

Vonnegut's Reconstruction of Religion and World Order: Parody in Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*

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Abstract

Parody is an important writing techniques by many Postmodernist novelists. In this paper, by exploring parodies of the Bible story, Christianity and American foreign policy in *Cat's Cradle*, the author tries to show the readers that how empty and meaningless the religion itself is, and how tyranny and religion work together to make the life of suffering people more miserable and how the foreign policies of superpower nation impose their tyranny and culture on other nations to secure its own sovereignty.

Key words: Parody; Bible; Christianity; American foreign policy

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INTRODUCTION

Cat's Cradle, like Vonnegut's other novels, uses irony and humor to make serious points about the state of the world and humanity. *Cat's Cradle* is set in the Cold War and Cuban Missile Crisis when American is playing increasingly important role in international relations and owning the world's greatest power to destroy the entire nations even the world easily. *Cat's Cradle* focuses on this worry caused by one of the developers of the atomic bomb and a fatal substance called ice-nine. In this paper, the author mainly elaborates parodies of the Bible story, Christianity and American foreign policies in order to present readers with more in-depth meaning of *Cat's*

Cradle and Vonnegut's beliefs and disbeliefs towards this postmodernist world.

1. PARODY

Parody was originally from the word "parodia", which means "imitative song" and then developed as "a technique of stylistic 'imitation' and distortion" (Rose, 1979, p.19). In postmodernist literature, many Postmodernist novelists adopt parody in their works. Parody means to imitate works of an author or writing style of an author, in order to "burlesque in its application of serious styles to ridiculous subjects, to satire in its punishment of eccentricities, and even to criticism in its analysis of style" (Baldick, 1996, p.161).

Parody is the most intentional and analytic literary method that emphasizes the weak points, affectation and the lack of self-consciousness of the object that it imitates through its destructive imitation. The so-called "object of imitation" may be a work or the common style of some writers. It imitates the contents or the style of a serious literary work or a genre of literature and makes the imitation funny and laughable through its uncoordinated form, style, and absurd subject. The evident function of parody is to satirize. Its way of satirizing is " to indirectly attack the object that it satirizes through the way of style, it 'cites' or indirectly mentions the work that it derides, and uses the typical method of the latter in the way of abolishing or reversing" (Chen, 2007, p.114). The function of parody in literature is like what cartoons are in arts. In *Cat's Cradle* by using the method parody, Vonnegut criticizes with freezing irony and burning satire the American foreign policies and the emptiness of religion.

2. PARODY OF BIBLE STORY IN CAT'S CRADLE

The first sentence of *Cat's Cradle* is "Call me Jonah. My parents did, or nearly did. They called me John."

(Vonnegut, 1963, p.1). This opening reminds the readers of the beginning of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* "Call me Ishmael".

2.1 Jonah Is Like Ishmael in *Moby Dick*

In *Moby Dick*, from the sailor Ishmael's point of view, Melville tells the story that Captain Ahab leads the crew members on the whaling ship to find and kill the white devil, Moby Dick. The adventure is like a revenge because Ahab lost one leg in a fight with Moby Dick. What Ahab cares about is to kill the whale without consideration of any sacrifice of lives of himself and the crew members. Moby Dick embodies the nature or truth, mysterious and unknown to human. Ahab tries to control it, but unfortunately he ends up with his own self-destruction.

Similarly, in *Cat's Cradle*, Jonah is also a witness and narrator of the whole story. At first, he wants to write a story called *The Day the World Ended*, which is about what has happened on the day the atomic bomb dropped in Hiroshima. Then he tries to contact with the Hoenikker's family. By coincidence, he meets the sister and little brother of the family in the flight on his way to San Lorenzo as a journalist. They go there for their brother's engagement party. Then he learns about the family member's ridiculous stories and gets involved in their stories as well. John experiences a journey of seeking for truth or meaning. But he cannot get away from the destiny.

2.2 Jonah in the *Bible* and Jonah in *Cat's Cradle*

In the *Bible*, God asks Jonah to evangelize in the city of Nineveh which is famous for its wickedness. Jonah thinks it is impossible to finish this order and is reluctant to accept it. Instead he runs away and goes to another city. But, on his way there, Jonah is swallowed by a big whale in the heavy storm sent by the God. In the belly of the great whale, Jonah spends three days regretting and praying to the god. Eventually, the whale vomits him on the land. He learns the lesson and carries out the God's mission. The God forgives the people and gives them a second chance. Jonah can be seen as a prophet of doom, so does John in *Cat's Cradle*. Jonah intends to write a book named *The Day the World Ended*, predicting the end of the world. It tells the story of what has happened on the day when the atomic bomb was dropped in Hiroshima. Obviously, the disaster is caused by a fatal weapon, the atomic bomb. It is a prediction of what will happen if people continue to research and experiment on mass-destructive weapons. Similarly, the deadly substance ice-nine invented by the father of the atomic bomb will easily swallow the whole world. After Jonah knows that each of the Hoenikker's has some, he wants to find them all. But all the three children of the Hoenikker try to trade it for whatever they want, like power, love and marriage. None of them get them at last. And no one knows what he will do if he finds them. Jonah the prophet follows the

God's mission and saves the people in Nineveh. It seems that Jonah also takes the responsibility of saving the souls of the people in miserable life. Unfortunately, Jonah the narrator and witness in *Cat's Cradle* knows the existence and destruction ability of Ice-nine very early but he can not save the people of San Lorenzo at last.

At first, it seems Jonah parodies Ishmael in *Moby Dick*. As the story goes, it is obviously a parody of Jonah the prophet in the Bible. Both Jonah are rebellious. But Jonah the prophet is brave enough to disobey God's will be although he knows he is doomed to fail. While Jonah in *Cat's cradle* is very impotent. Frank asks him to be the next President of San Lorenzo, he accepts it only because he can marry his lovely girl as the President of San Lorenzo. If he can resist the temptation of power, beauty and love, and tell people what he has known, maybe the disaster can be avoided.

3. PARODY OF CHRISTIANITY

In such a chaotic, fragmented and absurd world, people find themselves struggling with the questions: What's the meaning of existence and what is the purpose of life? Vonnegut compares and reconstructs a new world to take people from absurdity.

3.1 Parody of Jesus

In Genesis, God creates the earth and the human beings as well. Vonnegut expresses his view on God's creation: Whoever writes about other humans and creates their pains, loves, sorrows and passions, he tastes personally the process of God's creation and for these characters he becomes a God himself (Zelenka, 1992, p.89). Hoenikker invents the atom bomb and the ice-nine, which strengthens people's hope in science and disaster and destruction caused by science as well.

Jesus sacrifices himself for redemption. Hoenikker devotes himself into the cause of science. He invents the atomic bomb which causes death of tens of thousands of people and Ice-nine which will lead to self destruction of the whole world. All he cares about is the truth in science. Other things in spiritual world mean nothing for him. His wife is dying for lack of love and understanding. From her children Angela, Frank, and Newt's impression on him, the readers can get a different father's image from their points of view. Angela is the head of the family and takes care of the two little brother and her father after her mother's death. She used to talk about how he has three children, the brothers and her father. Frank's boss comments Frank never got the chance to experience the warmth of a family. In Newt's memory, his father is the ugliest thing he has ever seen. And he is reluctant to play with his father because he thinks his father is not interested in people including his mother.

Hoenikker doesn't care about the basic needs of the majority of human beings like money, power, clothes, cars

and other things for a normal man. But as a scientist, no one can deny his lifelong devotion to the cause of science. As his colleague Marvin Breed says, he is harmless and gentle even "had never hurt a fly, he was so innocent he was practically a Jesus." (Vonnegut, 1963, p.26) Even though he is described as a Saint, Marvin Breed questions how innocent he can be as the father of fatal atomic bomb. The contradiction and comparison are striking. Felix Hoenikker is indifferent to people. He is not interested to the living and is "stone—cold dead" (Vonnegut, 1963, p.26). It is Hoenikker who creates the atomic bomb that easily causes hundreds of thousands of deaths, but he himself has no feeling about it. Actually, he has no sense of responsibility about the destructive result it will bring about. When a bomb is tested successfully and America could use it to wipe out a city, a scientist turns to Hoenikker, "science has now known sin." Hoenikker answers, "what is sin?" The seemingly innocent answer indicates his amorality and indifference to people. This greatly challenges the traditional image of God in Christianity. In contrast with the Christian view of God, who loves and cares His people, God in Vonnegut's works is portrayed to be indifferent, lazy, cruel and oppressive. As Vonnegut mentioned in a conversation, Hoenikker was too professional that he lost the sense of virtue. If a scientist indulged in his own world, he would bring about huge disaster (Allen, 1988, p.235).

3.2 Parody of Christianity

In *Cat's Cradle*, Vonnegut not only satires and criticizes religious characters and religion itself, he even creates a totally new religion, that is, Bokononism. Bokononism parodies Christianity. Bokononism and Christianity have many similarities. They aim at rescuing the people and enjoy popularity among people. Also they gain their fame by rebelling against the rulers. Bokononism has its own savior, religious doctrine, even some relevant terms as in Christianity.

In the novel, Bokonon builds up a new religion, Bokononism, in the island of San Lorenzo and he even reveals that Bokononism is composed of "shameless lie" (Vonnegut, 1963, p.5). Bokononism which is invented by the author assumes a great parody of Christianity. It is easy to find similarities between the coined Bokononism and Christianity from many aspects.

Religion plays a very important role in the western countries. On Sundays, Christians go to their churches to worship God. They sing psalms, learn the Bible, listen to the service given by the priests. They can find peace in their minds, and learn to be a better man and find sense of belonging in the community. Religion and church play a very important role in their lives and culture.

It is safe to say the core of religion is to save the people from sadness and bring them to the paradise. Similarly, Bokononism, the only important religion in San Lorenzo, is very popular among the islanders in San Lorenzo. When

Bokonon and McCabe are first brought to the island, they are surprised and shocked to find that the local people are all thin and starving, they all live in poverty. They decide to do something to change the situation. They even want to build up a Utopia in San Lorenzo. In order to achieve their goal, McCabe takes charge of economy and laws, while Bokonon sets up a new religion under his name. Both Christianity and Bokononism are against the rulers and win great fame in the process. In the history of Christianity, the increasing popularity and influenced religion aroused panic of the Romans. They crucified Jesus on the cross, which conversely increases people's beliefs on Jesus' love, selfless and spread Christianity more widely. In the novel, Bokonon describes the relationship between the government and religion by a term, "Dynamic Tension": "a living legend of the cute tyrant in the city and the gentle holy man in the jungle" (Vonnegut, 1963, p.62). A peaceful society is built up on a dynamic tension, a balance between good and bad. So Bokonon insists McCabe to outlaw him and Bokononism. They even adopt a deadly penalty HOOK to anyone who worships Bokononism. From then on, Bokonon hides himself in the forest and lives on the foods brought by his followers. Now and then, McCabe sends people to search him in the forest. But he is never arrested. His religion became more and more popular by all these efforts. As the character Jonah found later, San Lorenzo is controlled not only by McCabe but also by Bokonon. Nearly all the citizens are Bokononists. New comers are converted to Bokononist too. Although McCabe warns his people to stay away from Bokononism, he declares that he himself is a faithful Bokononist before his death.

Vonnegut challenges Christianity in many ways. For Christians, God decides the existence and significance of everything in the world. While the book of Bokonon is full of Foma, lies. It will never be finished, never be printed, and is written every day by Bokonon. It is ever-changing and expanding religious book. It is true only for San Lorenzo, not a universal thing. The God in the book of Bokonon is indifferent and lazy, and he shows no interest in what he has created. Thus people need to control their own fate and create the standards and principles by themselves. For Christians, paradise is extremely attractive. But not everyone can live in the paradise after death. For Bokononists, only human beings are holy creature. They don't expect better life in another world after death, and what they care about is live a better life now, though. They are all like full time actors in their lives.

Bokonon also creates some terms and religious rites in his book. Karass is a group of people who do God's will unconsciously. The members of a Karass are connected in different illogical circumstances. They also have their tool—kan-kan to bring them together. The most absurd one was boko-maru, a communication of consciousness. Two Bokononists stretch their legs, put their bare feet

together bracing themselves by their arms. They believe that they can achieve heart-to-heart communication by this religious rite. This ridiculous rite helps islanders build up a system of trust thus increase their brother and sister love among them. By these absurd terms and rites, the writer lets readers feel the strong satire on religion.

The title of the book *Cat's Cradle* is a name of a string game. The players play the string crossed to form different designs. Cat's cradle is one of them. Only when human being join the two ends and make some steps, a loop of string can make a cat's cradle. It is created by human beings, but there is no cat, no cradle, only emptiness in it. Bokonon created Bokononism which give his followers purpose and meaning of their miserable lives.

By the invention of Bokononism and comparison of its similarity and relationship with Christianity, Vonnegut challenges the traditional image of Jesus and paradise even the existence of GOD. He satires and denies that Bokononism will save the people. Thus he challenges the traditional conception of Comfort and Savior and makes the conclusion that the religion Bokononism is shameless lies.

4. PARODY OF AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY

In *Cat's Cradle*, Vonnegut depicted San Lorenzo as a miserable island. Once he arrived there, he found the people there were dark-colored, thin and starving. From which we can see clearly that the islanders actually suffer a lot. But they wanted to make the island a "Utopia". In order to make it true, Bokonon and McCabe split the power: McCabe controlled the economy and government, Bokonon set up a religion. Vonnegut (1963) described this motivation in one of his Calypsos:

I wanted all things
To seem to make some sense,
So we all could be happy, yes,
Instead of tense.
And I make up lies
So that they all fit nice,
And I made this sad world
A par-a-dise. (p.46)

It seems that religion and government are separated. But actually, they cooperated with each other to rule people in San Lorenzo physically and spiritually. And "San Lorenzo, with its incurable poverty and hopeless suffering of the inhabitants, on a deeper level, is also intended as a metaphor for the universal predicament of human existence" (Shang, 2006, p.47).

In some sense, it is a reflection and parody of American foreign policies. American used to consider himself as the "safeguard for the International Community" and actually he tries to interfere with other countries' own matters. Even he causes troubles or invasions to other

countries. The United States is always trying to impose his own ideology and culture on people of other nations. In *Cat's Cradle*, "San Lorenzo seems to be the product of American foreign policies; there are two indispensable parts in America's hegemonism toward foreign countries. In the novel, McCabe represents the absolute power control and Bokonon represents the ideology control toward people" (Luo, 2006, p.122). As Vonnegut (1963) reveals the reality of people's life or truth is horrible, so Bokonon spare no efforts to create better and better lies (p.61). Those lies help people find their purpose and give them hope and happiness. The residents are aware of the truth that Bokononism are full of shameless lies, they would rather live under lies because indeed it can distract their attention from the sad and miserable life in the island and give comforts and reliefs to the people there. By building the powerful government and religion, the rulers want to reconstruct San Lorenzo into a Utopia. But since McCabe trades Ice-9 with power from Frank, huge disaster is brought into the island. They cannot escape from their destiny.

CONCLUSION

With the author's theoretical discussion of parody in postmodernist literature and elaboration of the parodies of biblical Jonah, Christianity and American foreign policy in *Cat's Cradle*, we will better understand the biting satire and freezing irony in this novel. And more vivid picture, of religion and government colluding together to make the life of suffering people become more miserable, of meaningless Christianity, will be exposed in front of readers, which will definitely help them get more in-depth contents of this novel and better know this postmodernist world.

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