

Zachary Perdieu

Texas State University

“That Was I. That Was Me”: The many Vonneguts and their Relationship with Fiction

Kurt Vonnegut’s novels are rife with recurring themes that frequently result in similar conclusions. Scholars have taken notice, with some, like Leonard Mustazza, going as far as arguing that Vonnegut’s work as a whole can be characterized by a single, defining sentiment. The problem with this reduction of Vonnegut’s work is that it fails to consider the massive scope, progression, and growth evident during the author’s career. Each novel is not a slightly altered version of the previous one, but an addition to an anthropological project that Vonnegut carefully fabricated and meticulously molded. Recurring themes of normalization, a search for purpose, and self-deception are not only evident in the vast majority of Vonnegut’s novels, but they are informed by previous iterations of themselves and evolve in conjunction with the rules established by earlier versions.

Critical accusations of repetitiveness, or what Peter S. Prescott called Vonnegut’s QUOTE “customary pose of satirizing attitudes that only Archie bunker could love” (40), END QUOTE fail to acknowledge this thematic crescendo and tend to ignore the deliberateness with which Vonnegut builds his fictional universe. The recurring themes build from text to text. They reflect back on previous manifestations of themselves and predict future outcomes of similar scenarios. While Vonnegut certainly wrote individual and distinct stories contained within his fourteen novels, they are not each entirely contained within fourteen distinct worlds. Characters and places, like themes, reappear, and Vonnegut establishes rules that dictate

future exchanges between characters and fate, characters and other characters, characters and their creator, and characters and themselves. Vonnegut constructed what Jess Ritter has called a “mythical modern universe” (38) within which he develops an ever-evolving social theory.

Vonnegut plays many roles in this universe – “Editor” in *Mother Night*, minor character in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, major character and narrator in *Breakfast of Champions*, and of course the role of author. This paper will examine the nature of Vonnegut’s relationship with the fictional universe he created by analyzing an early draft of *Cat’s Cradle* and the implications of the changes that were made. In doing so, I will conclude that Vonnegut’s varied roles in his fiction are a product of the very truths about humanity that the author uncovers in his work – that Vonnegut is as beholden to the self-deception and search for contrived meaning that his characters are, and thus becomes one of his characters. John, or Jonah, as *Cat’s Cradle’s* protagonist instructs the reader to call him, claims to be writing the text within *Cat’s Cradle* as a book about his journey into Bokononism. The questions, then, are who is Jonah, and what is Bokononism? An examination of this early draft of *Cat’s Cradle*, stored in the Vonnegut collection at Indiana University’s Lilly Library, reveals that Jonah may be a version of Vonnegut himself, and Bokononism is whatever anyone needs it to be. For much of the early draft, it is very similar to the final published version which expounds on humankind’s contrived sense of purpose and self-deception, but some minor differences between the two drafts are very revealing.

The published version of the book depicts a scene where John and a cab driver stop at a tombstone carving establishment in Ilium, New York, where they see a large grave marker carved into the shape of an angel. The owner of the shop explains that the angel was carved by

his great-grandfather who was commissioned by a German immigrant. The German man departed for land he owned in Indiana before paying for the angel, which was supposed to sit over the immigrant's wife's grave. The shop owner's great-grandfather had already carved the woman's name in the angel, however, so there it sat. The current shop owner calls the engraved title "a screwy name" and states that any descendants of the immigrant would have "Americanized the name," to "Jones or Black or Thompson" (72). Vonnegut, of course, was the descendant of German immigrants who eventually settled in Indiana. As for the narrator, it is revealed later in the text that he is similarly a Hoosier, and he speaks up in the published text to explain that the name on the stone has, perhaps, not been Americanized:

QUOTE "There you're wrong," I said, when the vision was gone.

"You know some people by that name?"

"Yes."

The name was my last name, too. (73) END QUOTE

This is how Chapter 34 ends in the published text of *Cat's Cradle*, but the earlier draft has a slight adjustment and an additional line: QUOTE "The last name was mine. 'Vonnegut,' that tombstone said" END QUOTE (*Cat's Cradle*, Vonnegut mss.). This is a small but monumental subtraction from the text of *Cat's Cradle*, as it shows Vonnegut attempting to place himself in his work years before doing so in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Illustrating just how groundbreaking this attempt was, Jerome Klinkowitz explains, QUOTE "editors talked Vonnegut out of the idea as being too radical" END QUOTE (273) in *Cat's Cradle*. Further indicating how such a narrative interruption by the author was viewed by editors, other minor edits around that section included changing "great stone prick" to "monument" on page 61, replacing the word "Shit"

with “Crap” on page 69, removing “And a whore” from Asa Breed’s description of Felix’s wife on page 68 and “thumbs up our ass” in Crosby’s human relations rant on page 89 (*Cat’s Cradle*, Vonnegut mss). In the light of these other edits, the removal of QUOTE “‘Vonnegut,’ that tombstone said” END QUOTE appears like a casualty of a crusade against vulgarity, only this particular edit was a vulgarity of literary style, not of linguistic manners.

The narrator’s name in the published text is known to the reader because the narrator himself instructed the reader to, “Call me Jonah” (1) in the opening lines of the book. That opening line, as well as the first paragraph in which the self-proclaimed Jonah explains his actual name is John, is absent from the earlier draft. The only name ever associated with the narrator in that draft is the “Vonnegut” on the tombstone. Even if his name *is* John, however, that doesn’t remove the connection with Vonnegut as they are both Hoosiers and writers, descended from German immigrants, who still possess an un-Americanized German name. In the published text, John, states QUOTE “if I had been a Sam, I would have been a Jonah still” END QUOTE (1). Despite his editors removing the introduction of his own name, therefore, Vonnegut makes it apparent in the opening lines that the “real” name of the character doesn’t matter; the narrator is representative of Vonnegut, or of any individual, and he would be of a Jonah figure regardless of his name. In the early draft of the novel, where “Vonnegut” is definitively the last name of both narrator and author, a completely different ending is present that strengthens the connection in the mythic universe between *Cat’s Cradle* and subsequent books, as well as furthering the argument for the universality of Vonnegut’s evolving social theory by examining the author/text relationship.

In the early draft of *Cat's Cradle*, *ice-nine* never contacts the ocean, and all the water on earth doesn't freeze as a result. This is prevented by a twenty-seven foot rope that is tied to the *ice-nine* contaminated bed, which plunges into the ocean in the published text. the rope is tied to the bed because of a Bokononist superstition that a twenty-seven foot rope tied to one's bed will help with sleeplessness. Furthermore, instead of the U.S. ambassador to San Lorenzo and his wife falling into the ocean and perishing, as occurs in the published version of *Cat's Cradle*, it is Newt and Hazel Crosby who find themselves on the wrong side of the landslide into the sea. However, QUOTE "A hero now appeared," END QUOTE in the form of Philip Castle. He leapt across the divide of the splintering rocks onto the doomed platform with Hazel and Newt, but, QUOTE "It was folly. There was nothing he or anyone short of God Almighty could do." END QUOTE. Vonnegut, in his early draft of his finale to *Cat's Cradle*, went on to write:

QUOTE Castle had a plan. It was exceedingly simple. He was going to pose with Hazel and little Newt. He took Newt by the hand, and he put his arm around Hazel's waist.

He smiled at us.

He spoke to us across the void. "Remember us always" he said amiable [sic] "the random three. Farewell!"

The wedge toppled out, plunged down. It was swallowed whole by the luke-warm sea. (*Cat's Cradle*, Vonnegut mss.) END QUOTE

Not only is this a comically morbid confirmation of the absurdity of *granfalloon*s, with "the random three" being exactly as meaningless as "Hoosiers," but it is the beginning of the of the narrator's realization of Bokonon's ability to "predict" a contrived future, as the older Castle,

Julian, informs the narrator that Bokonon had prophesized that Philip Castle would die between a fool and a midget. This revelation sends the narrator on a path which illuminates the very personal nature of the novel to its author.

In the earlier draft, the narrator calls upon Bokonon, intending to force the holy man to become president of San Lorenzo. Upon answering the summons, Bokonon calls the narrator "Mr. Vonnegut," further tying the author of *Cat's Cradle* to the narrator, and at this point, the early draft takes on aspects of metafiction almost as straightforward as those within *Breakfast of Champions*, in which Vonnegut himself is one of the protagonists. As Bokonon and the narrator begin to talk, Mr. Vonnegut states his belief that he is dreaming. When Bokonon asks how the narrator knows he is dreaming, Mr. Vonnegut indicates the bed spread Bokonon has wrapped around his body as a toga. The bed spread has the letters, "AGFR&RD" embroidered on them. Mr. Vonnegut asks Bokonon what the letters stand for, and Bokonon responds, QUOTE "All God's Friends Respect and Revere Divinity" END QUOTE, but Mr. Vonnegut counters that they stand for QUOTE "Army Ground Forces Rehabilitation and Reassignment Depot," END QUOTE citing this as a memory from his past when he stayed at this depot as evidence that he is dreaming. Bokonon reveals, however, that the surplus from this depot was sent to San Lorenzo to help the small island nation QUOTE "keep the Communists away." END QUOTE. He then explains that Papa Monzano, the now deceased President of San Lorenzo, believed the letters to stand for, QUOTE "Almighty God Fought Russia, and Russia Died" END QUOTE (*Cat's Cradle*, Vonnegut mss.). This exchange acts as a confirmation that each individual assigns contrived meaning to his or her surroundings to fit the narrative of his or her life. Furthermore, it asserts that the contrived meaning embedded in *foma*, a Bokononist term

meaning “harmless untruths,” and *granfalloonery* is not a dream-like existence, but the reality individuals construct for themselves, simply made to fit in within the structure at hand.

At this point, the conversation develops to nearly mirror the one between “Kurt Vonnegut” and Kilgore Trout in the climactic encounter at the end of *Breakfast of Champions*. It is best presented in its entirety, considering it is not readily available for referred viewing:

QUOTE “Is there a Bokononist word for a *karass* that’s more out in the open than others, a *karass* whose bare bones show, a *karass* whose purpose is to make public demonstration of some idea God Almighty wants people to have?” I said

“A *vow-prass*,” he said.

“There *is* such a concept?” I said.

“There is now,” said Bokonon. “You and I just made it up.”

“Well, let me tell you about the *vow-prass* to which I belong” I said. And I told him the tale I have set down in this book.

He was impressed. “I must confess –” he said, “I think you have a classic *vow-prass* there.”

“Would you care to say what it has been up to?” I said.

“You’re telling the lies now,” he said. “I’m simply sitting back and savoring them.”

“All right,” I said. “The purpose of our *vow-prass* has been to make a public demonstration of this fact: *That warm-hearted lies, warm-hearted magic,*

*warm-heart [sic] superstitions, are as beneficial as any truths – and that truth can injure and kill.”* END QUOTE

This narrating Mr. Vonnegut in the early draft, a Hoosier, a descendent of German immigrants, and a writer, states, QUOTE “And I told him about the tale I am setting down in this book.” END QUOTE. Kurt Vonnegut, a Hoosier, a descendent of German immigrants, and a writer, set the tale down in the book that is *Cat’s Cradle*.

The difference between the Mr. Vonnegut of the early draft and John of the published version is wholly within the presence of two “Vonneguts” and an introductory paragraph in which the narrator tells the reader what to call him, before immediately telling him no matter what his name happened to be, he would still need to be called his self-declared name. The difference between the narrator of *Cat’s Cradle* and its author, then, is hardly greater than the difference between the narrator of *Breakfast of Champions* and its author. Furthermore, the narrator/author is actively writing his own book which he is the protagonist in. He is “telling the lies” that manifest the meaning of the story, and declaring the contrived purpose of his own existence. Not only is this early draft undeniable evidence of the presence of Vonnegut in his own work six years before his use of this technique in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, but it is revelatory regarding Vonnegut’s unique role in his fiction. Bokononism and all of its terms are nothing more than definitions of the real-life happenings of humanity; of their tendency to find meaning in contrived connections, to tell themselves harmless untruths that make existence less oppressive. Bokononism simply names things that have existed in humankind for so long that a representation of one of the arbitrary definitions can be deemed a “classic” moments after the invention of the name, as was the case with Mr. Vonnegut’s *vow-prass*. This

revelation, evident in the early draft, explains why John in the published text would have been a “Jonah” no matter his real name – because the titles are arbitrary. In fact, the *individual* doesn’t even matter. Jonah, Mr. Vonnegut, Hazel, Newt, Franklin, Philip Castle, Bokonon, Billy Pilgrim, Paul Proteus, Old Salo, Winston Niles Rumfoord, Malachi Constant, Kilgore Trout, Kurt Vonnegut, or Zach Perdieu are all going to construct their own meaning out of the tale they exist in – going to assign their own words to the AGFR&RD acronym, for instance – and would thus be capable of carrying the torch of this Jonah myth if placed in those circumstances.

Bokonon wasn’t omniscient, he just gave Philip Castle and others a narrative to fit their story in, and they were compelled to run with it.

In the final pages of the early draft of *Cat’s Cradle*. Mr. Vonnegut and Bokonon are still talking. Bokonon is giving new prophecies, needed by Mr. Vonnegut to do so. The holy man is telling how each character will die, which of course is in his power to do, as he is a creation of Kurt Vonnegut, and thus has the power to do anything Kurt Vonnegut deems necessary. When Mr. Vonnegut runs out of characters whose fate he can ask about, save his own, he writes, QUOTE “I started to ask him how I would die, decided I didn’t want to know. He told me anyway. ‘A dog,’ he said. ‘My condolences.’” END QUOTE. Following this, on the final page of the early draft is, QUOTE “‘Poo-tee-wee phweet?’ said a bird. Somewhere a dog barked. ‘Coming,’ I said” END QUOTE (*Cat’s Cradle*, Vonnegut mss.). Vonnegut, of course, ends *Slaughterhouse-Five* with, QUOTE “One bird said to Billy Pilgrim, ‘Poo-tee-weet?’” (215) END QUOTE, and throughout the book, the phrase “Somewhere a dog barked” is used to tie Billy Pilgrim’s time as a captive of the Germans in World War II with his abduction by the Tralfamadorians. This is obviously yet another connecting tendril between two novels, again

strengthening the assertion that Vonnegut created a connected mythic universe, but it is much more than that. In *Breakfast of Champions*, “Kurt Vonnegut” the narrator is terrified by a dog as he waits for Kilgore Trout. This is a contrived fear, of course, as Vonnegut the author places “Vonnegut” the narrator just out of the reach of the fictional dog. Is this fear that “Vonnegut” the narrator of *Breakfast of Champions* feels perhaps a residual effect of Bokonon’s death-prophecy to the Mr. Vonnegut of an early *Cat’s Cradle*? The fact that this portion of *Cat’s Cradle* was edited out is perhaps more telling – that a “Vonnegut” narrator retains a fear that the reader has no backstory for – because it illustrates the key to understanding Vonnegut’s fiction and his role in it.

Contrived meaning and self-deception are so engrained in the reality of humanity that the very author who establishes the vehicle for the theory is equally beholden to it. Vonnegut’s own presence in his writing are the inklings of a man grappling with the very truths the author is depicting about humankind. These Vonneguts presence in this early draft of *Cat’s Cradle*, along with the published texts of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and *Breakfast of Champions* are indications of the very real Kurt Vonnegut using his fiction to understand his own existence. In *Cat’s Cradle*, he attempted to use an iteration of himself to explore the very meta-fictional quality of self-narration in everyday life. In *Slaughterhouse-Five* he was a present character/narrator exercising the demons of personal tragedy and massacre. In *Breakfast of Champions* he interacted with the very insanity and depression developing in the cocktail lounge of his mind.

The implications of Vonnegut’s initial version of *Cat’s Cradle* follow the author throughout his career, even if the reader is unaware of that early draft. Vonnegut understands

that he, the living and breathing author, is constructing his own story as he lives it. Just like Philip Castle, Mr. Vonnegut of the early *Cat's Cradle* was told how he was going to die, and instead of acknowledging the impossibility of prophecy, a future Vonnegut character/narrator carries the fear of that prophecy with him. Bokonon gave Mr. Vonnegut a framework for a personal narrative, and he ran with it. In one final moment of *Zah-mah-ki-bo*, Kurt Vonnegut predicted the circumstances of his own death and blurred the line between fiction and reality in one final mortal act, as biographer Charles Shields explains: "Outside the brownstone, as he and Flour reached the bottom steps, the little dog spun around to see if he was coming. He tripped over her leash, pitched forward full-length, and struck the right side of his face on the sidewalk, losing consciousness instantly" (Shields 415). Vonnegut died from this injury, and thus completed his own predicted death. One can only imagine the sounds of a lone bird on that day in New York on April 11, 2007, as it said "Poo-tee-weet?" Somewhere a dog barked, and Kurt finally answered.

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