

**UNIVERSITY OF TARTU**  
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**THE UNTRUTH OF HUMAN IGNORANCE: KURT VONNEGUT'S**  
***CAT'S CRADLE* AS A PARADOXICAL NOVEL**

**BA thesis**

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis intends to show how *Cat's Cradle* is built around a central paradox voiced in the novel's epigraph – everything in the book is a lie, which is itself a lie. To show this contradiction, an overarching idea of human ignorance and lack of control is identified by analysing the narrative representation of Bokononism, science, and the cat's cradle game.

The thesis consists of an introduction, a literature review, a summary of the narrative, an analysis of the narrative elements, a discussion of the paradox, and a conclusion. The introduction contextualises the novel and states the aims of the thesis. The literature review provides an overview of some of the previous studies on *Cat's Cradle*, summarises the key points of the authors, and defines existentialism as it will be used in this thesis. The empirical chapter begins with a summary of the novel, followed by an analysis of Bokononism, science, and the cat's cradle game. The analysis explains how the idea of human ignorance and lack of control becomes evident. Then it will be explained how the novel becomes paradoxical in conjunction with the idea of human ignorance and lack of control. Finally, the conclusion will summarise the main points of the study.

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## INTRODUCTION

Kurt Vonnegut was an American writer known for his satirical, humorous, complex, and often self-reflexive fiction (Hume 1982), for example, the novels – *The Sirens of Titan* (1959), *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), and *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* (1965). As a writer, he is often classified under postmodernism (Tally 2008: 164-168), which can be characterised as mixing multiple genres, being ambiguous, contradicting itself, and breaking distinguishable writing norms established by modernist writers (Jameson 1983). At the same time, Thomas (2009) argues that at the core of Vonnegut's work is the exploration of the human condition by drawing parallels between the real world and his fiction, arguing that it is meant to illustrate and mimic contemporary society. He claims that Vonnegut uses contradiction as a way to “make the reader re-examine essential truths (about ethics, morality, and religion)” (Thomas 2009: 28). Because of these elements, it is often unclear what Vonnegut is trying to say or represent through his narratives.

Some of the claims that have been made about Vonnegut's novels are: that they attack Christian beliefs (Scholl 1973), represent snippets of his life, his thoughts, and mental state (Weiner 2015), entertain through his combination of irony, dark humour, and a dry, straightforward writing style (May 1972). Vonnegut has also been categorised as a critic (Kaufman 1992), a science fiction writer (Schatt 1971), a moralist (Hauck 1974), a humanist (Thomas 2009), a satirist (Faris 1985), an absurdist (Głowacka 1988), sometimes even a nihilist (Hauck 1974), or any combination of those characteristics.

This thesis takes a thorough look at one of his earlier novels, *Cat's Cradle* (1963), and aims to interpret the novel as paradoxical, for the text establishes itself as untrue before the narrative begins. The epigraph of the novel states that “Nothing in this book is true. Live by the foma [foma denotes lies] that makes you brave and kind and healthy and happy.” (Vonnegut 1963: 4). This thesis argues that this epigraph represents the central paradox of

the novel: everything in the book is a lie, which is itself a lie. The paradox will be explained by first identifying an existential idea present throughout the narrative of *Cat's Cradle* in its representation of religion, science, and the cat's cradle game: human beings are ignorant and have little control over their lives. This idea will be explained with the support of the work of previous scholars. The word 'existential' will be used following Jean-Paul Sartre's *Existentialism is a Humanism* (1946). Finally, it will be shown how *Cat's Cradle* becomes paradoxical and thereby contradicts but also validates the idea of human ignorance and lack of control.

This thesis serves to fill a gap in research on *Cat's Cradle* since earlier scholarship has characterised the novel as having a moral message or generally acting as a critique of science, religion, or fundamentalism. The thesis will try to show that *Cat's Cradle* can be interpreted as paradoxical, meaning that it does not have to criticise anything or hold any moral message. Even if the narrative gives validity to an idea, it will also be countered by the paradox represented by the epigraph – everything in the book is a lie, which is itself a lie. Thus, this thesis argues that the novel is neutral towards all the ideas it represents, for it does not affirm or deny them but contradicts any absolute notion of true, false, right, or wrong.

The analysis will bring together relevant elements of *Cat's Cradle*: Bokononism, science, and the cat's cradle game, and shows how they work together to create the idea of human ignorance and lack of control. First, existentialism will be defined, as it will be used in this thesis, followed by a summary of the works of previous scholars. Next, *Cat's Cradle* will be summarised followed by an analysis of Bokononism, the fictional religion of the novel. Then there will be a discussion of science and how its representation shares similarities with religion. Religion and science are discussed as systems of thought that the characters of the novel adopt to guide their lives. Finally, there will be a discussion of the

implications of the paradox and its connection with the idea of human ignorance and lack of agency.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The purpose of this review is to provide an overview of previous interpretations of *Cat's Cradle* and to define existentialism for the purposes of this thesis.

### **Previous interpretations of *Cat's Cradle***

Thomas (2009: 28) argues that *Cat's Cradle* acts as a critique of fundamentalist elements in both religion and science. Preston and Shin (2022: 2) describe fundamentalism as “a dogmatic and authoritarian approach to belief”. Dogmatism is what Thomas (2009: 30-32) thinks that the text criticises by showing that Bokononism is the opposite of a dogmatic religion and that scientists are shown to believe in science as a fundamental truth. Thomas (2009: 33-34) points out that Bokononism acts as a metaphorical religion. If it were to be believed as the truth, people would become “stuck in the metaphor”. The same mode of thinking could be applied to science if adopted as a dogma.

By writing that “Vonnegut places the fate of the universe in the hands of a fundamentalist who is *not* religious but scientific”, Thomas (2009: 31) notes that Felix Hoenikker embodies fundamentalism in science by not realising the moral implications of his actions. Thomas (2009: 39-40) explains that by exuding childlike wonder at a cat's cradle figure, Felix is shown to not make distinctions between metaphorical and material objects in his practice of science. Thomas (2009: 40) considers Felix's blindness to morality as a flaw of scientific fundamentalism. Therefore, he also argues that the meaning of the title of the novel, *Cat's Cradle*, could directly point out the flaws of fundamentalism through the cat's cradle metaphor.

Allen (2009: 217) focuses on the narrative's ambiguous and contradictory representation of religion through Bokononism. As she explains, the text "simultaneously critiques the possible fictiveness of faith and its reliance on ambiguous narrative and contradictorily has the narrator assert a belief in a divine power" (Allen 2009: 217). Allen refers to the fact that Bokononism is believed in as a lie and the narrative elements of Bokononist faith are established as lies, yet this notion is contradicted with ironic expressions or satirical statements that directly express faith in a god – "God, in his infinite wisdom, made the island worthless" (Vonnegut 1963: 77). Like Thomas, Allen (2009) does not think that *Cat's Cradle* condemns religion in general.

According to Allen (2009: 217-218), religion is employed functionally – to improve the existence of the inhabitants of San Lorenzo. Before Bokononism, the people of San Lorenzo were oppressed by a sugar company that ran the island through organised violence and religion to maintain order and cater to the spiritual needs of the people (Vonnegut 1963: 77). Allen (2009: 219-220) claims that *Cat's Cradle* critiques practices of religious leaders as they deceive the people of San Lorenzo (Vonnegut 1963: 105). Bokonon was meant to act as a rebellious prophet, and McCabe as a cruel dictator who wants to abolish Bokononism (Vonnegut 1963: 103-105). However, Allen's statement seems contradictory since the novel states that Bokononism was outlawed to make the lives of the people exciting and caused stress for Bokonon and McCabe (Vonnegut 1963: 105). Still, because of the deception, Allen (2009: 222) argues that misinterpreting religion is essential for Bokononism to function.

Furthermore, Allen (2009: 220) points out that *Cat's Cradle* "seems to suggest that metanarratives, be they religious or scientific, can be dangerous when they are allowed to go unchecked." Thus, the novel's representation of religion and science expresses a need for people to not get stuck in believing ideas of religion and science, but judge them "in terms of an individual's own humanist sense of moral right and wrong" (Allen 2009: 220).

Therefore, Allen (2009: 222) interprets *Cat's Cradle* as a caution to keep metanarratives like science or religion in check through criticism. Allen and Thomas both share a similar understanding of the novel acting as a critique of neither science nor religion generally, but of the ideas that link the two systems of thought, such as a tendency towards fundamentalism.

Similarly to Thomas, Casey (1989: 407) recognises *Cat's Cradle* as a representation of disillusionment with organised religion, not religion in general. According to Casey (1989: 408), the target of the novel's critique is religious dogma since Vonnegut has given Bokononism absurd qualities. As Bokononism expresses firm beliefs and at the same time discards those beliefs, Casey (1989: 408) too thinks that the text is ambiguous in representing religion. This ambiguity gives Bokononism the possibility to counter fundamentalism, which has no room for ambiguity. Casey interprets the message of the epigraph ("Nothing in this book is true. Live by the foma that makes you brave and kind and healthy and happy.") as follows: "In other words, God – if God exists – is inscrutable; religions are factitious delusions, and one may as well live, by one's own lights failing any other agreeable principles and conventions. For surely human destiny is not one of God's main concerns" (Casey 1989: 409). He also identifies the novel as having humanist qualities, and disregards any notions of hopelessness, for human beings are the only thing sacred to Bokononism. Casey concludes that:

If there is any 'message' in *Cat's Cradle* – apart from a general injunction against the 'coarsening of the soul' and the argument against being a passive agent of inhumanity – it is minimalist. Vonnegut insists that our real purpose is to do what we can for each other, rather than striving to please a putative god whose assumed desires and motives are as absurd and futile as our attempts to meet or fulfill them (Casey 1989: 411-412)

As the arguments of Allen and Casey show, the moral message that they propose the text expresses has the human subject as the only important point of reference, from which everything else should be considered, not abstract and fundamental notions of religion and science.



Robinson discusses *Cat's Cradle* as an apocalyptic novel. He thinks that the apocalypse is indirectly caused by scientific research, thus meaning that the novel acts as a commentary on the negative effects of science (Robinson 2018: 44). In *Cat's Cradle*, Robinson (2018: 45) identifies scientists and politicians as the people who allow the apocalypse to happen, which marks human beings as being at fault. Robinson explains that the novel does not represent or state truths but instead "ideas relating to possibilities" and that the apocalypse is a possible destructive realisation of science (Robinson 2018: 45). Robinson recognises a parallel between the prophet Bokonon and Felix Hoenikker (Robinson 2018: 47). He also interprets the ending of *Cat's Cradle*, where Bokonon voluntarily dies by touching ice-nine and "thumbing his nose at You Know Who" as an act of defiance towards God (Robinson 2018: 47).

Robinson (2018: 48) thinks that Felix exemplifies being dedicated to the idea of scientific truth and "disconnected from the human world" (Robinson 2018: 48). Robinson (2018: 49) views the representation of science and scientist as being "outside ethical and/or moral discussions/debates" since Felix does not understand the meaning of sin and how his work on the atomic bomb could be seen as sinful. Thus, Robinson argues that not recognising sin shows the disparity between religion and science, where science might not require a comparable "moral dimension". He also considers the possibility of the novel implying a need for a change in the moral considerations of human beings.

Głowacka (1988) discusses the narrative of *Cat's Cradle* as a commentary about the nature of truth and lies, the real and the imaginary. The Books of Bokonon are interpreted by Głowacka (1988: 239) as an imaginary basis for the reality of Bokononism. The fact that there are elements of factually accurate world history (e.g. the atomic bombing of Hiroshima) in Vonnegut's fiction leads her to interpret it as an example of ambiguity between reality and fiction (Głowacka 1988: 239). Thus, Głowacka (1988: 240) argues that

*Cat's Cradle* does not make any claims for what is true or false, real or imaginary, but shows how the nature of those concepts is ambiguous. For her Bokononism symbolises that ambiguity for it shows that “meaningful systems are but dead concepts and vacuous projections of human mind, the illusion that there exists direct correspondence between the working of a subjective human mind and objective reality” (Głowacka 1988: 246).

To summarise, Thomas and Casey argue that *Cat's Cradle* acts as a critique of fundamentalist thought or dogmatism. Thomas proposes this idea through the novel's representation of Bokononism, science, and the cat's cradle game and Casey does it through Bokononism and the epigraph statements. While Thomas, Allen, and Casey agree that religion is generally discussed ambiguously in the book, Allen still thinks that *Cat's Cradle* criticises the practices of religious leaders, and religion and science as metanarratives that shape people's worldviews. Allen and Casey identify a similar moral message in the novel which encourages humans to judge thought systems like religion through their own sense of right and wrong. Robinson discusses the novel as a commentary on the negative effects of science and how moral considerations are often excluded from it. Głowacka interprets *Cat's Cradle* as exemplifying the importance of human subjectivity and how truths, lies, or reality cannot be objectively established.

## **Existentialism**

In this thesis, existentialism is discussed on the basis of Jean-Paul Sartre's *Existentialism is a Humanism* (1946). Sartre defines existentialism as a belief that existence comes before essence (Glyn 2011). What Sartre means is that before the inherent properties of something can be established, there needs to be a human subject to define and experience those properties. As an atheist, he explains, “man first exists, encounters himself and emerges in the world, to be defined afterwards. Thus, there is no human nature, since there

is no God to conceive it. It is man who conceives himself, who propels himself towards existence” (Glyn 2011: 3). Sartre’s definition of existentialism depends on the human subject. Therefore, existentialism directly relates to a kind of humanism that Sartre describes as “/.../ the acceptance that there is only one universe, the universe of human subjectivity. Existentialism is not despair. It declares rather that even if God did exist, it would make no difference” (Glyn 2011: 5).

During the analysis, it will be shown how this existentialism shares similarities to what Bokononism, science, and the cat’s cradle game represent in *Cat’s Cradle*.

### ***CAT’S CRADLE* – SUMMARY**

The narrative starts with the protagonist Jonah (or John), as an older man, reminiscing about the time he wanted to write a book about what happened on the day the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. Since the bombing of Hiroshima drives Jonah’s actions, and World War II and the following Cold War political conflicts are often referenced, the events seem to take place roughly in the time frame of the publication of *Cat’s Cradle* – 1963. Jonah is the narrator of the novel and we follow his account of the journey to collect material for his book.

Bokononism – a fictional religion Jonah will eventually come to believe in – is prominent throughout the narrative. In many character interactions, contemplations, or situations, Jonah describes this religion through its teachings in the form of calypsos or through the words of wisdom of its prophet, Bokonon. An important fact about Bokononism is that it is created and believed in as a lie, something that every Bokononist is aware of.

The initial chapters of *Cat’s Cradle* deal with Jonah getting to know the Hoenikker family. Felix Hoenikker is one of the creators of the atomic bomb in the novel and a brilliant, though emotionally detached, scientist. Jonah eventually finds out about another invention

that Felix is asked to develop for the military – ice-nine. It is supposed to be an isotope of water capable of instantly freezing any water molecules it touches and, therefore, help in getting military vehicles through muddy terrain. Felix manages to create ice-nine and it is split into three pieces between the Hoenikker children – Newt, Frank, and Angela. The Hoenikker children use pieces of ice-nine to fulfil personal goals. Angela gets a husband who works for a technology company connected with the United States government. Newt finds a Ukrainian dancer who turns out to be a spy for the Soviet Union and returns to the USSR after finding out about ice-nine. Frank gets a comfortable engineering job under Papa Monzano, the dictator of the fictional island of San Lorenzo.

San Lorenzo is the island that most of the characters eventually end up on. Jonah gets an assignment to do a story on Julian Castle, a millionaire who established a free hospital in the jungle of San Lorenzo. This island is also the place where Bokononism was created and practiced. Jonah learns of the religion, finds out how the island functions because of it, and converts to Bokononism due to his love for Mona Aamons Manzano, the daughter of the island’s dictator. It also turns out that Papa Monzano is about to die and Frank would like Jonah to be the next ruler of San Lorenzo. Papa Monzano, however, chooses to pass away by ingesting the piece of ice-nine that Frank had given him. This event reveals the ice-nine particles all over the room, but also potentially, all over the world.

Shortly after these events, an air show accident starts the climactic apocalyptic event which freezes the oceans and throws the Earth’s climate into complete disarray. Jonah, together with some of the surviving characters, witnesses the deadly aftermath. Jonah finds out that Bokonon survived and convinced some of the survivors to commit suicide by touching their lips with ice-nine. Bokonon ponders this act in the final lines of the novel.

## 1 BOKONONISM

Bokononism is created by Lionel Boyd Johnson, born into an Episcopalian family and educated in organised religion (Vonnegut 1963: 65). To further his education, he sails alone to London, enlists in World War I, gets injured by a gas attack, gets discharged, is captured by a German submarine, and then by a British destroyer, which takes him to Cape Verde islands (Vonnegut 1963: 65-66). These events make him believe in a destiny (Vonnegut 1963: 66). Eventually Johnson gets shipwrecked on the island of San Lorenzo along with a deserter named Earl McCabe (Vonnegut 1963: 67).

The reason for creating Bokononism stems from Johnson and McCabe seeing the way the island operated under the Castle Sugar plantation, which had taken over San Lorenzo by abusing the natives as free labour:

The form of government was anarchy, save in limited situations wherein Castle Sugar wanted to own something or to get something done. In such situations the form of government was feudalism. The nobility was composed of Castle Sugar's plantation bosses, who were heavily armed white men from the outside world. The knighthood was composed of big natives who, for small gifts and silly privileges, would kill or wound or torture on command. The spiritual needs of the people caught in this demoniacal squirrel cage were taken care of by a handful of butterball priests. (Vonnegut 1963: 77)

Johnson and McCabe want to turn the island into a utopia and take control from the sugar company. McCabe's role is economic and judiciary while Johnson becomes the prophet Bokonon so that the people would have something to believe in. The motivations of Bokonon are described 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 made up lies  
So that they all fit nice,  
And I made this sad world  
A par-a-dise. (Vonnegut 1963: 78-79)

Bokonon's calypsos are used throughout the novel to express Bokononist beliefs and worldview.

Bokonon is not portrayed as having a religious experience prompting him to spread spiritual ideas. Instead, Bokonon creates his own holy texts, *The Books of Bokonon*, to establish the religion. We can now look at one of the crucial statements in the text by Jonah:

The first sentence in *The Books of Bokonon* is this: “All of the true things I am about to tell you are shameless lies.” My Bokononist warning is this: Anyone unable to understand how a useful religion can be founded on lies will not understand this book either. (Vonnegut 1963: 10)

This contradictory statement directly parallels the epigraph at the beginning of *Cat’s Cradle*: “Nothing in this book is true”. Thus, *The Books of Bokonon* and *Cat’s Cradle* both contradict themselves. The religion based on lies is to improve the lives of San Lorenzans, not to present a fundamental truth, as argued by Allen (2009) and Thomas (2009) above. As de Castro explains it: “/.../while the Christian faith considers the sacred scriptures to be a compendium of divine truths, the Bokononist bible openly admits, in the words of its prophet Bokonon, that his is a religion based on *foma*, that is, on ‘harmless untruths’.” (de Castro 1998: 27)

Scholl (1973: 5) describes Bokononism as a “counter-religion”, but it would be a bit more accurate to call it a “counter-dogma”, as Thomas (2009) does. In the same way, *Cat’s Cradle* could be looked at as a counter-narrative to whatever it represents.

Every Bokononist in the book knows that what they believe in is a lie, but they believe in it and practice it nevertheless. In a letter written to Schatt (1971: 29), Vonnegut states that “awful things, of course, are commonly perpetrated because some crook says God wants them.” However, in the case of Bokononism, Bokonon asserts through his writings that no one can know God, so whatever Bokonon does or claims is not because God actually tells him so. Hume (1982: 435) argues that God, in the narratives of Vonnegut, “is often a disinterested Creator, remaining aloof from His earth creatures except to punish them occasionally when they step out of line.” Similarly, Myers (1976: 53) explains that the narrative universe in Vonnegut’s texts tends to be “nontranscendent and indifferent to man’s posturings”. The intentions or characteristics of the God that are described in Bokononism

cannot be confirmed, for all of the information on that God is established as lies, including the possibility that God exists. Thus, in Bokononism, it does not matter if God exists or not. As a lie, Bokononism does not declare that God does not exist, it shows that human beings cannot know of the existence of God, but can still believe in it since they have enough agency to impact their own existence through that belief. This idea shares some similarities with the existentialism as described by Sartre above.

Jonah introduces Bokonist beliefs:

We Bokononists believe that humanity is organized into teams, teams that do God's Will without ever discovering what they are doing. Such a team is called a karass by Bokonon, and the instrument, the kan-kan, that brought me into my own particular karass was the book I never finished, the book to be called *The Day the World Ended*. (Vonnegut 1963: 2)

A karass serves an important role in Bokononism by showing people's lives being entangled by tendrils that human beings cannot detect (Vonnegut 1963: 8,10). A karass can bring together anyone from anywhere for purposes unknown (Vonnegut 1963: 8). Trying to understand these purposes is not condemned but the answers will always remain out of reach. This is also illustrated by Bokonon's words, stating that anyone who claims to understand God is a fool (Vonnegut 1963: 9-10). This is in itself a paradoxical statement because Bokonon claims to know how God organises his activities. However, this paradox is also an important part of Bokononism, because everything that Bokonon teaches is meant to be a lie. Bokonon wrote that his texts are all lies, meaning that everyone is a fool, including him.

This statement provides the initial evidence for the idea of human ignorance present in the novel. According to Bokononist thought, no human can know anything about their purpose. "Busy, busy, busy, is what we Bokononists whisper whenever we think of how complicated and unpredictable the machinery of life really is" (Vonnegut 1963: 44) The saying 'busy, busy, busy' is meant to distract people from thinking about life in general since they would not be able to come up with the definitive answers anyway. Thus, Bokononism seems to express the importance of the subjective "human dimension" described by Sartre.

The following calypso by Bokonon shows the existential aspects of Bokononism:

Tiger got to hunt,  
 Bird got to fly;  
 Man got to sit and wonder, "Why, why, why?"  
 Tiger got to sleep,  
 Bird got to land;  
 Man got to tell himself he understand. (Vonnegut 1963: 109)

The calypso represents the existential situation of human beings, who can reason, question, and try to understand the purpose of anything, in contrast to animals. Therefore, lies represented by Bokononism can be seen as necessary to human existence, for they provide answers to questions that humans ponder. That is why Bokonon establishes a powerful God who works beyond human understanding. Another example of existentialism is in the story of how human beings were created, according to The Books of Bokonon:

In the beginning, God created the earth, and he looked upon it in His cosmic loneliness. And God said, "Let Us make living creatures out of mud, so the mud can see what We have done." And God created every living creature that now moveth, and one was man. Mud as man alone could speak. God leaned close as mud as man sat up, looked around, and spoke. Man blinked. "What is the purpose of all this?" he asked politely. "Everything must have a purpose?" asked God. "Certainly," said man. "Then I leave it to you to think of one for all this," said God. And He went away. (Vonnegut 1963: 156)

Bokononism answers existential questions with lies that encourage people to find and consider the answers themselves. This makes the lies of Bokononism "bittersweet" (Vonnegut 1963: 8). Taking religion seriously would deceive people into believing an illusory reality. However, if the people of San Lorenzo would live their lives every day while knowing the difficult reality of their situation, then according to Bokonon, their existence would be comparatively worse. As such, they would have to constantly face being isolated from the rest of the world, poverty, sickness, and so on.

These existential aspects of Bokononism are chiefly concerned with human existence. They relate to the idea that human beings can only talk about the subjective reality that they perceive. No transcendent reality is considered, only the "human dimension". The novel alludes to this idea through this statement of Frank Hoenikker: "'What is sacred to Bokononists?' I asked after a while. 'Not even God, as near as I can tell.' 'Nothing?' 'Just



one thing.’ I made some guesses. ‘The ocean? The sun?’ ‘Man,’ said Frank. ‘That’s all. Just man.’” (Vonnegut 1963: 125-126). If human beings are the only sacred thing to Bokononism then the human subject is at the centre of the religion. All existential questions that Bokononism answers always affirm human subjectivity. Therefore, only the “human dimension” is important, not fundamental or declarative objective ideals.

## **2 SCIENCE**

Another prominent element of the novel is science. Jonah introduces the kind of scientific thought that is expressed in the novel: “My book is going to emphasize the human rather than the technical side of the bomb” (Vonnegut 1963: 11). This calls attention to humanness in science, focusing on the lives of the people involved in the creation of the bomb, not the bomb as an objectively scientific invention. The following sections will focus on scientific thought represented through the perspective of a scientist in the novel and compare it with fundamentalism in religion and Bokononism. The main focus is on Felix Hoenikker, the most frequently discussed scientist in *Cat’s Cradle*.

### **2.1 Felix Hoenikker as a Holy Figure to Science**

Felix Hoenikker is one of the creators of the atomic bomb, the inventor of ice-nine, and the main person of interest for Jonah in collecting information for his book. Felix is described by Newt as having an innocent and pure curiosity about anything (Vonnegut 1963: 15). A key statement by Newt is that Felix is interested in anything but people, as he pays minimal attention to his family members or other people (Vonnegut 1963: 14). He is interested in experimenting with things, to invent or discover something:

After the turtle incident, Father got so interested in turtles that he stopped working on the atom bomb. Some people from the Manhattan Project finally came out to the house to ask Angela what to do. She told them to take away Father’s turtles. So one night they went into his laboratory and stole the turtles and the aquarium. Father never said a word about the disappearance of the turtles. He just came to

work the next day and looked for things to play with and think about, and everything there was to play with and think about had something to do with the bomb. (Vonnegut 1963: 15)

Felix is impartial towards what he plays around with and indifferent to how it affects the people around him. Felix is unaware of the destructive potential of the atomic bomb or the moral implications of its use. He seems to equate researching the bomb to researching or “playing with” turtles. These observations seem to suggest that Felix lacks morality and responsibility for his work.

A parallel can also be drawn between Felix and religion:

For instance, do you know the story about Father on the day they first tested a bomb out at Alamogordo? After the thing went off, after it was a sure thing that America could wipe out a city with just one bomb, a scientist turned to Father and said, “Science has now known sin.” And do you know what Father said? He said, “What is Sin?” (Vonnegut 1963: 16)

Felix is completely unaware of the idea of sin and might not even be aware of morality. His work is motivated by the wonder for the activity itself (Vonnegut 1963: 13).

Other people’s opinion provides additional evidence of his status as a person who is beyond human norms. A superior of his describes Felix as “/.../ a force of nature no mortal could possibly control.” (Vonnegut 1963: 15) Another case of mystification comes from Miss Faust:

“He was an unusual man.” “I agree.” “Maybe in a million years everybody will be as smart as he was and see things the way he did. But, compared with the average person of today, he was as different as a man from Mars.” “Maybe he really was a Martian,” I suggested. (Vonnegut 1963: 39)

Elevator operator Knowles thinks that Felix did not pass away, but travelled to another dimension (Vonnegut 1963: 40).

The surname Hoenikker can be interpreted through the perspective of religion. Doxey (1979) compares the pronunciation of Hoenikker with a Jewish holiday, Hanukkah, where giving gifts is a traditional practice. A statement by Jonah reads: “ice-nine was the last gift Felix Hoenikker created for mankind before going to his just reward” (Vonnegut 1963: 34). Doloff (2004) compares another practice of Hanukkah, lighting candles for eight days, to Felix’s gift of freezing the water supply of Earth. As the practice of lighting candles

signifies warmth and Felix's "gift of ice-nine" signifies cold, the dichotomy of the two actions would add more irony to Felix's conduct in a religious context. Pauly (1973: 66) compares Felix to a "demon-scientist", who "fulfills the biblical prophecy that tasting the tree of knowledge will bring destruction on the race", recognising the destructive effects of the atomic bomb and ice-nine.

In the town that Felix worked in, there is a tombstone shop, the owner of which confirms Felix's highly regarded status as a scientist:

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 1963: 45)

But, differently from the previous accounts, he holds more of a negative view of Felix:

/..../"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..." He shuddered, "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 1963: 45)

The shop owner also claims that Felix's wife got married to Felix because his mind "was tuned to the biggest music there was, the music of the stars" (Vonnegut 1963: 46). Angela Hoenikker comments on Jonah's plan to represent her father in his book: "Well, if you ever do do the book, you better make Father a saint, because that's what he was" (Vonnegut 1963: 70). As the previous examples show, Felix is often attributed holy, or beyond human qualities, which shows that the text represents religion and science in parallel as systems of thought which can be believed in, not something inherently true or false. Like Robinson (2018) suggested, a further parallel could therefore be drawn between Felix and Bokonon as leaders of the ideas of science and Bokononism, respectively.

## **2.2 Scientific Thought and Parallels with Religion**

The main characteristics of scientific thought in the novel are provided by a scientist, Dr. Asa Breed. Dr. Breed works in the same institution as Felix did, was his supervisor, and a strong believer of science (Vonnegut 1963: 20). In contrast, Dr. Breed's son, who worked in the same research complex as his father, quits his job, for he believes that the work of scientists is being weaponised (Vonnegut 1963: 21). Dr. Breed's son recognises the possible moral implications behind his work.

This does not necessarily mean that Dr. Breed lacks moral considerations like Felix, for he expresses some sorrow. At one point, Jonah and Dr. Breed discuss the hanging of a murderer who took the lives of 26 people and regretted nothing when he was executed (Vonnegut 1963: 21). Dr. Breed cannot understand how someone like this can have no moral qualms for his actions (Vonnegut 1963: 21). However, Dr. Breed does not consider himself responsible for the lives that the atomic bomb took, because he considers himself, Felix, and other scientists "pure-research men" (Vonnegut 1963: 30). He says that "pure-research men" only do research in its purest form, without an added context of use: "Here, and shockingly few other places in this country, men are paid to increase knowledge, to work toward no end but that" (Vonnegut 1963: 29). Myers (1976: 53) characterises these scientists as being represented like "smug fools", but the text itself does not apply any judgements to the scientists, only the perspectives of different characters are shown.

When Miss Pefko, a secretary of Dr. Breed's laboratory, comments that scientists generally think too much, Dr. Breed says he believes that everyone thinks the same amount, but draws a clear distinction between the thinking of "scientists", and "other people" (Vonnegut 1963: 25). What he seems to mean is that science has its own rules, language, and practices. Miss Pefko compares the powering on of the items of an exhibition to "magic". Dr. Breed, however, does not like the word 'magic', explaining that the exhibition shows that they can be explained scientifically. He presents science, however, as an almost holy

practice that requires devout service. According to him the women working in the typing bureau located in the basement: “‘serve science, too,’ Dr. Breed testified, ‘even though they may not understand a word of it. God bless them, every one!’” (Vonnegut 1963: 28)

Dr. Breed’s thoughts show a clear belief in science. Miss Pefko does not understand the science behind the exhibited items but believes that they work. The secretary’s statement shows that while science can generally be regarded as objective, it can still be believed in just as religion. Dr. Breed’s statements reflect a different kind of belief. Dr. Breed believes he and everyone involved “serves” science which is similar to serving a god. Dr. Breed’s god would be science or the scientific method which, to him, will unlock the secrets of the universe one day: “New knowledge is the most valuable commodity on earth. The more truth we have to work with, the richer we become.” (Vonnegut 1963: 29)

In contrast with Bokononism, science is represented in a dogmatic way, which has been pointed out by Thomas (2009). As was established before, Bokononism functions as the antithesis of religious dogmatism, by making it clear that everything about the religion is not true. For example, Jonah adds a Bokononist comment to Dr. Breed’s statement about knowledge and truth: “Had I been a Bokononist then, that statement would have made me howl” (Vonnegut 1963: 29). This may leave the impression that the novel is critical towards science. Since the bombing of Hiroshima acts as motivation for Jonah to write his book, discussing the event itself can be seen as critical towards the effects of science. Morse (2000: 397) suggests that the atomic bombings “tainted” science, making it “lose its innocence”, and it “became part of the problem rather than as often maintained in science fiction as well as in much of twentieth century science, the solution to all problems.” It might also seem that the text criticises religion, for Bokonism is a religion that essentially states itself as not being true. Religion is also discussed in a satirical context, which can make it seem like religious beliefs are being made fun of:

I once knew an Episcopalian lady in Newport, Rhode Island, who asked me to design and build a doghouse for her Great Dane. The lady claimed to understand God and His Ways of Working perfectly. She could not understand why anyone should be puzzled about what had been or about what was going to be. And yet, when I showed her a blueprint of the doghouse I proposed to build, she said to me, "I'm sorry, but I never could read one of those things." "Give it to your husband or your minister to pass on to God," I said, "and, when God finds a minute, I'm sure he'll explain this doghouse of mine in a way that even you can understand." She fired me. I shall never forget her. She believed that God liked people in sailboats much better than He liked people in motorboats. She could not bear to look at a worm. When she saw a worm, she screamed. (Vonnegut 1963: 9)

So far, the analysis has discussed the novel's representation of religion and science, and how these two systems of thought are connected in the narrative. For this thesis, the most important similarity that they share is to do with the overarching idea posited in the introduction – human beings are ignorant and have little control over anything in their lives. As was shown, Bokononism directly affirms human ignorance as a part of its ideas. However, science tries to establish the opposite in the novel – that it is a path to truth and knowledge which would make human beings less ignorant. Despite this, scientific invention, in the form of ice-nine, leads humanity to extinction. Also, scientific thought is often conveyed as something to be believed in, because it does not have all the answers to human questions.

### **3 THE CAT'S CRADLE GAME AND THE EPIGRAPH**

Human ignorance is represented as an important factor in science as well as religion. The following sections will expand on that idea by discussing the cat's cradle game, explaining how also the lack of human agency is represented throughout the novel, and how the paradox of the epigraph contradicts that idea.

#### **3.1 The Symbolism of the Cat's Cradle Game**

The game of cat's cradle, that is, creating figures from loops of strings tied around one's fingers, makes appearances in the narrative and provides pertinent information on the

representation of religion and science in *Cat's Cradle*. The novel's name also suggests that the game is a more general thematic or symbolic element of the novel.

A cat's cradle is first referenced in Newt's recollection of the day of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. Felix Hoenikker finds a string from a manuscript and starts to play with it, eventually forming a cat's cradle figure between his fingers (Vonnegut 1963: 13). When he makes the figure, Felix seems surprised and, exceptionally, inspired to play with Newt (Vonnegut 1963: 13). This scares Newt as a child (Vonnegut 1963: 13). One explanation is Felix's sense of wonder, discovering or re-discovering it for himself, providing him satisfaction similar to that produced by scientific research, as Thomas (2009) suggests.

However, later on in the novel the meaning of the cat's cradle game becomes clearer. On San Lorenzo, Newt creates a painting that John describes as looking like a spider's web (Vonnegut 1963: 99). For Newt the painting represents pieces of string forming a cat's cradle (Vonnegut 1963: 99). Newt also argues that the game potentially drives children crazy: "A cat's cradle is nothing but a bunch of X's between somebody's hands, and little kids look and look and look at all those X's... 'And?' 'No damn cat, and no damn cradle.'" (Vonnegut 1963: 99-100). Newt combines Bokomonist and scientific thought into a coherent whole – nothing that human beings create or refer to can be considered true, for they exist only from the perspective of human beings. Fialho (2020) sees a similar unification of science and religion in *Cat's Cradle* as "grand concepts with which to make sense of life". She explains them as follows: "religion is a 'bunch' of lies that keeps believers in dejected submission, passively waiting for a better life after death, while science brings mankind no comfort. Both have us live in delusion" (Fialho 2020).

Both religion and science are made up concepts from different human vocabularies. Neither can be real or absolute, for the human experience of existence can be considered

subjective. In this case, the existence of a conceptually objective reality or an absolute principle, regardless of human experience, cannot be confirmed or denied by humans because of their subjective viewpoint.

To solidify his point, Newt repeats when Frank Castle mentions Bokononism: “Little Newt snorted. ‘Religion!’ ‘Beg your pardon?’ Castle said. ‘See the cat?’ asked Newt. ‘See the cradle?’” (Vonnegut 1963: 109). Easterbrook arrives at a similar conclusion regarding the cat’s cradle:

Felix, Newt, and Vonnegut will hold that in the center of the cat’s cradle there is only the game – ‘no damn cat and no damn cradle.’ The game, the painting, the novel are set as equivalents – isomorphic and coextensive – just, as the novel says, ‘Playing with a loop of string’ (Easterbrook 2010: 75)

Nadeau (1980: 41) views this metaphor from the perspective of science: “Physicists in growing numbers are accepting the view that their so-called knowledge of nature consists essentially of metaphorical descriptions of what might be, rather than definitive transcriptions of what is.”

Bokononist beliefs are connected with the cat’s cradle symbolism as well. Bokononists believe (and therefore also do not believe) that human lives are like “living tendrils” which are constantly entangled together and no one but God knows how or why this entanglement happens. Easterbrook (2010: 82) provides a relevant comparison: “The tangling, of course, is simply another representation of the cat’s cradle metaphor, placing the main characters into the position of following necessary contingency.”

As the novel is named *Cat’s Cradle*, it can also be interpreted as representing human existence as an abstraction: nothing about it can fundamentally be real, and human beings can only define their existence through that subjective experience. This suggests that *Cat’s Cradle* persistently represents an overarching idea similar to Sartre’s explanation of existentialism and humanism, for everything experienced by humans can only be discussed from the subjective, human viewpoint which means that the “human dimension” can be seen as a symbolic cat’s cradle.



### 3.2 Absence of Control and Randomness

Johnson, before becoming the prophet Bokonon, feels like someone is guiding him toward a destiny (Vonnegut 1963: 66). At the beginning of the novel, Jonah expresses the same idea: “somebody or something has compelled me to be certain places at certain times, without fail” (Vonnegut 1963: 8). The events bringing Jonah and the Hoenikkers together can also be seen as a parallel to Johnson’s journey.

The Bokononist view on this matter is quite clear. People are brought together and entangled by forces that they know nothing about, but everyone has their destiny and purpose given by God within their ‘karass’. This belief is the lie that Bokononists tell themselves because, from the perspective of human subjectivity, the sequence of events that led Jonah and Johnson to the island remains a mystery due to human ignorance. Bokononism answers Jonah’s and Johnson’s questions about how they all ended up on the island, but it could all be a random chain of events. These events made Jonah think that “God was running his life” (Vonnegut 1963: 120). Faris (1985: 48) sees this representation of destiny and fate as “mocking people who believe they can understand, can control everything, and survive the world’s mysteries.” She proposes that Bokonon’s religious texts cohesively represent how people do not have control over their future (Faris 1985: 48).

Something that Jonah repeats while telling his story is “as it was meant to happen”. This sentence is to echo the introduction to his story: “somebody or something has compelled me to be certain places at certain times, without fail. Conveyances and motives, both conventional and bizarre, have been provided.” (Vonnegut 1963: 8) From those statements, it can be gathered that Bokononism is described as deterministic and that human beings have no real agency themselves. These observations show that not only does Bokononism represent human ignorance but also a lack of agency. An example of the lack of agency in human beings is confirmed in a calypso:

Someday, someday, this crazy world will have to end,

And our God will take things back that He to us did lend.  
 And if, on that sad day, you want to scold our God,  
 Why go right ahead and scold Him. He'll just smile and nod. (Vonnegut 1963: 158-159)

This quote represents the powerlessness of humans in general because, if God would suddenly decide to end the world, no human could stop the process and the only thing they could do is be defiant towards the act because it is beyond them.

The ice-nine apocalypse mirrors the calypso and is a direct example of a lack of human agency. After pieces of ice-nine are scattered, the absence of control is realised. The ending of the novel solidifies the deficiencies of human agency. Jonah meets Bokonon, who is in the middle of writing the final sentence for *The Books of Bokonon* (Vonnegut 1963: 168). The sentence reads:

If I were a younger man, I would write a history of human stupidity; and I would climb to the top of Mount McCabe and lie down on my back with my history for a pillow; and I would take from the ground some of the blue-white poison that makes statues of men; and I would make a statue of myself, lying on my back, grinning horribly, and thumbing my nose at You Know Who. (Vonnegut 1963: 168-169)

The references to a “younger man” evokes Jonah, who wanted to write a book about the day the atomic bomb was dropped. Bokonon calls his book “a history of human stupidity”. The stupidity can allude to both the destructive effects of the atomic bomb and ice-nine. Bokonon uses it as a pillow, suggesting that the book cannot be used to learn from history, for humanity is heading for extinction. The history book also parallels *Cat's Cradle*, because the quote is the final sentence of the novel and *The Books of Bokonon*. By grinning and thumbing his nose at “You Know Who”, Bokonon indicates that the only thing that he can do is be defiant towards the situation and reclaim some form of agency. “You Know Who” might be interpreted as God, but it does not matter what “You Know Who” is. The important thing is that it represents the unknown forces behind the apocalypse. Bokonon does not know if the cause was God, human beings, destiny, randomness, or a combination of them. If Bokonon would accept his lack of agency, it would parallel the hopeless situation of San Lorenzans without Bokononism. Instead, he uses the Bokononist way of thinking and

believes in his hope for agency, despite knowing that humanity is becoming extinct. Although the novel stresses the lack of control in human lives, this does not mean that there is absolutely no control to be found.

### 3.3 The Paradoxical Epigraph

Before the table of contents, the following epigraph is provided:

Nothing in this book is true.

“Live by the foma\* that makes you brave and kind and healthy and happy.”

--The Books of Bokonon. 1:5

\*Harmless untruths

The reader is directly addressed to stress that everything in *Cat's Cradle* is untrue, just as Bokonon does with Bokononist literature. This statement, therefore, clarifies that any idea represented by the following text would also be a lie, for it is based on lies. Therefore, the idea of human ignorance and lack of control is also a lie. Similarly to The Books of Bokonon, *Cat's Cradle* invalidates its narrative contents.

The epigraph discusses ‘foma’. It is used by Jonah as follows: “And what opinion did Bokonon hold of his own cosmogony? ‘Foma! Lies!’ he wrote. ‘A pack of foma!’” (Vonnegut 1963: 114). The recommendation to “live by the foma” provides guidance for the reader to believe in whatever makes them a brave, kind, healthy, and happy person, while knowing that those beliefs are untrue. *Cat's Cradle* becomes paradoxical, for it both invalidates anything in the book (by declaring everything in it lies), but then again validates it (by encouraging to live by the lies if they can make the reader brave, kind, healthy, and happy). As Tally (2008: 175) explains, foma provides the foundation for Bokononism, but also for any sort of religion. As such, he also makes a more general claim that ‘foma’ is necessary for humans to exist (Tally 2008: 175). Casey’s (1989) previously discussed interpretation of the epigraph mainly focuses on god and belief systems, but there is no reason to believe that the epigraph singles out specific ideas from the novel. It could also

refer to anything that the text could represent. Weiner (2015: 120) thinks that Jonah “identifies ‘the heartbreaking necessity of lying about reality’ as a central tenet of Bokononist thought”, but the epigraph seems to suggest that everything in the book is ‘foma’. Therefore, the epigraph extends the idea of foma not only to Bokononism or religion in general, but to everything that could be read from the text. This would make the text itself foma (including the epigraph) which creates the central paradox - everything in the book is a lie, which is itself a lie.

If *Cat’s Cradle* is interpreted as paradoxical, then the key points of some of the authors discussed previously cannot be exactly true or false just like the idea of human ignorance and a lack of agency. If everything in *Cat’s Cradle* is meant to be taken as a lie, then it does not seem necessarily critical of fundamentalism or religious dogma, unlike Thomas (2009) and Casey (1989) propose. Because of its inherent contradiction, it cannot exactly function to criticise the practices of religious leaders, nor metanarratives like Allen (2009) supposes. Robinson’s (2018) argument of *Cat’s Cradle* being a commentary on the negative effects of science would also lose certainty since no negative judgements would stand. However, Głowacka’s (1988) argument is similar to what the central paradox represents since she thinks that *Cat’s Cradle* does not express what is true, false, real, or imaginary, but that everything is ambiguous and subjective. Because of this, the statements of Thomas, Casey, Allen, Robinson, or anyone else are not exactly false either. Every claim that could be made about the narrative would be foma, but it does not have to stop anyone from considering it.

Thus, the epigraph creates a paradox about what *Cat’s Cradle* can represent. The text does not definitively critique, state, or judge anything because all claims would be invalidated by the “nothing in this book is true” statement and validated by the “live by the foma” statement. The same sort of paradox is present in The Books of Bokonon, as the

validity and invalidity of the contents are constantly contradicted. While in *The Books of Boknon*, the contradiction is meant to improve the lives of the islanders without lying to them, the purpose of the contradiction in *Cat's Cradle* may attempt to make us aware of the problems inherent in any narrative.

The second part of the epigraph encourages the readers to live by the foma if it makes the person kind, brave, healthy, and happy. Therefore, it would mean that foma can potentially also have the opposite effects of worsening human lives. It is thus important to ask what sort of lies is foma meant to refer to in the first place.

Following the logic of the discussion above, everything can be foma. The epigraph could have just declared, for example, to “Live by whatever makes you brave and kind and healthy and happy.” The use of ‘foma’ suggests that everything is foma and it is up to the reader to live by the foma that has a positive effect on them. As such, there does not exist a fundamental system of thought that should be followed, but everything is equally foma, even the values of being brave, kind, healthy, and happy. Therefore, human beings have some form of agency in how the foma can be adopted to impact their existence. This conclusion fits the previously identified idea of human ignorance and lack of control. If human beings are largely ignorant of the world, then everything is bound to be foma – lies as ways to explain and understand the world through the subjective human viewpoint. Nothing about these lies can be proved as true or false by humans. Even if human beings cannot change the world, they have the limited agency of choosing which foma impacts their lives.

However, if everything is foma, then nothing is true, including the statement “everything is foma”. Everything about this conclusion is paradoxical, suggesting that any conclusion or statement about the novel would be paradoxical, even interpreting it as a paradox, as this thesis attempts to do. Therefore, our original paradox is entirely realised – everything in the book is a lie, which is itself a lie.

Overall, there seems to be a connection between the nature of lies (foma) and human ignorance and agency. The validity of everything being foma is both affirmed and invalidated by human ignorance since humans cannot know if everything is foma. Still, foma exists within the subjective dimension of human beings which means that there is enough agency to choose from the foma. Thus, this paradoxical phenomenon can be regarded as “the untruth of human ignorance”, for humans can be considered ignorant of any objectivity because of their subjective human dimension. At the same time, they cannot be declared as ignorant or powerless, for that declaration presumes a human agent to suppose it, who would not know the truth of the matter.

## CONCLUSION

This thesis aimed to interpret *Cat's Cradle* as a paradoxical novel because of the epigraph of the novel – “Nothing in this book is true. Live by the foma\* that makes you brave and kind and healthy and happy.” The paradox was established as follows – everything in the book is a lie, which is itself a lie. This paradox was explored by identifying human ignorance and a lack of agency as prevalent ideas in the text through the narrative elements of Bokononist religion, science, and the cat's cradle game.

The literature review showed that previous studies mostly discuss *Cat's Cradle* as being critical of fundamentalism, dogmatism, religious practices, or that it expresses a moral message. However, the novel has also been consistently discussed as generally ambiguous towards what it represents, whether it is religion in general, truth, lies, or reality.

The analysis of Bokononism showed that the religion openly admits to being a lie and is meant to be believed in because of it. The first sentence of Bokonon's holy texts confirms that its every teaching is a lie. Bokononism functions to help the islanders of San Lorenzo improve their lives by answering existential questions with comforting lies.

Bokononism both claims to know what God has planned for every human being, but also considers anyone who claims to know God as a 'fool'. Thus, Bokononism operates in a paradoxical fashion and points to human ignorance as an important element in understanding the religion. The text confirmed that human beings are the only things sacred to Bokononism. Thus, Bokononism is only concerned with the human subject and the subjectivity of the human experience. It does not claim to know any fundamental truths.

It was also shown how *Cat's Cradle* discusses science as prone to fundamentalist thought. The novel presents science as something that can be believed in and taken as a fundamental truth. This is expressed mainly by Felix Hoenikker and Dr. Asa Breed, who disassociate moral considerations from scientific thought, give it a religious quality, and express dogmatism. However, Bokononism tries to challenge dogmatism by openly admitting to be ignorant of what is true or false. Therefore, human ignorance is a key component of both science and Bokononism.

The game of cat's cradle was shown to metaphorically represent science, Bokononism, and more generally, any abstract concept, idea, or system of thought created by human beings. Newt brings attention to the cat's cradle figure as X's between someone's hands, not an actual cat's cradle. He equates the figure with a metaphor for religion. Bokononism was shown to share similarities with the cat's cradle metaphor since human lives are equated to entangling living tendrils which are similar to the strings of a cat's cradle game. Thus, the idea of human ignorance is further accentuated by the cat's cradle metaphor, as any idea, concept, or worldview would be an abstraction of the human mind, not something fundamentally true.

Lack of control in human lives was demonstrated by how the characters have seemingly little agency in their lives. As Bokononists, the characters realise that they do not know if their lives are guided by greater forces, but they can also use Bokononism to make

peace with that fact. Human ignorance is therefore tied to a lack of human agency, for no one could know if they lack control over their lives.

Finally, it was demonstrated how the epigraph creates the central paradox by both establishing its contents as untrue and reaffirming them as lies. Thus, the novel makes no clear judgements or critiques in its content, but remains ambiguous. Through the epigraph, the novel can make the reader realise that everything about it is untrue, foma. Foma was also shown to be able to extend to any sort of idea like human ignorance and lack of control. If human ignorance of anything fundamental or objective can be confirmed through the subjectivity of human beings, then everything would be foma. However, human ignorance, lack of agency, and foma cannot be confirmed or denied by human beings because of their subjective knowledge and experience of the world.

In conclusion, this study demonstrated how *Cat's Cradle* can be built around a central paradox (everything in the book is a lie, which is itself a lie) by focusing on Bokononism, science, the cat's cradle game, and the epigraph. The novel has other aspects that could be analysed within the paradoxical frame (e.g. the use of humour, representation of American society, and Christianity). More extensive research on the existential aspects of *Cat's Cradle* could be undertaken in the future as well.



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## RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL  
ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

**Oto Pruul**

**The Untruth of Human Ignorance: Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle* as a Paradoxical Novel**

**Inimteadmatus eavale: Kurt Vonneguti *Cat's Cradle* kui paradoksaalne romaan**

Bakalaureusetöö

2023

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Annotatsioon:

Käesoleva uurimuse eesmärk on näidata, kuidas „*Cat's Cradle*“ on ülesehitatud keskse paradoksi ümber, mida väljendab romaani epigraaf – kõik selles raamatus on vale, mis on ka ise vale väide. Romaani läbivaks ideeks on inimeste teadmatus ja puudulik kontroll oma elu üle. Seda ideed analüüsitakse Bokononismi, teaduse ja kassikanga mängu kaudu.

Bakalaureusetöö koosneb sissejuhatusesest, kirjanduse ülevaatest, romaani sisukokkuvõttest, vastavate narratiivi elementide analüüsist, arutelust paradoksi üle ja kokkuvõttest. Sissejuhatus loob tausta uuritavale romaanile ja püstitab uurimuse eesmärgid. Kirjanduse ülevaade tutvustab eelnevaid uurimusi „*Cat's Cradle*“ romaanist, võtab kokku olulised argumendid ja defineerib eksistentsialismi nagu seda käesolevas bakalaureusetöös kasutatakse. Töö põhiosa algab raamatu sisukokkuvõttega, millele järgneb Bokononismi, teaduse ja kassikanga mängu analüüs. Analüüsi eesmärk on näidata inimese teadmatust ja vähest kontrolli elu üle. Seejärel selgitatakse, kuidas romaan muutub paradoksaalseks. Viimane osa tööst on kokkuvõte, kus tuuakse välja töö peamised tulemused.

Uurimuse käigus näidati, kuidas teose epigraaf muudab romaani paradoksaalseks, kuna selle sisu kehtestatakse samal ajal nii tõe kui valena. Seega „*Cat's Cradle*“ otseselt ei mõista hukka ega kritiseeri ühtegi ideed, vaid jääb ebamääraseks. Tänu epigraafile paneb romaan lugejat mõistma, et kõik selle teosega seotu on vale nagu foma. Foma on termin, mida saab laiendada igale mõttele või ideele, mida „*Cat's Cradle*“ väljendab. Kui inimesed tõesti ei tea midagi sellest, mis on fundamentaalselt objektiivne, sest nad ise kogevad maailma subjektiivselt, siis kõik on vale. Sellegipoolest ei saa inimesed oma subjektiivsuse tõttu kuidagi kinnitada või ümber lükata oma teadmatust, kas neil on tegelik kontroll oma elu üle või kas kõik on vale.

Märksõnad: ameerika kirjandus, Kurt Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle*, teadus, religioon, eksistentsialism, paradoks, kassikangas.

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