett refuses to fix interpretation about Godot, he is considered by most critics and consumers of the play as God. S. Beckett on the other hand states that he had no idea of who or what Godot could be or mean. It is a play of fate, belief, and life. Critic Lawrence Graver interprets Vladimir and Estragon as the “fallen state of man” (Graver, 2004, p.14), to refer to man's expectations of life and their behaviors towards the unknown. Indeed, the two characters are aware of the uselessness of the waiting they had to endure, yet, they never stop as it represents for them a basic activity that makes them feel their lives are meaningful.

The idea of the waiting, and what it entails, only became clearer when the play was performed in San Quentin's prison in 1957, as the prisoners made direct reactions to the play because they identified with it, unlike the viewers who only watched it in theatres. The prisoners “understood what waiting was at a deeper level than any of us could comprehend” (Esslin cited in Scott, 2013 p.449).

The play somehow attributes life incidents and human choices (or the lack of them) to God's absence or presence in the lives of men, to avoid assuming responsibility for their failures. This, in existentialist thought, is referred to as the bad faith. It is a term coined by Jean Paul Sartre to refer to man's attempt to escape freedom and the responsibility of taking his own life in control. This concept is contrasted with Good Faith, which is man's craving for authenticity. Jean Paul Sartre defines the Bad Faith as “a paradoxical, confusing perplexing and therefore ultimately a schizophrenic attempt at self-deception, although the fact it may even be the normal aspect of life for many people.” (Sartre cited in Tirsahar, 2017, p.1). In Beckett's play the events become both paradoxical and deceiving as the two protagonists try to give meaning to their lives. Their multiple conversations about death are serious at times and hilarious at others, as they try to hang themselves then the pants of Estragon fall down, causing them to burst into laughter. Death is presented as their bad faith after they realize that there will be no Godot coming for them.

The belief in this bad faith, and the hopes the two characters build around it, leads to a ridiculous situation that is irrational and deceptively funny. Death is displaced from its meaning as an end of life and turns into an end of struggle, particularly, that of finding the meaning of life. The ridiculousness of the situation appears in the fact that death becomes a hope in itself, rather than a pain.

Yet, the position of death is even more absurd and ironic when the two men cannot die and laugh about it. This is called the theatre of the Absurd, which Ionesco defines as “that which is devoid of purpose. ... Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless” (Esslin, 2004, p. 21). The theatre of the absurd is the expression of meaninglessness and despair in theatre. Albert Camus describes absurdity as follows:

A world that can be explained by reasoning, however faulty, is a familiar world. But in a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger. His is an irremediable exile, because he is deprived of memories of a lost homeland as much as he lacks the hope of a promised land to come. This divorce between man and his life,

the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of Absurdity. (Cited in Esslin, 2004, p.20)

It is about the purposeless lives of human beings during the modern age. It carries the same ideas as those of the existentialist thought, yet, unlike philosophy, the absurd is expressed on stage because, according to Esslin (2004), it is the best way to represent “the absurdity of the human condition” (p. 22).

The theatre of the Absurd is characterized by a particular use of language and disruption of traditional writing standards. Language is devalued and loses its representational function in this genre. In fact, the stage becomes itself a representation of language. The ridiculous and the ironic render the language quite different from, and sometimes opposite to, the scenes performed in front of the audience. (Esslin, 2004, p. 24). The ridiculous in this kind of literature concerns the central characters in particular, to make them nihilist, and careless individuals.

Lawrence Broer (1994) describes Vonnegut’s characters as dehumanized by the authoritarian institutions they are compelled to live within. Jonah in *Cat's Cradle* (1963) is often sarcastically laughing about thoughts that are perpetuated in society as common sense, like the supremacy of science over everything else in the world. Broer (1994) cites John Alridge to argue that effective literature today, or contemporary literature, is that which takes place in a context of suicide and mental breakdown (p. 02). Likewise, Vonnegut’s characters in *Cat's Cradle* (1963) are traumatized by the horrors of the atomic bomb and of “ice-nine” (which itself is interpreted as a consequence of the world war). The people who have enough common sense to realize the violence of the atomic bomb, and who feel sad about earth’s destruction by “ice-nine” turned to suicide; like Mona, or died when they rushed to save humanity as for Philip and Julian Castle.

Ihab Hassan (1962) describes the Post-World War II hero in the same way Vonnegut represents him. He is fragmented, and disturbed by his consciousness, because of the oppositions of his age (p.4). Lawrence Broer (1994) refers to the inability to have a peaceful mind in Vonnegut’s characters to the “shock of war” and disturbing “childhood experiences” (p.53). Indeed; in *Cat's Cradle*, Newton is constantly traumatized by his father’s game. In fact, the game represents an existential problem for Newt. He often speaks of his confusion saying “no wonder kids grow up crazy” with all these meaningless Xs being waved in their eyes aimlessly (Vonnegut, 1963, p.176).

Newt’s confusion is related to the paradox of the game. He complains about the game he could never understand but which he was exposed to as a child. Little kids, he says, “look and look at all those Xs... and no damn cat, no damn cradle” (Vonnegut, 1963, p.176). When he finally faces his trauma and paints the cat’s cradle, he only makes scratches in blackness. Jonah then concludes that the painting represents the “sticky nets of human futility” (Vonnegut, 1963, p.175). The painting describes the condition of western civilization. It raises more confusion not only for Newt, but for Julian Castle as well, the philanthropist who builds a free hospital in the jungle. Julian’s reaction to the painting is pessimistic and violent; it is a typical response to the impact of western civilization on man. The cat's cradle (the game) is thus the sticky nets of human futility.

Julian Castle is the human representation of the results of the project of reason. He is pessimistic and sensitive, embittered by the confusion of his age. When first asked to give his opinion about Newt’s painting he answers mockingly, it is hell (Vonnegut, 1963, p.179). He adopts the voice of



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tradition and speaks in its logic, yet still sounds odd in a very ironic free indirect style. It is neither the voice of the author nor that of the character. It is simply the logic of the prevailing ideology. The particularity of free indirect style is that it carries the complete message and still shows how ridiculous or irrational it can be (Colebrook, 2002, p.109-110).

Newt is the most affected by Julian's reaction to the painting. In fact, Newt is the most tormented character in the novel. He struggles with irrationality along the entire narrative, although he surrenders to the impossibility to solve it at times. The Hoenikker children suffer emotional alienation and deprivation not only from their father but from society as well. Their difficult, or impossible, integration with the world could be referred to a defect in their environment. Their father was a robot-like person, who was only interested in science. Dr. Hoenikker never showed any affection, neither for his wife nor for his children. He withdrew his oldest daughter from school to mother him and her younger brothers. Frank, the middle son, was considered alien during his school years and was called secret agent X because his behaviours were mysterious.

The children never managed to forget their homeless childhood. As adults, they are still unable to integrate in society. The only thing which attracts people in them is their father's legacy which they are not mature enough to use, that is, his invention of Ice 9 (an ice that freezes water in room temperature). Lawrence Broer refers the Hoenikkers' inability to lead a stable life to their difficult childhood. These characters, he says, become themselves mechanical and lose their humane side (Vonnegut, 1963, p.101).

Dr. Hoenikker's children in *Cat's Cradle* are confused, puzzled, and senseless; this is a state of mind caused by the atrocities of World War II. Madness is constantly seen in their behavior and their responses. Angela, the oldest daughter, is described as a "case of schizophrenia or demonic possession" (Vonnegut, 1963, p.192). She is physically unattractive and authoritative over her midget brother; yet, when she plays the clarinet—which is the best moment of her life—she shows another side of her personality. Angela's schizophrenia is an art caused by the trauma of the war.

### 3. The Absurd and the "Granfalloon":

Hopelessness takes over society in *Cat's Cradle* (1963). It is caused by the shift in the lifestyle and the ideologies which do the opposite of what they say for the sake of serving governmental agendas. Such societies live under the control of imposed "Granfalloonery" which is a Bokononist word for Absurdity. Writing with the sense that everything might be otherwise than what it seems to be because there is no ultimate plan to make things happen, is writing the absurd. In literature, the absurd concerns an experience in which the world is aware of its lack of internal meaning and of purpose (Michelman, 2008, p.27).

The Absurd in Albert Camus' definition is the tension which results from an individual's will to uncover the purpose of the world (Childs and Fowler, 2006, p.1). Vonnegut's Absurd is most apparent in the religion of Bokononism where characters surrender to a lie and believe in its power to grant them meaning for their lives while they search for this meaning desperately. A text is called absurd when it includes both irony and absurdity (Ibid). It is comedy that emerges from deceit and often appears as irony, which is a reaction to emptiness and meaninglessness.

Vonnegut is most known for this style. In *Cat's Cradle* (1963) Jonah mocks Dr. Breed's conviction that the more truth we have the richer we become, and the fact that he centers the secret

of the universe in science. This idea becomes funnier and more ridiculous when a group of people maintain that the secret of life is Protein and are seriously absorbed by this idea. This, in short, is being a “Granfalloon”.

The “Granfalloon” is a false “Karass” which is gathered with no purpose at all. The “Granfalloon” is an absurd group of people who act in an absurd and egocentric manner. It is the Bokononist word for Absurdity. They are the very embodiment of western tradition and they believe reason’s narratives. They are hopeless people who never see their failures, but consider them successes without paying attention to their inhumane repercussions. “Granfalloons” act irresponsibly, like Angela’s approval of her father’s work and her inability to notice the savagery of his inventions while she defends him.

But Angela is not the only “Granfalloon” in the novel; the Crosbys make perfect “Granfalloons” too. They are narcissistic and their patriotism blinds them from seeing the negative consequences of their culture’s flaws. When they arrive in San Lorenzo they are convinced that their culture is the norm and everything else that is different, is not accurate. Mrs. Crosby in *Cat's Cradle*, for example, is careless about the awful condition of the natives in San Lorenzo but the fact that they are Christian—or so she is told—is enough for her to feel reassured (Vonnegut, 1963, p.105). Moreover, Mrs. Crosby insists on being called mother by the people from the same state as her—Indiana—. It becomes more absurd as she lists all the people that are Hoosiers<sup>1</sup> and hold interesting positions around the world. Jonah describes her conversation about famous Hoosiers in the world as a “clockwork” that completes its cycle by the interlocutor calling her “mother,” and which then has to be rewound again for the next Hoosier she meets (Vonnegut, 1963, p.104).

The “Granfalloons” are what Louis Althusser calls state apparatuses that unconsciously apply what institutions implicitly command them to do (E.Hall, 2004, p.85). Mr. Crosby faithfully applies institutional instructions where these institutions have robbed people of their freedom. He is unable to understand what it is not to conform to the Western Cannon. He threatens to tell the authorities about people practicing Bokononist rites because the religion is banned in San Lorenzo (Vonnegut, 1963, p.166). On his first encounter with people who do not conform to western culture—like Philip Castle—he calls them “pissants”. In fact, “pissants” are the people who embarrass him because they speak of things that are beyond his knowledge.

The Crosbys do not feel any sadness when the world comes to its end; they are inexplicably happy even after the catastrophe. They name “every enemy that freedom has ever had” (Vonnegut, 1963, p.237); these enemies of freedom were: Stalin, Fidel Castro, Hitler, Mussolini, Karl Marx, Kaiser Bill and Mao Tse Tung. These men were not only “enemies of freedom” but also enemies of western culture. As a matter of fact; Vonnegut considers the USA a “Granfalloon” when Jonah meets the Crosbys and Frank Hoenikker and finds out they have taken the only taxi available in Bolivar, and painted on its roof the letters USA. They have made the only comfortable commodity in the country their own property and written the word USA on it as a form of a code able to save them from death. Frank and the Crosbys use the car as shelter to survive tornadoes; they deprived others that are not American from surviving when they made it the property of the USA, as if

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<sup>1</sup> People from Indiana, she considers her meeting with them as a very symbolic event.

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survival was not an option for everyone. Vonnegut calls the letters USA “the letters of a Granfalloon” (Vonnegut, 1963, p.283).

The concept of the “Granfalloon” includes the notions of nation and boundaries; it is “any nation, anytime, anywhere” (Vonnegut, 1963, p.108). The “Granfalloon” in short is what Louis Althusser calls the Ideological State Apparatuses. They are different ideologies by which reason justifies itself. They oblige man to conform to the rules of normality; thus they follow the “big brains,” which tell man how he should act. Man, in the face of reason, has no free will over his actions. Moreover, organized religion, as a man-made institution, commands that everything that happens is meant to happen, and man has no ability or strength against what Vonnegut called inevitable destiny (Vonnegut, 1963, p.194).

Man ends up defeated by the power of institutions which tie him with their discourse of freedom. Althusser lists the different systems which provide the bases for assumptions about the real, thus describing the individual's definition of the real and its relationship to it. The bodies which provide these assumptions are the religious, the educational, the family system, the legal system, the political system, the trade-union, communications, culture...etc. (E.Hall 85-86). Likewise, Vonnegut lists examples of “Granfalloons”; they are “the Communist party, the Daughters of the American Revolution, the General Electric Company, the International Order of Odd Fellows—and any nation, anytime, anywhere” (Vonnegut, 1963, p.104)

Gilles Deleuze shows that language is a construct and so are all the institutions which are built on language. Everything is an event of language. Language has the power of creating meaning and of creating people in their submission to its effect. He argues with the example of Joyce's novels on the artificiality of religion, as well as different national anthems which are meant to encourage people's pride about their origin or religion. It is a circulating “noise” instead of a “signification” (Colebrook, 2002, p.114) .

Slogans like “everything happens for a reason” (Colebrook, 2002, p.114)—which is a statement that constantly occurs in *Cat's Cradle*—are simply phrases people repeat because they make them but in reality they mean nothing. They are constituents of an illusory identity. Minor literature uses these phrases in the free indirect style in order to speak in their voice and thus show their superficiality and their weakness (Colebrook, 2002, p.110). Vonnegut does so in *Cat's Cradle* when religion is spoken about in innocent and immature language that tells things about religion that are common and banal. The novel ends up showing that religion is a circulating language that offers a basis for identity for many people but in fact it is but “foma,” harmless lies.

Granfallonery as a concept that was only used by Vonnegut, may be applied to the two protagonists in *Waiting for Godot* as examples of absurdity. They have the same characteristics of a Vonnegutian Granfalloon. Vladimir and Estragon may not be described as an empty toy balloon, but their behavior and vocation in the play do classify them as such. They have no particular purpose and thus they are granfalloons because they try to find meaning in material objects. Just like Mrs Crosby who thinks she found a revelation each time she meets a new Hoosier, Vladimir and Estragon's feast is their meeting every morning to wait for the unknown Godot.

Even death is an absurdist way of giving meaning to life for Vladimir and Estragon. While it is presented as a way out in *Cat's Cradle*, it more or less saves some characters the trouble of

thinking about life and the future, which is depicted in Mona and Papa Monzano's suicide. In *Waiting for Godot* death is also presented as a freedom but is more a granfalloon thing rather than a true escape. The two characters find peace and relief in death as an idea but never manage to execute it. They fail at committing suicide because they wonder what happens if they survive. Death is thus placed as something to do, always yet to come, which has not arrived yet but is a plan to fill their empty lives with.

#### **4. The "Karass" and Free Will**

Vonnegut has a deep sentimentality for family, and nostalgia for brotherly love. In *Cat's Cradle* he suggests the concept of the "Karass" as the agent of brotherly love in Bokononism, which itself is the philosophy of humanism. The "Karass" is a group of people who help each other unconsciously to do God's will. Yet, unlike the "Granfalloon", the group is formed around human instinct rather than institutions. The "Karass" is thus useful for humanity. It has a sacred theme and a philanthropic function.

Although it is made of lies, this religion emphasizes the importance of destiny. Destiny in Bokononism is man's will, free of the interference of institutions. In Bokononism it is referred to as God's will, or chance, to keep its authenticity and keep it from the influence of "Granfalloonery". The mission of the "Karass" of Jonah is to lead him to Mount McCabbe and make him accomplish Bokonon's last book. This "Karass" has the mission of revolting against what could contribute to humanity's its destruction against irresponsibility.

Through the novel, Jonah is led unwillingly to do things he judges meaningless and confusing. He often wonders what all that is for but never finds an answer (Vonnegut, 1963, p.292). It is at the end of the novel that Jonah realizes what the purpose of his "Karass" was. He adopts Bokononism for the sake of finding the purpose of all the "Wampeters" that have been driving him towards the end.

Jonah becomes more convinced of the necessity of considering the "vin-dits" which control the tendrils of his life, the "Sinookas" (Vonnegut, 1963, p.16). Yet, Jonah is meant to follow his "Karass" and "ice-nine", and meet the "Granfalloons"—the Crosbys (absurd) and Frank the "stuppa"—and Bokonon himself, who appears at the end of the world preaching the apocalypse in order to realize the theme of his "Karass". Jonah says that he intended to speak of the members of his Karass because he meant to examine the reasons why they were gathered (Vonnegut, 1963, p.6). The "Karass" is not only a reaction to the "Granfalloon," as it seeks to ensure man's happiness and relief, but a means to undermine institutions, because lies open the field for creativity and imagination.

The "Karass" knows no boundaries of nation, language, origin, or religion. It is a body that deconstructs tradition and puts all people, regardless of their positions and classes, on the same level.

Oh, a sleeping drunkard  
Up in Central Park,  
And a lion-hunter  
In the jungle dark,  
And a Chinese dentist,



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And a British queen—  
All fit together  
In the same machine.  
Nice, nice, very nice;  
Nice, nice, very nice;  
Nice, nice, very nice—  
So many different people  
In the same device. (Vonnegut, 1963, p.13)

The entire novel *Cat's Cradle* is in fact about “the meaninglessness of it all” (Vonnegut, 1963, p.179). In most of his novels he insists on blurring political boundaries of different nations, and creates a post-apocalyptic world where all people live together. Vonnegut's non-political boundaries include a primitive life with no science, no technology, and often with no religion. Thus, a world of peace is finally achieved out of destruction and horror. Chaos, in Vonnegut's novels, becomes a necessary experience for humanity to live in peace, when there is nothing more to destroy. Vonnegut said that he warned his own children against participating in government's crimes, like wars, yet, he would certainly recommend them to go to war to see how bad it is (Allen, 2003, p.6). It is with Bokononism that Vonnegut seeks to counter tradition.

The religion of Bokononism leads to two conclusions. The first is a mode of life where man is valorized and his welfare represents the ultimate goal. The “Karass” is the mode of life that undermines modernity and its institutions. The second is the role of religion in societies, which according to Vonnegut, is that of the comforting lie which grants man peace and tranquility. The claim of detaining truth in a world that has lost its values attracts people towards the peace of religion. Yet, the idea of Vonnegut is that religion is itself made of lies, but these are lies that comfort. When life and reality become hard to accept and deal with, religion provides a lovable comedy which people fully understand, but it constitutes for them a form of salvation. Bokonon supports this view with a calypso that relates between the deepness of having good emotions and reality. He concludes that those who have truth are unable to love; and who love live by lies:

A lover's a liar,  
To himself he lies.  
The truthful are loveless,  
Like oysters their eyes! (*Cat's Cradle* 240)

Bad Faith is the Bokononists' belief in this religion despite their awareness of its artificiality. In *Wampeters, Foma and Granfalloon* (2006), Vonnegut writes about a holy man from India whose name is Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, and who showed up in the United States claiming he could teach people to find spirituality and tranquility through meditation.

Vonnegut chose to call it a religion. He chose to call religion every practice that could give people the illusion that they are in touch with their spirituality, and makes them feel better. Vonnegut arrived at the conclusion that Maharishi was a liar, with nice lies that were successful in American society. His lies were useful for American society in particular, and Vonnegut's wife (in the essay) is aware of his falsehood, but his lies give her ways to love her life. Vonnegut sums up that people prefer Maharishi to Jesus, because if they would go to Jesus “He'd tell 'em to give all

their money away” (Vonnegut, 2006, p.42). Just like Bokonon, Maharishi brings “foma” and makes a “Karass” for everyone as he makes them search for their missions, thus making them happier.

Bokononism and existentialism have common beliefs, although on the surface they oppose each other. Bokononism is the religion of man. It is made of lies, a response to meaninglessness, what Sartre called “Nausea” (Engel, 1990, p.370). Existentialism raises the main question asked by Bokononism: what is man made for? Vonnegut, in the words of Bokonon and Leon Trout, asks the same questions which Existentialism tries to answer: “what shall we do? ..., it doesn’t matter what we do, for what difference could it make?” (Engel, 1990, p.371) Vonnegut writes what turns out to be a parody of the history of humanity in *Cat’s Cradle* and in *Galápagos* for the sake of discovering what we were made for (Vonnegut, 1963, p.16).

Vladimir and Estragon also live in a small karass of their own. They choose to survive death because they are unable to figure out what their lives can be like if one of them lives without the other. Separation is presented as a risk because it highlights a gloomy and dark future. The fact that they decide to die and take the full responsibility for that decision, and then retrieve and again take full responsibility for it, is a freedom and control they have over their lives that is not open to them in other life situations. So death in this play is not just a freedom from life as previously argued for, but it is also a symbol of free will. Yet, unfortunately, it is the only thing they can control in life.

## **5. The Comforting Lie:**

Vonnegut’s troubled characters seek peace where they may never find it. They feel obliged to create their own utopia and make not only others, but themselves, believe that this utopia really exists. To these traumatized characters, illusions allow them to escape the complexity and anguish of human identity (Broer, 1994, p.9). *Cat’s Cradle’s* most artistic creativity is the religion of Bokononism, which is made of lies. Bokonon says “live by the foma which make you brave and kind and healthy” (Vonnegut, 1963, p.6). The philosophy of this religion is no longer what religion can do for man, but what man himself can do for himself.

At the beginning of the novel we are warned by the author to close the book, because only a person who could understand how a religion built on lies could be successful can understand the book in hand. Bokonon’s warning is: “All of the true things I am going to tell you are shameless lies” (Vonnegut, 1963, p.16). The warning implies the danger and temptation of discovering the lies although we are warned about their inexistence. Bokonon chooses this method because there is nothing in that country which could save the people from their misery; except a little utopia to keep their imagination fertile and their spirits open. Bokonon constantly reminds his readers that they are reading lies; he starts his books with the warning “Don’t be a fool! Close this book at once! It is nothing but *foma!*” (Vonnegut, 1963, p.272)

Truth by itself cannot be enough for man to live on, says Miss Faust. Jonah understands that Miss Faust is ready for Bokononism because she understands the importance of narrative in making life bearable. Truth alone is not enough for man to live with because it compels him to bear the anxiety of being aware of one’s freedom. Truth is not enough by itself, but the comforting

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belief of comforting illusion matters. Such a statement by a religious woman could only be a proof that religion needs a lie in order to survive. Likewise, Jonah's warning at the beginning of the novel stresses the role of lies in understanding the history of humanity. Only the people who believe in the importance of the lie, including lying to oneself and claiming unrealistic illusions about life could believe in religion and love their religion. On the other hand, there are the people who only trust science or follow the instructions of reason faithfully. The importance of a lie is more than an amusement, or a narrative of control, but a necessity for man to love his life.

The idea of Klinkowitz, that Vonnegut's characters have a necessity to find patterns with which they can shape their lives and identify themselves with, is confirmed in their love of lies and narratives of their own making. Julian Castle further reinforces Miss. Faust's claim that truth is not enough for a person to live with. He comments on people's struggle to give themselves meaning. He says that people never really mean what they say, and they "talk about something just to keep their voice boxes in working order, so they'll have good voice boxes in case there's ever anything really meaningful to say." (Vonnegut, 1963, p.180)

The second consequence—that people might feel alienated and robbed of their lives with the feeling that somebody has been patterning their lives—is what Klinkowitz calls the "common disease of the current American ethos" (Pascual, 2001, p.55). It is the feeling that somebody has been fashioning people's lives and their decisions when they are not even aware of it. That there are "plots" meant to prevent them from being their own authors. Jonah constantly feels like he is robbed of his life through events which have overcome him. He ends by giving up to Bokononism and to the narrative of a purposeful world. The novel simply denies life of meaning and supposes that people tell themselves narratives without which they would feel alienated. Lundquist concludes that Bokononism in the novel comes to trace a way to view life that is able to avert catastrophe. Bokononism is the reaction and outcome of "pop-culture ridiculousness" in Vonnegut's novels (Lundquist, 1977, p.37).

Lies in *Cat's Cradle* provide inner peace which modern man is no longer able to feel. It is the "comfort of lies in a world of pain" that matters the most, because hope is no longer a valid possibility (Lundquist 1977, p 38). Bokonon provides useful and "harmless lies" to his followers. It is a play they are all aware of, made of good and evil, a dictator and poor helpless people. Since life offers no alternatives, Bokononism offers a comforting scenario for man to amuse himself. Jonah, while trying to find a "neat way to die" (Vonnegut, 1963, p.377), follows the instruction which commanded Bokononists to live by the "foma" which make them "brave and kind and healthy and happy" (Vonnegut, 1963, p. 6). Bokonon teaches the impossibility of possessing the truth. The least one believes in truth and certainty, the more Bokononist they are.

### 6. Conclusion

Although Sartre and Nietzsche called cowardly those who made the effort to escape truth, these people are aware of their reality, and of the impossibility of taking things in control (Engel, 1990, p.390-391). Life has become too irrational, too violent, and too unattractive to be lived as it is. The need for a lie is indispensable because it provides a ground to stick to instead of an ill-founded heartbreaking reality. Julian Castle is aware of this existential anxiety and has decided that whatever lies he is told by writers, they are more attractive because they heal man from

disappointment. This anxiety in the existentialist sense is man's awareness of his freedom. Yet, man prefers illusory stability to being confused by reality.

The two novels raise a set of questions which people often try to understand and seem to confuse themselves with. Vonnegut asks unanswerable questions regarding existence, the purpose of life, God, and humanity. Most of his questions seek answers to why people were created and why were they brought to earth, as well as how they function and how God controls them. Vonnegut tries simply to tell man that these questions are not within the province of human beings to answer, and it is unwise to try to answer them. Life is more subtle and unstable than one would think; to try to fix a meaning for life is simply impossible.

His characters get sadder and anxious as they never get answers to their questions. In contrast, people who do not ask themselves such questions are more relaxed and cheerful. As a matter of fact, as they realize their inability to answer these questions, they endorse Bokononism. Bokonon himself converted to this religion when he realized that anyone who thought they could understand God's "ways of working perfectly" was a fool. As a matter of fact, he considers a "folly" pretending the ability to understand such a thing. (Vonnegut, 1963, p.14)

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