

# **Cat's Cradle Study Guide**

## **Cat's Cradle by Kurt Vonnegut**

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# Contents

<a href="#">Cat's Cradle Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 1-4.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 5-8.....</a>	<a href="#">7</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 9-18.....</a>	<a href="#">9</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 19-27.....</a>	<a href="#">12</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 28-35.....</a>	<a href="#">16</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 36-46.....</a>	<a href="#">18</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 47-57.....</a>	<a href="#">20</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 58-68.....</a>	<a href="#">22</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 69-77.....</a>	<a href="#">23</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 78-88.....</a>	<a href="#">25</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 89-99.....</a>	<a href="#">27</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 100-106.....</a>	<a href="#">29</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 107-113.....</a>	<a href="#">31</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 114-127.....</a>	<a href="#">32</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">34</a>
<a href="#">Objects/Places.....</a>	<a href="#">38</a>
<a href="#">Social Sensitivity.....</a>	<a href="#">40</a>
<a href="#">Techniques.....</a>	<a href="#">41</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">42</a>
<a href="#">Style.....</a>	<a href="#">45</a>
<a href="#">Quotes.....</a>	<a href="#">47</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>	<a href="#">49</a>



[Literary Precedents.....](#) [50](#)

[Copyright Information.....](#) [51](#)



# Plot Summary

Determined to write a non-fiction book entitled *The Day the World Ended* about the day the nuclear bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, freelance journalist John travels to Ilium, New York. He meets the family of the deceased Dr. Felix Hoenikker, one of the fathers of the nuclear bomb. John learns that Frank Hoenikker, the doctor's fugitive son, lives on the Caribbean island of San Lorenzo. Among an odd assortment of characters in the tiny island dictatorship, John encounters a former Calypso singer turned religious prophet named Bokonon and becomes a convert. John learns that each of the three Hoenikker offspring owns a vial of Ice-nine, the doctor's final invention. Ice-nine is so deadly that a single drop will freeze all the water on Earth, making the planet uninhabitable and killing all living things. John is just about to assume the presidency of San Lorenzo when an accident releases the Ice-nine into the ocean. Instantly, all plant and animal life is killed. Only a few ants and six humans survive the cataclysm.

Arriving on the island of San Lorenzo, John is surprised to find that the people are malnourished, impoverished, homeless and diseased. The Americans who accompany him on his journey are greedy, destructive or misguided. The dictator of San Lorenzo, Papa Monzano, is the worst of all. Each of the Hoenikkers has used his or her vial of the fatal Ice-nine for their own purposes. Angela, Frank and Newton are each willing to sacrifice the entire world for love or money.

Papa Monzano commits suicide by ingesting the Ice-nine. John, with the Hoenikkers' help, isolates the dangerous crystal when an explosion sends Papa's body plunging into the sea. Instantly, all the water on the earth freezes and almost all life perishes. John manages to survive along with Newt and Frank Hoenikker and the greedy Crosbys.

The author, Kurt Vonnegut, is a master of satire. Vonnegut debunks everything that humans rely on to give meaning to life, including religion, science, the truth, business, power, politics, social groups, families, governments, nations, art and romance. He skewers the concepts of fate and self-determination, good and evil. Even nihilism - the belief that life is essentially meaningless - is subjected to scorn. Yet, the author never offers an alternative to these false gods. Instead, the novel is a farce perpetrated by men who are constantly seeking an elusive meaning in life.

Vonnegut credits his background as a reporter for his powerful yet unadorned style. *Cat's Cradle*, Vonnegut's first best-seller, was accepted by the University of Chicago as the author's belated thesis in anthropology. Vonnegut had attended the university from 1945 to 1947. His first thesis, on the similarities between Cubist paintings and the Native American uprisings of the late 19th century, was rejected by the University as unprofessional. Vonnegut was finally awarded his degree, an M.A. in anthropology, in 1971, at the age of 49.

Vonnegut's novel has a unique structure. It is comprised of 127 chapters averaging just one and a half to two pages each. Because of this unique structure, within this study guide, chapters have been grouped according to topic for easier reading.



# Chapters 1-4

## Chapters 1-4 Summary

Determined to write a non-fiction book entitled *The Day the World Ended* about the day the nuclear bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, freelance journalist John travels to Ilium, New York. He meets the family of the deceased Dr. Felix Hoenikker, one of the fathers of the nuclear bomb. John learns that Frank Hoenikker, the doctor's fugitive son, lives on the Caribbean island of San Lorenzo. Among an odd assortment of characters in the tiny island dictatorship, John encounters a former Calypso singer turned religious prophet named Bokonon and becomes a convert. John learns that each of the three Hoenikker offspring owns a vial of Ice-nine, the doctor's final invention. Ice-nine is so deadly that a single drop will freeze all the water on Earth, making the planet uninhabitable and killing all living things. John is just about to assume the presidency of San Lorenzo when an accident releases the Ice-nine into the ocean. Instantly, all plant and animal life is killed. Only a few ants and six humans survive the cataclysm.

When John was much younger, he collected material for a book called *The Day the World Ended*. It was a non-fiction book on the events the day the Americans dropped the nuclear bomb on Hiroshima, Japan. John was a Christian then. Now, 250,000 cigarettes, 3,000 quarts of booze and 2 wives later, he is a Bokononist in the Republic of San Lorenzo in the Caribbean Sea.

Bokonon teaches that all humanity is organized into teams that do God's will unintentionally. These teams are called *karass*. When you find your life tangled up with someone else's for no logical reason, Bokonon teaches, that person is likely a member of your *karass*. Occupation, class, family and nationality are irrelevant to *karass*, which is depicted as free-form, like an amoeba.

Bokononism does not discourage inquiry into the extent of one's *karass* and its work. It simply emphasizes that all such inquiries must be incomplete. This is illustrated in a parable in the autobiographical section of *The Book of Bokonon*. An Episcopalian lady claimed to understand exactly what God intended for the past and the future perfectly. The woman asked Bokonon to build a doghouse for her Great Dane. When Bokonon showed her the blueprints, she could not read them. Bokonon told her to take the blueprints to her husband or minister. They would serve as her link to God and help her read the blueprint.

According to Bokonon, this woman had no doubt that God liked people in sailboats much better than people in motorboats. She was a fool, and so is anyone who claims to understand what God is doing. Despite the impossibility of complete understanding, Bokonon encourages one to include as many members of the *karass* as possible and to examine what the group has been up to. A basic tenet of Bokononism is that all religions are lies. "The first sentence in *The Book of Bokonon* is this: 'All of the true things I am about to tell you are shameless lies.'"



John's karass contains the three children of Dr. Felix Hoenikker. Dr. Hoenikker, one of the "fathers" of the first nuclear bomb, died in 1963. He was a Nobel Prize-winning physicist. His youngest son Newton pledged to the Cornell chapter of John's fraternity. John sends a letter to the boy, introducing himself as a freelance writer working on a book about August 6, 1945, the day the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. John asks Newt, who was just a child at the time, to share his memories of that day.

## Chapters 1-4 Analysis

By invoking the biblical story of Jonah and the whale in the first sentence, Vonnegut introduces the theme of religion, especially the illusory nature of self-determination. In fact, the main character's first name is John, not Jonah.

The invented religion Bokonon teaches that men are put on earth only to do God's will, not their own. It favors a Zen-like acceptance of fate over any illusion of self-determination. This is emphasized when the 53rd Calypso refers to a karass as a "device." Humans, in Bokononism, are only cogs in the great machinery of life, which will continue with or without them.

The author ironically refers to the blueprint story as a parable. Parables are fables invented to illustrate a moral and are presumed not to be literally true. This story, which is autobiographical, clearly seems based in fact. Vonnegut uses the realism of Bokonon's experience to gently jest at Christians' presumptions of divine privilege. He suggests that instead, most merely worship money. He especially enjoys poking fun at Episcopalians, as the most uptight and prosperous of Protestant sects. The prospect of a person so wise and knowing that she understands the entire cosmos, but is unable to read a simple blueprint, is humorous and irreverent.

Bokononism also suggests that while our understanding of God's plan for the cosmos is unclear, it is not necessary to go through an intermediary to have the teachings interpreted for us. Bokonon's statements about religion apply equally well to novels. The imaginary facts of fiction often conceal more truth than literal, objective information. Bokonon's first line is not only an indictment of all organized religions, but it is also a statement about what literature should be. This line contains the modernist philosophy that literature contains universal truths concealed as lies.

With Dr. Hoenikker, a second major theme is introduced - that of the nuclear weapon. The entire novel, in fact, can be read as a single parable on the dangers of inevitable worldwide destruction by a nuclear weapon in American hands.

John's reference to August 6, 1945 as the day the world ended is ironic. Assuming that nuclear holocaust is inevitable, in one sense, the statement is correct. The day the first bomb was dropped was the beginning of the end. In another sense, the statement is ridiculous, since John is writing in 1968. From yet a third perspective, the world will in fact end, but as a result of the secret weapon Ice-nine, rather than nuclear war. In this way, the book's title foreshadows the end of the world.



# Chapters 5-8

## Chapters 5-8 Summary

Newton Hoenikker, a Delta Upsilon pledge, replies to John's letter. Newt explains that he was very young on the day the bomb was dropped. He has two older siblings. His brother Frank disappeared two years ago, immediately after their father's funeral, and may well be dead. His older sister Angela is a housewife in Indiana.

Newton recounts his memories of being a six-year-old boy, playing with trucks on the carpet outside his father's study on the day the bomb was dropped. Inside, his father, a self-absorbed, anti-social man, played cat's cradle with a bit of string. His mother died when Newton was born and Angela, sixteen years older, raised him. She often complained that she had three children - Frank, Newton and their father.

After Newton's father frightened him, Newton went outside. There, his older brother Frank was staging bug fights. Frank would put several tablespoons of bugs into a large glass jar and shake the jar until the bugs battled to the death.

In a postscript to Newton's letter, Newton refutes John's comment about the "illustrious Hoenickers." Frank is a criminal who is wanted by the FBI, police and Treasury Department for a scheme transporting stolen cars to Cuba. Angela is a wallflower whose only hobby is playing the clarinet. Newton confides that he has flunked out of college in his first semester and will soon have to leave. Newton is a midget, only four feet tall. Still, he is about to marry a wonderful "little girl" and insists that this proves there is someone to love everyone.

A few days later, there is an article in the newspaper about Newt's fiancée. Zinka is a famous Ukrainian dancer, a midget with only one name. She falls in love with Newt and asks for political asylum in the U.S. She and Newt disappear. A week later, Zinka returns to the Russian Embassy, pleading for repatriation. Americans are too materialistic, and she wants to go home. The newspaper also reveals that Zinka is actually forty-two, although she has been posing as a twenty-three-year-old.

## Chapters 5-8 Analysis

Dr. Hoenikker is portrayed as a stereotypically brilliant, cold, reclusive and impractical "absent-minded professor." The portrait of him idly playing while thousands are roasted alive with his latest invention paints him as especially remote and dispassionate. Scientists are depicted in the novel as coldly inventing the agents of humanity's destruction, with no regard for the consequences. The revelations about the Hoenikker children add depth to their characters, although John has not met any of them in person yet. The coldest member of the family seems to be the deceased Dr. Hoenikker, who is depicted as less than human.



Frank's behavior in staging bug fights foreshadows his actions in inciting human wars. The action is also symbolic on two levels. First, it suggests that scientists act the same way, producing the weapons and conditions for war and then idly standing back to watch the results. Second, the scene implies that the gods themselves stage bug fights among men for their own amusement.

The novel, set in the midst of the U.S. cold war with Russia, dramatizes the political and ideological differences between the two superpowers. Although religion is forbidden in Russia, Americans are depicted as more arrogant and materialistic than people in the USSR.





# Chapters 9-18

## Chapters 9-18 Summary

A year later, John's work takes him to Dr. Hoenikker's hometown of Ilium, New York. There he encounters the patriarch's supervisor, Dr. Breed. The man calls Dr. Hoenikker an "old man" and his family "three peculiar children." He says that Dr. Hoenikker was a force of nature that no one could control.

In Ilium, John happens to encounter two former high school classmates of Franklin Hoenikker's, a bartender and a hooker. Frank was not a member of any clubs or groups. They confide that Frank was a secretive, reclusive boy whose only interest was in building models. His nickname at school was Secret Agent X-9, as he always seemed engaged in clandestine business.

Dr. Hoenikker was supposed to be the commencement speaker for Frank's class, but he never showed up. Instead, Dr. Breed arrived at the last minute. As far as the hooker can remember, he suggested that more of the students should study science. He claimed that science would overcome superstition and that superstition causes most of the world's current problems. Dr. Breed claims that someday science will uncover the basic secret of life. The bartender chimes in that he read in the paper a few days ago that the secret has been discovered. He is vague on the details, but he believes that it has something to do with protein.

An older bartender joins the conversation. He remembers the day they dropped "Dr. Hoenikker's" bomb on Hiroshima. The bar was Navaho themed back then. A bum arrived and demanded a free drink, claiming that the end of the world was at hand. The bartender complied, giving the man a concoction of crime de menthe in a fresh pineapple, topped with whipped cream and a cherry. Dr. Breed's son arrived and proceeded to become drunk. He said that anything a scientist worked on was sure to become a weapon. He refused to work at the Research Laboratory anymore, to help politicians with wars.

The bartender repeats a rumor that Dr. Breed was in love with Dr. Hoenikker's wife, Emily, and is the true father of the three children. On the way to the laboratory, Dr. Breed reports that Ilium used to be a jumping-off point for the western expansion of settlers into Indian lands. Dr. Breed points out that at one time, criminals were hanged in the very spot where the Research Laboratory is now located. He marvels over the most vicious killer, a man who killed twenty-six people without showing any remorse.

Traffic is heavy as over 30,000 people try to reach jobs at the General Forge and Foundry Company, home of the Research Laboratory. Dr. Breed recounts a story of the day that Dr. Hoenikker became impatient with traffic. He abandoned his Marmon car in the middle of the street and walked to work. The police found the auto with a cigar



burning in the ashtray and fresh flowers in the vases. When they called the doctor, he told them to keep the car. Later, Mrs. Hoenikker retrieved it from the auto impound.

John asks if he can use the story in his book, and Dr. Breed says yes, but not to include the remaining details. Mrs. Hoenikker was not used to driving the unwieldy car and had an accident in it. Her pelvis was crushed in the wreck. Although she recovered, this was the injury that ultimately caused her death when Newton was born.

On the way into the laboratory, Dr. Breed and John encounter Miss Pefko, secretary to a surface chemist. She has no idea what projects the scientist is working on. Like all people, she hates scientists and believes that they think too much. Dr. Breed, with his Top Secret badge, escorts John past the security guards. He assures Miss Pefko that if she asks, the scientist she works for will be happy to explain his projects to her. Miss Pefko insists that to do so, he will have to start with kindergarten. She views science as magic. When Dr. Breed assures her that science is the antithesis of magic, she cannot understand the word.

In Dr. Breed's office, his own secretary is hanging a banner that says "Peace on Earth, Good Will Towards Men." She assures the administrator that she has purchased the chocolate bars, his annual gift to the typing pool that is referred to as the "Girl Pool."

Dr. Breed correctly accuses John of not liking scientists. He accuses the freelance writer of portraying them as heartless, narrow and inhumane, without conscience. Dr. Breed argues that scientists instead provide people with power in the form of pure truth.

## Chapters 9-18 Analysis

A major argument in the novel is that humans, given free reign, are inherently greedy and destructive, and Americans are especially so. Scientists are depicted as people without moral scruples. The author suggests that they should be controlled, lest their random inventions unleash horror on the world. Breed's claim that superstition causes most of the world's problems is ironic. In fact, on the eve of a nuclear holocaust, science is clearly at fault. More specifically, the dispassionate and unfeeling application of science without regard to consequences produces ruin.

The irony continues in the discussion of the basic secret of life. The author clearly thinks that the true secret of life involves philosophy and intangibles like art, truth and justice, not simply protein.

The author suggests that common people such as the older bartender share the blame for mankind's destruction with scientists. While cataclysmic events occur, they choose to be oblivious. Their only reaction is to concoct elaborate cocktails to mark the occasion. The opinions expressed by Dr. Breed's son accurately reflect the author's. Interestingly, neither man condemns the politicians for waging wars - simply the scientists for making weapons that are more effective.



Irony is present in Dr. Breed's description of Ilium's history. First, the area was a staging ground for an invasion that ultimately cost thousands of Native Americans their land and livelihood. Second, the doctor marvels over a man who killed twenty-six people, while accepting matter-of-factly a bomb that killed 80,000 people immediately and another 60,000 from painful radiation sickness over the next months. The chapter title suggests that the human race has reached a new embarkation point from which unsurpassed evil can be created.

The story of the abandoned car, coupled with a previous incident where Dr. Hoenikker tipped his wife for serving breakfast on the morning he received his Nobel Prize, illustrates his complete lack of concern for other humans. This apathy extends even to family members that he is supposedly close to. Vonnegut uses this device to contrast the callous killing of thousands of humans, which many of us have come to accept, with normal, considerate human behavior. The author's actual criticism of scientists is not that they think too much, but that they feel too little compassion for their fellow man. In doing so, they neglect to consider the destructive consequences of their inventions.

Miss Pefko is utterly ignorant of even the simplest scientific principles. She is barely literate and cannot even understand Dr. Breed when he discusses non-scientific topics. This attitude, the author suggests, is common among ordinary people, who prefer not to think too hard about science. John clearly believes that pure truth is to be found in literature, emotion or words, but not necessarily in scientific research.

Vonnegut perhaps unintentionally illuminates 1960s attitudes towards women in Chapters 16 and 17. Miss Pefko is dim and barely educated. She knows little and prefers to believe in magic. The "Girl Pool" is similarly simple-minded and relentlessly cheerful. The secretary's banner touting universal peace is highly ironic, since she is erecting it in an elaborate munitions factory. Without the support of these ignorant, helpful people, devastation such as that at Hiroshima would not be possible. Thus far, in the novel, the responsibility for Hiroshima is placed squarely on scientists. Only as the narrative moves into the adventure involving Ice-nine does Vonnegut begin to suggest that even ordinary people have a limitless capacity for greed and destruction.



# Chapters 19-27

## Chapters 19-27 Summary

Dr. Breed explains that scientists, whom he characterizes as "playful," often work on projects suggested by admirals and generals. For example, Dr. Hoenikker was working on a project to eliminate mud suggested by a Marine general. The Marines have been slogging around in mud for 200 years. The general further suggested that Dr. Hoenikker invent a tiny pill or capsule to eliminate it, because they were tired of carrying heavy equipment. Dr. Hoenikker was intrigued by this puzzle and conceived of one microscopic grain to solve the problem.

John expresses doubt that any tiny molecule could solve the mud problem. Dr. Breed disagrees. He explains that materials can crystallize in one of many different ways. He suggests that John visualize the different patterns that cannonballs could be stacked in front of a courthouse. These different patterns, or different crystals of the same material, have different properties. Since the structure of the bottom layer of crystals determines the entire composition, even a tiny seed of a new crystal is enough to transform the entire substance.

Dr. Breed goes on to explain that there might be several types of a common substance, such as ice. If we think of ice cubes as *Ice-one*, different seeds would produce different crystalline structures, which could be named *Ice-two*, *Ice-three*, etc. Eventually, one might be found that would make water solid at 100 degrees, or even 130 degrees. Such a compound would render water solid at room temperature and eliminate all mud.

Outside the office, the Girl Pool carolers arrive. They sing beautifully, especially the line from "O Little Town of Bethlehem": "The hopes and fears of all the years are here with us tonight." After passing out chocolate bars to the girl carolers, Dr. Breed returns to discussing war.

A single seed of *Ice-nine*, he explains, would make all the mud on a shore solid. All the Marine's Howitzers and tanks would be freed from ooze. Of course, Dr. Breed insists, all this discussion of *Ice-nine* is fictitious. It just illustrates the novelty with which Dr. Hoenikker approached new problems. Dr. Hoenikker died shortly after this problem was proposed by the Marine general. At any rate, pure research scientists work on problems that interest them, not on practical problems posed by others.

John is intrigued by *Ice-nine*. He wonders if it would not continue to spread. Dr. Breed admits that it would, turning all the rivers and streams solid. When John presses, Dr. Breed admits that even falling rain would become solid as soon as it contacted the earth, and *Ice-nine* would spell the end of the world. Dr. Breed becomes angry at the questions and calls John a yellow journalist.



Despite Dr. Breed's protestations, Ice-nine did exist. It was the last gift of Felix Hoenikker. There are no records of its creation. The blue-white chip of Ice-nine has a melting point of 114 degrees Fahrenheit. Dr. Hoenikker put the chip into a bottle and put the bottle in his pocket. Then he left to enjoy Christmas at Cape Cod with his children. After Dr. Hoenikker died on Christmas Eve, his children divided the Ice-nine amongst themselves.

In Bokononism, a *Wampeter* is the pivot of a karass, like the hub of a wheel. Anything can serve as a Wampeter. Usually karasses have two Wampeters, one waxing and one waning. John is almost certain that at this time, the waxing Wampeter of his karass was Ice-nine.

Offended by John's questions, Dr. Breed instructs his secretary to show the man out. Miss Faust gives the journalist a tour of the facility on the way. John asks her about Dr. Hoenikker. Miss Faust says the man was unknowable. He did not talk about his family or love. The only thing that he valued was the truth. Miss Faust wonders how that could possibly be enough for anyone.

During one conversation with Miss Faust, Dr. Hoenikker challenged her to name one thing which was absolutely true. She replied that God is Love. Dr. Hoenikker challenged her. What is God? What does she mean by Love? Miss Faust's faith, however, remains unshaken.

Miss Faust leads John to Dr. Hoenikker's lab, a sacred room in the otherwise busy research facility. The workroom has been preserved just as the doctor left it. Toys are strewn everywhere, including a broken kite, rubber bands and a toy gyroscope. There is one photograph displayed. It is not of Dr. Hoenikker's children or a sweetheart. Instead, it shows a war memorial in a small town. Miss Faust explains that Dr. Hoenikker loved photos of cannonballs stacked in different ways. She ventures that sometimes the doctor was so smart that she thought he was from Mars.

## Chapters 19-27 Analysis

Humor is a hallmark of *Cat's Cradle* and of much of Vonnegut's work. The characterization of the U.S. Marines as tired of slogging through mud carrying heavy equipment is hilarious. The obvious solution - to quit waging war - is completely overlooked by both the general and the scientist. This passage also suggests that politicians and generals are unable to recognize that the solutions of trivial problems may have far-reaching consequences, even the destruction of the entire planet.

This can be considered a major thesis of *Cat's Cradle*: that if ordinary people don't take an interest and exert authority, politicians, scientists and generals will destroy the world. This is an astute analysis of the state of the world in 1968 and a reasonable assessment of the problems of the current era.

Dr. Breed's cannonball metaphor is especially apt. It expresses the latent destructiveness of Ice-nine and foreshadows the devastation the compound will cause.



The author effectively contrasts the joy and hopes for peace and goodwill of the traditional Christmas celebration with the murderous and destructive actions of current Christians. This final line suggests that humanity's ultimate destiny is self-destruction, rather than peace and kindness.

Vonnegut invents his own line for the traditional Christmas hymn, which actually goes: "The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight." The traditional lyrics suggest that Christianity is the salvation of mankind. This version suggests that science, or perhaps nuclear power, represents both mankind's greatest hope and worst nightmare. An alternate reading of the text would be that women are inherently less warlike and aggressive than men and that females represent the best hope of current society.

Dr. Breed's casual switching from Christmas carols extolling peace on earth to talk of war demonstrates the ineffectiveness of Christianity to control man's destructive impulses. The doctor is unable to understand the moral consequences of the innovation he is discussing. He sees nothing problematic about designing better and better ways to kill people. Such lack of vision implies an absence of morality in scientists and perhaps in mankind. Dr. Breed's calm admission that Ice-nine would mean the end of the world illustrates his moral depravity. The term yellow journalist, which seems picturesque today, was actually a potent allegation of treason.

There is extreme irony in Dr. Hoenikker spending a cozy holiday with his family in quaint Cape Cod while he has the seed of the entire planet's destruction in his pocket. The scientist cannot conceive, or does not care, that Ice-nine will spell the end for his children and everyone else on earth. Ice-nine is even more devastating than the nuclear bomb. Vonnegut uses the amazing substance to continue a parable about man's destructiveness and greed. Ice-nine symbolizes nuclear energy, the entire military complex and man's infinite power for destruction.

As anti-social as Dr. Hoenikker is, at least he is intelligent. The prospect of a substance as destructive as Ice-nine in the possession of the three strange Hoenikker children is truly frightening. The message is clear: once a weapon is unleashed, everyone in society has access to it, even the least intelligent and most misguided.

Bokononism is a religion that stresses fate and karma over free will and self-determination. This is an emphasis alien to many Americans, who value self-determination over everything. In many ways, Bokononism resembles Eastern religions such as Hinduism or Zen Buddhism. Yet, it is obvious that Vonnegut is using the alternative religion satirically, to lampoon both religion in general and Christianity in particular.

In saying that Dr. Hoenikker was unknowable, the author suggests that science itself is cold and heartless. Easy solutions are rejected. "Ultimate Truth," the aim of many artists and novelists, is lampooned as well. Miss Faust's narrow view, that only family matters, may be presented ironically, but it is one of the closest approximations to hope that the novel provides.



Dr. Hoenikker clearly believes in nothing. The man has spent his entire life pursuing truth, yet admits that there is not one absolute statement of truth in the universe. Truth is presented as more a matter of faith than an absolute, immutable fact.

Dr. Hoenikker's lab suggests that science is no more than the toys of excessively curious, overgrown children. The photograph of stacked cannonballs misses the whole point of the war memorial, which is the enormous and unrealistic human price paid in war. Rather than learning from past destruction, mankind is only refining it.





# Chapters 28-35

## Chapters 28-35 Summary

Escorting John out, Miss Faust is disappointed when elevator #5 arrives. The elevator operator, Lyman Knowles, is clearly crazy. He greets the two with the phrase, "Hello, fellow anthropoids and lily pads and paddlewheels." Knowles has been told by a visitor that the architecture of the elevator is Mayan. Therefore, he reasons, he must be mayonnaise. Mr. Knowles suggests that Dr. Hoenikker is not dead, merely in another dimension. He says that the doctor's three children are full of rabies.

John decides to take a photo of Dr. Hoenikker's tomb, as the cover for his projected book. The weather is gray and sleeting as he reaches the cemetery. He finds the Hoenikker plot, with a perfect monument to the doctor. It is an alabaster phallus twenty feet high and three feet thick. John is thrilled until he brushes the sleet away to reveal the word "Mother" engraved on the monument. The monument is engraved with childish, saccharine poems penned by the two older Hoenikker children and a handprint of baby Newt. Nearby John finds Dr. Hoenikker's actual tombstone, a marble cube forty centimeters square engraved "Father."

Returning from the cemetery, John asks the taxi driver to stop at a monument shop nearby. There, he sees a beautifully carved stone angel monument, at least 100 years old. The shop owner remarks that his grandfather carved a German family's name into it. The family was on their way to Indiana and left without paying for the tombstone. The storeowner opines that by now the family's name has probably been Americanized. John disagrees with him. The last name is his own, which John sees as another sign of fate.

## Chapters 28-35 Analysis

Knowles's presence suggests that language, and by extension, literature, is not the answer to the meaning of life, either. Despite the man's creativity and original thinking, Miss Faust clearly hates him. She believes that just the act of questioning accepted "truths" is an act of insanity. Knowles's statements are nevertheless the most accurate and perceptive that the research laboratory offers.

The marble monolith is considered a fitting tribute to the father of the nuclear bomb because war, and especially the explosive, destructive power of nuclear weapons, is regarded as exclusively male. Some people during the 1960s theorized that if women were given more power, war and nuclear weapons would not exist.

The contrast in the monument's size clearly indicates that despite their father's brilliance and Nobel Prize, the Hoenikker children were much more attached to their mother. The doctor's monument, approximately ten inches on a side, is tiny by comparison. This suggests the relative importance of emotion and intellect in the average person's life. It





may also serve as commentary on the relative impact of religion and science, with Mrs. Hoenikker's tombstone symbolizing a monument to religion and Dr. Hoenikker's symbolizing a monument to science. The angel tombstone foreshadows John's death and the end of all life on earth. It implies that God seeks vengeance on humans for unleashing the nuclear bomb.



# Chapters 36-46

## Chapters 36-46 Summary

John returns to find his apartment trashed by Sherman Krebs. Krebs is an acquaintance John allowed to use the apartment in his absence. The man is a poet and the National Chairman of Poets and Painters for Immediate Nuclear War. The poet has murdered John's cat, hanging a sign that says "meow" around the animal's dead neck. Krebs has also written poetry in John's absence - in excrement on the kitchen floor.

One Sunday, John accidentally discovers where the fugitive Franklin Hoenikker is. In a special supplement to the Sunday *New York Times* paid for by a banana republic, John discovers a photograph of Frank. He is identified as the son of the Nobel Prize winner and the current Minister of Science and Progress in the Republic of San Lorenzo.

San Lorenzo is a small island in the Caribbean, presided over by Miguel "Papa" Monzano, a gorilla-like man in his late seventies. Papa Monzano's adopted daughter Mona Aamons Monzano is featured on the cover of the supplement. She is an indescribably beautiful girl of mixed race, with chocolate skin and blond hair.

One article in the supplement, obviously ghostwritten, purports to be an essay by Frank Hoenikker about his arrival on the island. Adrift alone on a Chris Craft from Cuba, surrounded by sharks and barracuda, Frank lifted his eyes to the horizon. There he sighted Mount McCabe, the highest point on the island. Frank at first took the mountain to be the mythical land of Fata Morgana, promising perfect happiness. Realizing it was real, Frank stepped ashore. He carried a vial of Ice-nine in a thermos jug with him.

Frank was immediately jailed because he had no passport. When Papa Monzano discovered how famous Frank's father was, he was released. Since then, according to the essay, Frank's opportunities - and those of San Lorenzo - have been limitless.

As is supposed to happen according to Bokononism, John is assigned a magazine article on San Lorenzo. The article is about Julian Castle, a wealthy American sugar merchant who devoted his first forty years to debauchery and spending money. Now sixty years old, Castle has pursued philanthropy for the last twenty years, with all the zest that he previously devoted to being a playboy. Julian Castle has one son from his five marriages, Philip Castle. He is the owner and manager of the only hotel in San Lorenzo, the new Casa Mona.

As fate would have it, on the plane to San Lorenzo John's seatmates are Horlick Minton and his wife Claire. Minton is the new American ambassador to the Republic of San Lorenzo. The couple is two gentle, gray-haired, frail lovebirds. John sees them as a perfect example of the *duprass* - a karass consisting of only two members. Bokonon teaches that both members of a duprass always die within one week. In the case of the Mintons, their deaths will occur at the same second.



At the bar in the rear of the plane, John encounters H. Lowe Crosby of Evanston, Illinois, the owner of a bicycle factory in Chicago. Crosby and his wife Hazel are overweight Midwesterners in their fifties. Crosby plans to move his factory to San Lorenzo where he can exploit the impoverished local labor pool. Crosby rails against the impractical union rules and heavy taxes that make business impossible in the U.S. He argues that if his factory did accidentally produce a bicycle, it would be seized for back taxes and sent to a blind man in Afghanistan. He has been assured by Papa Monzano that everyone in San Lorenzo speaks English and is Christian. Crosby approves of the severe laws of San Lorenzo. Even the pettiest crimes are punished by a public execution, being impaled on a gigantic iron hook in the middle of the marketplace.

Mrs. Crosby is from Indiana. She insists that wherever you go in the world, Hoosiers are in charge of everything. When she learns that John is originally from Indiana, she insists that he call her "Mom." From the Crosbys, John learns that Ambassador Minton was fired from the State Department for being soft on communists. In reality, Mrs. Minton wrote a letter to the editor of a newspaper suggesting that people from Pakistan are as proud of their cultural and ethnic group as Americans. Mr. Crosby was fired within twelve hours because his wife suggested that Americans are not universally loved abroad.

Ambassador Minton confides to John that Frank Hoenikker is no longer a fugitive from justice in the U.S. By serving in the military of another country, Hoenikker has automatically forfeited his U.S. citizenship. The ambassador is busy reading a rare manuscript on the history of San Lorenzo written by Philip Castle.

## Chapters 36-46 Analysis

Krebbs's society, the Poets and Painters for Immediate Nuclear War, is highly satirical. Clearly, no such organization exists, while many anti-war movements do. The author indirectly poses the question of why so many anti-war movements are necessary. The answer seems to lie in mankind's innate aggression, violence, greed and war-like propensities.

Vonnegut carries the satire further with Krebs's cruelty, killing John's cat and writing poetry in excrement on the kitchen floor. These obviously meaningless and unfulfilling actions are a sardonic comment on nihilism, the philosophy that nothing in life really matters and all life is pointless. This rejection of nihilism suggests the absurdity of all existence as too complex for humans to appreciate, let alone understand. Ultimately, even nihilism fails to be satisfactory.

Mr. Crosby perfectly illustrates man's innate greed. He refuses to provide decent working conditions in his factory and resents the intrusion of the government and unions in his exploitation of workers.



# Chapters 47-57

## Chapters 47-57 Summary

John is so absorbed reading the history of San Lorenzo that he does not notice the passengers getting on the plane in Puerto Rico, including a horse-faced woman and a midget. He is especially intrigued by the description of Bokonon's theory of dynamic tension. The philosopher believes that strong societies are created by pitting good and evil against each other and maintaining a high level of tension between them. Under this theory, evil is as necessary as good for the development of a healthy society. This theory is adapted from the theory of isometric exercise invented by bodybuilder Charles Atlas.

John learns that Bokonon is a Negro man, born Lionel Boyd Johnson on the island of Tobago and raised as an Episcopalian. After many adventures, Bokonon was shipwrecked on San Lorenzo. Bokonon and his companion, Corporal Earl McCabe, determined to improve the lot of the residents of the impoverished island. The islanders were unable to pronounce Johnson's name and called him Bokonon instead.

When Johnson and McCabe arrived, all of the land on the island belonged to the Castle Sugar Company or the Roman Catholic Church. Castle Sugar paid supervisors low wages to torture and overwork the employees, who were paid almost nothing. Despite the low wages, the soil of San Lorenzo is so poor that the company barely broke even. The most imposing structure on the island was the cathedral, considered one of the finest in the world. It was dynamited in 1923.

One of Bokonon's promises is that the island's total income will be divided amongst its many occupants. The first and only time this is attempted, each person receives less than \$7. Despite this, Bokonon is revered by the residents of San Lorenzo. The local residents soon found his lifeboat and painted it gold. The president of San Lorenzo sleeps in the boat. It is said that the golden boat will sail again when the end of the world is near.

Mrs. Crosby informs John that she has located two more Hoosiers. They are Angela Hoenikker Connors and Newton Hoenikker - the horse-faced platinum blonde woman and the midget. Newt is tiny but completely proportional in build. They are traveling to San Lorenzo to attend Frank's wedding to Mona Aamons Monzano. Angela reveals that Dr. Hoenikker died peacefully at the Cape Cod cottage during a remarkable fall of warm snow, like orange blossoms.

Besotted, John looks up Mona Aamons Monzano in the index of his book. Claire Minton reveals that she is a professional indexer. She warns John never to index his own book. The index of the history reveals that the author is self-indulgent, arrogant and a homosexual, according to Claire.



## Chapters 47-57 Analysis

The true end of the world is foreshadowed in the revelation that vials of Ice-nine are in Newt's and Angela's luggage. In a parallel with nuclear war, there is no suspense in the novel regarding the final result. The world will end, it is just a matter of when, how and who will be the agent.

Mrs. Minton's remarks on an author indexing his own work are ironic. In reality, Vonnegut is commenting on the impossibility for authors of hiding their true feelings in their writings. The true message is not "never index your own book" but "never write a book if you want to hide your inner thoughts."

Within the Bokonon belief system, both good and evil are necessary. The emphasis on the lies of Bokononism and the playful nature of the marijuana-fueled calypso songs is a critique of traditional religion. This is borne out again when the Roman Catholic Church is compared to the greedy and exploitative Castle Sugar Company.



# Chapters 58-68

## Chapters 58-68 Summary

In the San Lorenzo customs shed, there is a large wanted poster featuring Bokonon. A reward of 10,000 corporals - the local currency - is offered. Foot play, the Bokonon practice of mingling souls by two people touching the bottoms of their feet together, is punishable by death on the hook. The local residents are poorly dressed, malnourished, diseased and often maimed.

A limousine pulls up to this disheartening scene. Papa Monzano, Frank and Mona alight while the San Lorenzo national anthem plays. Papa Monzano is an ancient man with a chrome .45-caliber revolver at his hip. Major General Frank Hoenikker acts as his bodyguard. The lovely Mona plays the xylophone with heartbreaking beauty.

Papa invites everyone to a special ceremony the following day. The celebration commemorates San Lorenzo's 100 Martyrs to Democracy. In response to John's questions, Frank tells him that San Lorenzo declared war on Japan and Germany one hour after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. A force of 100 volunteers was immediately raised. The transport ship was sunk immediately outside Bolivar harbor, leaving no survivors. At the ceremony, the American ambassador will place a wreath from the president of the United States in the water.

As the tourists depart, John sees Mona provocative kneading the instep of the pilot's boot with her bare foot. Papa Monzano collapses, in obvious pain. He is clearly ailing and proclaims that Frank will be the next president of San Lorenzo.

## Chapters 58-68 Analysis

Humor is apparent in the wordplay involved in the Bokonon practice of mingling souls by touching the soles of the feet. The wealth of the leader of San Lorenzo compared to the extreme poverty of the people is further proof that man is essentially greedy and destructive. Ambassador Minton assures people of San Lorenzo that every American schoolchild knows of sacrifice of the 100 martyrs. This is ironic, since in reality no one has ever heard of San Lorenzo's grand sacrifice for the democratic way of life.

*Cat's Cradle* is a systematic debunking of all the belief systems, or illusions, that humans use in an ineffectual effort to make life meaningful. Julian Castle's experiences debunk the myth that altruism is the answer to a meaningful life. Vonnegut shows philanthropy as merely a luxury of wealthy old men seeking status. It is no more honorable or satisfying than the alcoholism and womanizing that Castle practiced when younger.



# Chapters 69-77

## Chapters 69-77 Summary

John, along with the Crosbys, arrives at the newly opened Casa Mona hotel. An artist, a white man, is creating a mosaic of Mona Aamons Monzano's face in the lobby. Talking with the man, John learns that he is Philip Castle, the author of an unpublished manuscript, a history of San Lorenzo. Philip asks if John is a drug salesman, since that is what the people of San Lorenzo really need. When John protests that he is a writer, Philip asks, "What makes you think a writer isn't a drug salesman?"

John learns that Mona and Philip were childhood sweethearts. They were both tutored by the holy man, Bokonon. Mr. Crosby is irate that the artist does not act servile towards him. He angrily reports the man to the front desk clerk and demands that he be fired. The desk clerk reluctantly admits that the "rude" artist owns the hotel.

John is shown to his luxurious room. Despite the air conditioning and fresh flowers, the room is still not fully furnished. It lacks certain amenities like sheets and toilet paper. John walks down the hall in search of a chambermaid to help him. He stumbles on two painters in a suite. The two men are sitting on the floor, the bare soles of their feet pressed against each other. They are terrified that John will turn them in and that they will be executed.

Philip Castle arrives with the needed supplies. He tells John the story of a ship that sank offshore, killing everyone on board. Only the ship's cargo of wicker furniture and the rats on board survived. When they washed ashore, some of the island's residents got new furniture and some got the bubonic plague. Philip Castle's father, who had recently founded the island's only hospital, worked around the clock for several days tending the victims. Despite his efforts, thousands died. One night, an exhausted Julian Castle shone a flashlight on the stack of bodies of plague victims. Giggling, Julian Castle told his son that someday, this would all be his.

John receives an urgent summons from Frank Hoenikker. John takes the island's only taxicab to Frank's house. It is the former home of Nestor Aamons, Mona's Finnish architect father. The house straddles a waterfall. The terrace is cantilevered over the mist of the falls, and the interior walls are of canvas. "The effect of the house was not so much to enclose as to announce that a man had been whimsically busy there."

On the terrace, Newton Hoenikker has fallen asleep while painting a picture. He is painting a vista of the falls from the terrace, a misty view overlooking the sky, sea and valley. The painting is small, black and warty, resembling a spider's web. Newt awakes and tells John it's a painting of a cat's cradle. The string game is at least 100,000 years old, according to Newt. It is nothing more than a hoax perpetuated by adults on children. It is a series of x's made of string - no cat and no cradle.



The saintly Julian Castle arrives and immediately professes himself a follower of Jesus Christ. He calls Newt's painting ugly and throws it off the terrace. Julian confesses that he no longer gets along with Papa Monzano. The philanthropist would be condemned to death by the hook if he weren't an American. This is because Julian allows the ceremony of touching feet, the *Boko-maru*, as a last rite for Bokononists at his hospital. In fact, the man confides, *Boko-maru* and aspirin are the only remedies the hospital has to offer.

## Chapters 69-77 Analysis

John and Phillip's initial conversation explores the nature of literature and art. Phillip asks if John is a pharmaceutical salesperson, because the islanders are all diseased and are desperately in need of medication. John replies that he is a writer. Phillip's response suggests that literature is a sort of opiate of the masses, meant to placate and entertain, when no real healing is available. Vonnegut's tone in discussing the immortal power of literature is light, less sarcastic than his criticisms of religion, science and other false gods.

The Bokononist theory of fate is summed up in the shipwreck, which washed new wicker furniture ashore for a few but gave many the fatal bubonic plague. This view of reality mocks both free will and traditional religious views of sin, retribution and redemption. The wicker furniture symbolizes American consumer goods and the quest for wealth, which has caused much of the world's suffering.

Frank's house is pretentious, uncomfortable and impractical. It is an empty display of wealth, bringing neither beauty nor comfort to its owner. Newt's painting reflects his own inner turmoil, instead of the beautiful waterfall. He paints a complicated, dark, tangled web that is meaningless. Newt says this is a reflection of the cat's cradle - the one game his father attempted to play with him. The hollowness of the game, which involves neither a cat nor a cradle, symbolizes the emptiness of modern life. The ultimate theme of the novel is that everything that man does to create meaning in the world is essentially a hoax. Science, religion, art, truth, literature, family, love, democracy, nationality and every other human construct is a meaningless illusion. Fate and self-determination are similarly hoaxes. Seen in this light, the novel may be considered a commentary on man's eternal search for meaning where there is none.





# Chapters 78-88

## Chapters 78-88 Summary

When Bokonon and his faithful sidekick Corporal McCabe arrived on the impoverished island of San Lorenzo, the first thing they did was kick out all the priests. Bokonon, a.k.a. Lionel Johnson, determined that truth was the enemy of the people. The truth was that they were poor, sick, malnourished and disfigured, and things were unlikely to get better. Bokonon set about creating better and better lies.

Bokonon asked McCabe to outlaw Bokononism to provide more zest, more tang, by intensifying the struggle between good and evil on the island. When he did, an unforeseen thing happened. When they arrived on the island, both Bokonon and McCabe were part good and part bad, like most people. After McCabe outlawed Bokonon, his good side began to wither away, while Bokonon's bad side shrank. Soon, McCabe was entirely evil while Bokonon was entirely good. Once that happened, McCabe actually began to kill some of Bokonon's followers. McCabe had no real incentive to capture and kill Bokonon. Without a holy man, a ruler is meaningless. The fight against Bokononism provides a distraction for the people of San Lorenzo.

Back at Frank Hoenikker's house, Angela is feeling depressed. She complains that her father only received a \$45 bonus for each patent he filed while working for General Forge and Foundry. She gets out her clarinet and plays along with jazz records. John discovers to his amazement that she is a virtuoso.

Frank calls with the news that Papa Manzano is in great pain. He is dying from cancer, which Frank refers to as his *zah-mah-ki-bo*, or inevitable destiny. John wants to leave, but Frank insists he needs to talk to him. A convoy of American-made army trucks arrives. The soldiers say they were sent to protect the next president of San Lorenzo. John protests that Frank is not there, but the soldiers have their orders.

John asks one of the servants where he can find a copy of the *Book of Bokonon*. The man protests that it is filth, and Bokonon should be killed. Then he directs John to Frank's bedside table, where he finds a well-thumbed copy.

The electricity goes off and everyone goes to bed. Suddenly, it comes back on, in the middle of the night. The noise startles everyone. John finds himself standing in the hallway, clutching his passport, wallet and watch. Angela and Newt each clutch a small thermos that John later learns contains Ice-nine.

## Chapters 78-88 Analysis

Greed and destructiveness are again identified as the most pervasive traits of Americans as Angela complains about her father's bonuses, while the residents of San Lorenzo are starving and homeless. John learns that Bokonon was banned as a way of

intensifying the conflict between good and evil. The author argues that every man is a combination of both good and bad, and that an imbalance occurs when one is predominant.

Every man on San Lorenzo seems in love with Mona Aamons Monzano including John and Philip Castle. These ill-fated romances indicate that romantic love, like religion, science and society, are just Fata Morgana, or illusions, mirages of happiness. In *Cat's Cradle*, humanity is not fated to be happy, in this world or the hereafter. Vonnegut continues to satirize every human institution. The Crosbys symbolize the false gods of business or profit, and nationality or regionalism. The Mintons symbolize the failed dreams of government and diplomacy.



# Chapters 89-99

## Chapters 89-99 Summary

Finally, Frank arrives home. He speaks in a kazoo-like voice. Perhaps to overcome this deficit, Frank's language is sprinkled with manly clichés about calling a spade a spade and riding off into the sunset. Frank offers John a job at the princely salary of \$100,000 per year. When John asks what the job is, Frank replies it is the presidency of San Lorenzo.

John protests. He thought that Frank was the next designated president of San Lorenzo. Frank replies that his definition of maturity is recognizing one's limits. Frank realizes that like his father, he is a whiz with technical things, but at a total loss in dealing with people. "he wasn't far from Bokonon in defining maturity. 'Maturity,' Bokonon tells us, 'is a bitter disappointment for which no remedy exists, unless laughter can be said to remedy anything.'" When John still demurs, Frank explains that no one else on the island will take the job. Frank promises to help John with all the technical matters pertaining to the governance of the island.

John has decided to accept the presidency as his fate, when Frank suggests that he ask Mona to marry him. John protests again, but Frank insists. Bokonon has written that Mona will marry the next president of San Lorenzo. All John has to do is ask her. Mona appears, beautiful in a diaphanous gown. John stutters awkwardly. Mona suggests that they share souls by pressing the soles of their feet together. It is the most transcendent experience that John has ever had. Afterwards, John asks Mona to marry him, and she agrees, if he will convert to the Bokononist religion. John gladly acquiesces.

Frank suggests that John seek Papa Monzano's blessing on his succession before he dies. Traveling to the low, black castle, they pass a huge iron impaling hook reserved for Bokonon. John resolves to make Bokononism legal at the first opportunity.

Papa Manzano is in terrible pain, waiting for the release of death. He says it does not matter who is president, but urges John to kill Bokonon. The president refuses Christian rites and asks for someone to perform the Bokononist last rite ceremony. No one is willing to admit that they are a Bokononist in front of the president. Finally, his doctor proclaims that all religions are lies and gets into the golden lifeboat bed with the president to perform the ceremony.

## Chapters 89-99 Analysis

These chapters focus primarily on exposition and plot development, rather than theme and symbolism, with the exception of the passages about Papa Monzano's final religious rites. Although Bokononism is outlawed, virtually everyone practices it, including Frank and Papa Monzano himself. There is an obvious parallel with the



recreational use of marijuana in the 1960s, which was very common, even among those who decried the use of drugs the most.

Much of the novel is devoted to contrasting traditional Christian and Bokonon views of life, as a way of satirizing military aggression, materialism, American culture and organized religion. Bokonon is untraditional in that its hymns are calypso tunes about drunkards and taking drugs, especially smoking marijuana. This approach satirizes traditional American values, which make a religion out of self-determination and champion greed and militarism while paying lip service to equality and peace. While the approach may be unconventional, many of Bokonon's teachings are far closer to the original intent of Christianity's message of love and acceptance than many modern churches' doctrines.



# Chapters 100-106

## Chapters 100-106 Summary

Outside, it is now day. Frank plans to repair the power plant before the ceremony and air show honoring the 100 Martyrs. After the air show, Frank will announce John's elevation to the presidency, and John will make a speech. There are never elections in San Lorenzo.

As John writes his speech, he calls for the help of God and the people of San Lorenzo. He imagines that he will abolish religious intolerance. Then he realizes that if he were to unite good and evil, people would have enough food, decent houses, schools and medical care. Since he can offer none of those things, John decides that Bokonomism must remain illegal for a bit longer.

The Mintons, Crosbys, Castles and Hoenikkers arrive for the memorial ceremony along with various officials. No one is aware of John's new status yet. A feast of native foods has been laid out on the castle's parapet. After the speeches, the entire San Lorenzo air force of six planes will bomb targets in the nearby sea.

John talks with Philip Castle. The two agree that if writers went on strike, millions of people would surely die. John says that he believes when a man becomes a writer, he "takes on a sacred obligation to produce beauty and enlightenment and comfort at top speed."

John tastes an albatross canapy and becomes violently ill. Running for the bathroom, he encounters the doctor, who is distraught. Papa Manzano has swallowed whatever is in the vial around his neck and immediately turned into cement. John does not realize it yet, but Monzano is the first man to die of Ice-nine. Before swallowing the fatal crystal, Manzano uttered the traditional Bokonomist words said before suicide, "Now I will destroy the whole world."

The doctor shows the body to John. It is, indeed, as hard and hollow-sounding as cement. The doctor brushes his hands over the dead man's lips and goes to the basin to wash his hands. As soon as the doctor thrusts his hands into the water, it turns solid. He lifts the mass out of the basin in a single block. He touches his tongue to the blue-white mass. Immediately, he freezes solid and falls to the floor, dead.

## Chapters 100-106 Analysis

Vonnegut satirizes literature when John and Phillip agree that many people would surely die if writers went on strike. Both men can easily see the irony in other people's views of religion, science and national pride. They are blind to their own quest for meaning in their work, however.



Monzano's suicide with Ice-nine raises important issues about who should have power. The most dangerous secret weapon the world possesses has fallen into the hands of an ancient, infirm semi-invalid who is greedy and self-indulgent. Worse yet, the man is suicidal from extreme pain and terminally ill. The parallel with nuclear weapons is apparent. The implication is that only the most corrupt and cynical are likely to gain enough power to control weapons that could destroy the world. The fear that a single suicidal old man could launch an attack, which would destroy the entire world, was central to the nuclear era.

Vonnegut's work also refers to an idea that was first voiced in the late 1960s, that while young men fight wars, it is old men who cause them. Since women were prohibited from serving in many positions in the military, including combat, war was considered exclusively a male occupation. Many people believed that if women were given more power, war would be eliminated.



# Chapters 107-113

## Chapters 107-113 Summary

John drags all three Hoenikkers into the death chamber to see what they have done. Newt throws up on the floor. He exclaims that it is just like the dog. On the fateful Christmas Eve when Dr. Hoenikker died, the boys were walking along the beach. A black Labrador retriever followed them into the house. Inside, Dr. Hoenikker had obviously been experimenting with his new invention. There were pots and pans full of water and solid Ice-nine all over the kitchen. The doctor was resting in his favorite wicker chair in the living room.

Following the boys in, the dog licked the pan full of Ice-nine. He immediately froze, turning cement-like. The children realized that their father had invented something even more deadly than the hydrogen bomb. Running to tell him, they discovered Dr. Hoenikker dead in the living room. Without discussing it, the three chipped apart the Ice-nine with an ice pick and put it in 3 mason jars with tweezers.

Each sibling took a supply of Ice-nine. Angela ridiculed Frank for giving his Ice-nine to Papa Monzano, a corrupt, suicidal dictator. Frank replies that he simply used his, as Angela used hers to capture a handsome husband. John realizes that the U.S. government undoubtedly has a sample of the potent weapon, from Angela's husband. Newt confides that Zinka stole part of his sample, so the USSR also has the secret weapon.

As the four talk, they clean up the Ice-nine with brooms, rubber gloves and a blowtorch. All that is left to dispose of is the bodies. They have the soldiers make a funeral pyre ready, without telling them why.

## Chapters 107-113 Analysis

Dr. Hoenikker's death was apparently of a heart attack or other unspecified natural causes, since Papa Monzano's death is referred to as the first from Ice-nine. Papa Monzano's final words are ironic, since the reader is aware that he has, in fact, destroyed almost all life on Earth with his suicide.

Determining whether Monzano was so self-absorbed that he saw no point in anyone living after his own death is impossible. Another possible explanation would be that he was unaware of the consequences of using Ice-nine, which seems unlikely. Alternatively, he might simply have been driven mad with pain. Regardless of Monzano's motives, Vonnegut makes a very convincing argument that eventually a similar "accident" is likely to occur with a nuclear weapon.



# Chapters 114-127

## Chapters 114-127 Summary

At the memorial ceremony, Ambassador Minton makes a moving, dignified speech about the futility of war before dropping the wreath into the water. The ambassador, who lost his own son in World War II, protests that all the men who die in wars are just children.

John is still sick and moves to the edge of the parapet to throw up. The air show has begun. One of the decrepit bombers bursts into flame. All of its bombs explode, shaking the ground. One tower of the castle collapses into the sea. Below him, John can see the golden boat with Monzano's body dropping into the ocean.

A crack opens on the parapet and quickly turns into a chasm. Mona calmly steps on John's side, along with the Castles and the Hoenikkers. The ambassador and his wife are trapped on the other side. They hold hands and face the sea together.

Everyone scatters. John leads Mona deep under the castle, where Papa Monzano has built a bomb shelter. It is stocked with water, a stationary bike that runs the ventilation fan, food, liquor, a radio, candles and the *Books of Bokonon*. For days, tornadoes rattle the manhole cover over the bomb shelter. If anyone else in the world is alive, they are not broadcasting on the radio. John forces Mona to have sex with him. Afterwards, she reminds him that it would be very sad to have a baby in these circumstances.

On the fourth day, the weather stabilizes. They wait three more days. Then, John and Mona fill their canteens with water and venture outside. Everything is covered with blue-white frost. There is no life, not even plants, insects or rats. In a natural depression atop Mount McCabe, thousands of residents have committed suicide by touching the frost, and touching their finger to their lips. A written record shows that the crowd captured Bokonon and demanded answers from him. He told them God was tired of man, and was trying to kill him. Bokonon urged all his followers to commit suicide.

The mass suicides make John sad, but Mona protests. She points out that death has solved so many problems, for so many people. She asks John if he honestly wishes any of them were alive. When he takes too long to answer, Mona laughs. She calmly touches the blue-white frost, puts her finger in her mouth and dies.

The Crosbys and Newt find John crying over Mona. They take him back to Frank's house under the waterfall, which is an igloo of sorts now. Mrs. Crosby compares them to the Swiss Family Robinson. She is perfectly happy because they have plenty of food to eat and can melt Ice-nine for water. Although all the plant and animal life is dead, the cows, pigs and chickens are perfectly preserved until the survivors are ready to eat them. There are tons of canned goods on the island, as well. All the germs seem to have been killed, because their little band all stays healthy.





Hazel Crosby begins to sew an American flag. No one has the heart to tell her that the red is really peach, the blue is green and her stars are six-pointed stars of David. Hazel is determined that when the flag is finished, John will plant it at the top of Mount McCabe. John spends his time writing this book, the final history of mankind.

Frank rigs up a transmitter that constantly sends SOS signals, in case there are other survivors anywhere in the world to hear. He finds a few living ants and sets up an ant farm. The ants have defeated Ice-nine with cooperation. A large cluster of ants will surround a small chip of Ice-nine, generating enough heat to create a few drops of liquid water. Each time they repeat this procedure, half of the ants die. The other half cannibalizes their corpses and continues to live. Frank wonders aloud who taught the ants to survive Ice-nine.

John and Newt agree that they have lost all sexual urges. The only woman left is Hazel Crosby, who is far past childbearing age. John thinks longingly of Angela Hoenikker, who blithely picked up her clarinet to play one day, not caring if it was tainted with Ice-nine or not. Julian and Phillip Castle died trying to make it to the hospital, to help the people there. John thinks that both were fine ways to die.

Driving Newt into Bolivar to forage for oil paints, John passes an elderly Negro man on the side of the road. He is amazed and backs up. It is Bokonon, sitting on a rock by the side of the road, wrapped in a bedspread from the Casa Mona.

The prophet confides that he is writing the end to the *Book of Bokonon*. He gives the final page to John. It says, "If I were a young 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."

## Chapters 114-127 Analysis

There is strong irony apparent in the juxtaposition of the memorial service with the imminent release of a secret weapon that will destroy all life on earth. Obviously, as much as man bemoans the loss of young lives in war, mankind is unable to avoid making the same mistakes repeatedly. Vonnegut devotedly believes that aggression, violence, greed and especially the inevitability of war are humankind's defining characteristics. The theme of the novel could be distilled into one statement: unlike ants, humans never learned to cooperate.

Although Vonnegut satirizes everything, his comments on art, especially literature, are less caustic than most. John spends his last days penning a history of the end of the world, although not the book he first intended. He sees this as somehow more meaningful than Hazel Crosby's construction of a flag replica. Even this is a futile gesture, as there will soon be no one to read the history. Bokonon's final act is creating literature as well, although his ultimate purpose is mocking God.



# Characters

## John

Although John ridicules materialistic and pompous Americans throughout the novel, he shares in privilege himself, as a Cornell graduate and fraternity member. John is not wealthy at this point, but his penury is voluntary, because he chooses the life of a freelance writer.

John is working on a novel called *The Day the World Ended*, about Aug. 6, 1945. He is detailing the events surrounding the U.S. dropping a nuclear bomb on the Japanese city of Hiroshima. John's non-fiction work brings him in contact with the Hoenikker family and eventually takes him to San Lorenzo, where he becomes a convert to the Bokonon religion.

John is originally from Indiana, although he currently lives in Chicago. Although John's last name is never specified in the novel, it is carved on the base of a 100-year-old angel tombstone that he discovers in Ilium, New York. The name is of German extraction and unusual enough that Dr. Breed's brother opines that the family probably changed it when they moved to Indiana. The implication is that John's last name is Vonnegut.

## Franklin Hoenikker

Frank Hoenikker is the older of the two brothers. Frank's passion during high school is building models, especially elaborate layouts for model trains. The boy has no friends and does not date. Instead, Frank spends all his time working at a local hobby shop and spends all his money buying modeling supplies. The adolescent does have a secret. He is carrying on a clandestine affair with the storeowner's wife.

The hobby shop is a front for a Mafia car theft operation. Although Frank is innocent, he is caught up in the car theft ring and becomes a fugitive from the FBI, the police and the Treasury Department. His family assumes that Frank has been killed by the Mafia. In fact, he has been sent to Cuba with a shipment of cars. From there, Frank mysteriously travels to the Caribbean island of San Lorenzo.

In San Lorenzo, Frank is imprisoned because he has no passport. Once the president of the island country learns that Frank is the son of a Nobel Prize winner, he is released and rewarded with the position of Minister of Science and Progress. When John arrives in San Lorenzo, Frank is the heir apparent to the ailing President Monzano and engaged to the president's beautiful daughter Mona.



## Newton Hoenikker

Newt Hoenikker is a midget, well proportioned but just four feet tall. His mother died giving birth to Newt. When he is introduced into the novel, he has just flunked out of Cornell's pre-med program. Newt falls in love with a beautiful midget dancer, a Russian citizen named Zinka. Pretending to be in love with Newt, she defects to the U.S. The two enjoy a few weeks of bliss in Cape Cod before Zinka - who is really forty-two, not twenty-three - steals a sample of Ice-nine from Newt and goes back to Russia.

Newt's avocation is oil painting, but all his works resemble his interior landscape. They are dark, confused tangles that look like spider webs. Newt insists that they are cat's cradles, an ancient and meaningless children's game meant to deceive or to introduce meaning where none exists.

## Angela Hoenikker

Angela Hoenikker is a platinum-blond horse-faced woman. At six feet tall, she towers over her two brothers. Angela's mother died when the girl was a sophomore in high school. Her father insisted that Angela drop out of school to care for him and her two brothers. Angela has no friends, and her only hobby is music.

Angela's passion is playing the clarinet. John is amazed to learn that she is a gifted jazz musician, even though she has had little professional training and only plays with recordings, not other musicians. Music is so important to Angela that after the Ice-nine crisis, she picks up her clarinet and begins to blow, not caring if the instrument is contaminated. It is, and she is killed instantly.

After Angela's father's death, Angela uses the powerful Ice-nine to lure a handsome man into marrying her. He is an executive for a defense contractor. Despite their twin daughters, it is not a happy marriage. Angela's husband often comes home late, drunk, with lipstick all over him.

## Bokonon

Born Lionel Johnson, the Negro holy man known as Bokonon has led a colorful life. He was originally a British subject of Tobago, son of a wealthy family. As a young man, Johnson built a boat and sailed it to England alone, to be educated. He was soon embroiled in World War I. After the war, Johnson set sail alone again for Tobago. When he was shipwrecked and ended up in the U.S., Johnson decided that clearly his fate lay outside of Tobago. Johnson began to drift, traveling wherever and with whomever fate decreed. He had a wild series of adventures, including working with Gandhi in India.

When Johnson was finally shipwrecked on San Lorenzo with his close friend Corporal Earl McCabe, he saw how impoverished and diseased the people were. Johnson immediately threw the Roman Catholic Church out of San Lorenzo and started his own



religion. His purpose was to tell the people pretty lies to distract them from the misery of their existence. The people of San Lorenzo are unable to pronounce Johnson and start calling the former calypso singer Bokonon.

## **Dr. Felix Hoenikker**

In many ways, Dr. Hoenikker is a stereotype of a brainy scientist. He is socially inept and utterly incapable of managing the simplest details of ordinary life, like driving in traffic or remembering his lunch. Dr. Hoenikker is cold and unfeeling, choosing to stay home and play children's games alone the day the bomb is dropped on Hiroshima. When a fellow scientist remarks that the bomb is sin, Hoenikker in all seriousness inquires, "What is sin?" Hoenikker dies on Christmas Eve at his Cape Cod cottage, apparently of natural causes. Just before his death, the scientist was "playing" with Ice-nine in the kitchen.

## **Hazel Crosby**

Mrs. Crosby is the wife of a successful industrialist. She is from Indiana and proclaims that wherever they travel, they always find that the world is being run by Hoosiers. Mrs. Crosby insists that everyone call her Mom. After the complete destruction of almost every living thing on earth, she is happy because there is plenty of good food to eat. Mrs. Crosby is the only female left alive, and since she is far too old to bear children, humanity is doomed. Mrs. Crosby gives meaning to her life after the cataclysm by trying to reproduce an American flag. The flag is peach and Kelly green, instead of red and blue. The stars are six-pointed stars of David.

## **Mona Aamons Monzano**

Mona is the gorgeous mixed-blood daughter of the Finnish architect Nestor Aamons. John falls in love with her as soon as he sees her photo in the newspaper. With her blond hair and chocolate skin, the girl is so beautiful that she is loved throughout the island of San Lorenzo. Papa Monzano adopts her, simply to appropriate some of her power. Bokonon has written that Mona will marry the next president of San Lorenzo.

## **Papa Monzano**

Papa Monzano is the ancient, cancer-ridden dictator of the Caribbean island of San Lorenzo. Although he calls himself president, the office is self-appointed. Monzano is cruel and lives a life of luxury while his people starve. He persecutes Bokononists, although he is a believer. Worst of all, Monzano is suicidal, driven almost out of his mind with pain.



## Dr. Breed

Dr. Hoenikker's supervisor at the General Forge Laboratory is Dr. Breed. Breed is an earnest man who provides many moments of comic relief as he discusses weapons of mass destruction while listening to Christmas carols extolling peace on earth. When Breed finally realizes that John intends to paint a less than flattering picture of Dr. Hoenikker, he chases him out of the building.



# Objects/Places

## Ice-Nine

Dr. Felix Hoenikker's final invention is a unique variation of the ice crystal called Ice-nine. The crystal has a melting point of 114 degrees Fahrenheit, meaning it is solid at room temperature. Even more crucial, Ice-nine is solid at body temperature, instantly freezing all the water in a person's tissues and killing them on contact. An incredibly destructive secret weapon, Ice-nine symbolizes the destructive power of the nuclear bomb.

## The Cat's Cradle

On the day his devastating invention is unleashed, Dr. Felix Hoenikker tries to play with his six-year-old son Newton for the first and only time. The man creates a cat's cradle with string. The ancient children's game is a sham. There is no cat and no cradle, just a bunch of x's made of string. The cat's cradle symbolizes all the elaborate belief systems that humans construct in order to give meaning to life, including religion, business, truth, democracy, nationalism, government, family, love and art. Using this metaphor, Vonnegut suggests that all such human constructs are hoaxes.

## The Iron Hook

Bokononism is outlawed on San Lorenzo, and violators are impaled on a huge iron hook until they die. The same penalty is extracted for even the pettiest crimes. A special hook in the palace is reserved for Bokonon himself.

### *The Day the World Ended*

Initially John meets the Hoenikkers while working on a book about the day the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, called *The Day the World Ended*. The title is ironic, since the reader is aware long before John is that Dr. Hoenikker's secret weapon, Ice-nine, will destroy the world.

## Frank's House

Frank Hoenikker has an ultramodern house built under a waterfall in San Lorenzo. The cave-like house has canvas interior walls and is uncomfortable. The structure symbolizes American greed and the fallacy of artistic achievement.



## San Lorenzo

San Lorenzo is a Caribbean island that measures fifty miles by twenty miles. Its principal products are sugar, coffee, bananas, indigo, crafts and Bokononism. Sport fishing is popular, and San Lorenzo is referred to as the Barracuda Capital of the World. The highest point on San Lorenzo is Mount McCabe, at 11,000 feet above sea level. The island has a population of 450,000 people, most of whom are very poor.

## Mount McCabe

The highest point on the island of San Lorenzo at 11,000 feet, Mount McCabe is named after Bokonon's best friend and San Lorenzo's first president, Corporal Earl McCabe.

## The Golden Lifeboat

Lionel Johnson, who later becomes know as Bokonon, is washed ashore in a lifeboat with his friend Earl McCabe. When Johnson founds a new religion, the residents of San Lorenzo gild the lifeboat. It becomes the bed of the president. Legend has it that when the end of the world is near, the lifeboat will sail again. This prophecy comes true when the lifeboat, containing the body of Papa Manzano, falls into the sea. The entire ocean is instantly contaminated with Ice-nine and freezes solid.

## The Castle

Papa Monzano lives in a dark, ugly ogre's castle built by the original emperor of San Lorenzo. An escaped slave, the emperor had seen castles only in children's picture books. He copied one for his residence, and the president now lives there.

# Social Sensitivity

Cat's Cradle, published in the wake of the Cold War weapons buildup and the tensions of the Cuban missile crisis, focuses on man's ability to destroy life on earth. The narrator sets out to write a book, *The Day the Earth Ended*, about the Hiroshima bombing, but soon his background research into Dr. Felix Hoenikker, one of the creators of the atomic bomb, and his family, shifts the focus of the story to the new apocalypse brought on by his discovery of ice-nine, a substance that causes any water it contacts to freeze at 114 degrees Fahrenheit.



# Techniques

Some critics have dismissed *Cat's Cradle* as a thin summation of the three books preceding it, but technically the novel marks some significant changes for Vonnegut. The fragmentary effect of 127 chapters, short units of prose often structured as three-line jokes, marked the beginning of Vonnegut's subsequent method.

It is also a book marked by irony.

The book is cautionary, even prophetic, but it also makes fun of prophets. In keeping with its warning to beware of the ascendancy of lies, the novel ends with the statement the "Nothing in this book is true."



# Themes

## Themes

In *Cat's Cradle*, Vonnegut brought together themes from his first three novels: the threat of technology from *Player Piano*, the question of free will from *The Sirens of Titan*, and the problem of communication from *Mother Night*.

The overriding theme of *Cat's Cradle* is the narrator's warning that if technological advancement continues without a concurrent growth in ethical awareness, annihilation of the human race is a real possibility. This, of course, parallels the biblical story of Jonah who so vividly prophesies the destruction of Nineveh that the city repents and is spared by God. As in other books, Vonnegut shows that intellect harbors the temptation to rule over life, death, and nature, and he hopes that his novel will have the cautionary effect of Jonah's prophecy.

The confrontation between technology and morality is represented in the book by the two primary settings: Ilium, New York is the city of science, a world of materialistic absolutism in which scientists create in a moral vacuum; San Lorenzo is an island of belief, a tyrannical and hopelessly impoverished island nation in which the religion of Bokononism has been created to provide "dynamic tension" that will distract the people from the oppression and material suffering that mark their lives.

The book also shows how lies can overcome truth. Bokononism's purpose is to "provide people with better and better lies," lies that will keep them from seeing the Hobbesian truth, that "life was as short and brutish and mean as ever." This view justifies fiction and art, yet Vonnegut cannot easily resolve the "cruel paradox of Bokononist thought, the heartbreaking necessity of lying about reality, and the heartbreaking impossibility of lying about it." The uncertainty of truth is emphasized in the Biblical parallel, for when God spared Nineveh he made Jonah's prophecy a lie.

## Mankind's Greed and Destructiveness

A major theme of *Cat's Cradle* is the innate destructiveness and greed of humankind. While all humans suffer from these flaws, Americans are portrayed as especially greedy and destructive. This is illustrated in many ways. All of the playful inventions of the scientists at the Research Laboratory of General Forge and Foundry are turned to destructive purposes. Nuclear energy is used to make a hydrogen bomb that devastates the residents of two Japanese cities. There is little wonder, since General Forge and Foundry is essentially a huge munitions factory. The residents of San Lorenzo, who symbolize the entire third world, are financially exploited by everyone who should protect them, including their employers and the Roman Catholic Church.

The invention of Ice-nine perfectly illustrates man's innate destructiveness. A Marine general makes a casual suggestion that Dr. Hoennicker eliminate mud, because the



Marines are tired of slogging through it for the last 200 years. He also insists that the invention be light, because they are tired of carrying heavy equipment. Dr. Hoenikker responds by creating Ice-nine, and a single crystal of the substance is so powerful that it can eliminate all life on earth. In trying to eliminate a minor annoyance, the scientist has created a secret weapon that eventually eradicates humanity. Apparently, if the Marine general had casually suggested that Dr. Hoenikker invent something that would eliminate war forever, he would have complied as readily. The fact that no one in authority would ever suggest such a thing perfectly illustrates Vonnegut's point.

## Religion

The over-arching theme of *Cat's Cradle* is that all of the belief systems and groups that man creates to give meaning to life are merely hoaxes. Of all these belief systems, the author's strongest criticism is reserved for religion. Vonnegut critiques modern society, especially American culture, by contrasting two sets of religious beliefs - traditional Christianity and an invented, calypso-based Zen-like belief called Bokononism. In the first line of the *Book of Bokonon*, the holy man says that everything in the book is a lie. The purpose of religion, according to Bokonon, is to make beautiful lies that will distract people from the hopelessness of their lives.

One of the major debates enfolded within the theme of religion is self-determination versus predestination. According to Bokononism, everything is determined by fate. Each person on earth belongs to a karass, an assorted group of unrelated people who are predestined to complete certain activities. Following this belief, humans are not in control of the relationships they form or of the results of their actions. Ultimately, even Bokononism fails to determine the catastrophic outcomes of John's karass. Vonnegut's ultimate comment on the world, in the final chapter, is that it is a strange and complex pattern wrought by a capricious deity. The final sentences suggest Bokonon committing suicide while literally thumbing his nose at God, frozen in that position for all time.

## Nuclear War

Vonnegut's novel, published in 1968, treats the nuclear bomb both directly and indirectly. The narrative begins when John, a freelance writer, is writing a book about August 6, 1945, the day the hydrogen bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. In the course of gathering his information, John encounters three key characters, Angela, Frank and Newton Hoenikker. Their father was a key figure in creating the bomb.

The novel can be read as a parable about the inevitability of worldwide nuclear annihilation. The saga of the wildly destructive Ice-nine is a parable about nuclear war. In 1968, this topic was an obsession for almost everyone, from schoolchildren to the U.S. president. Many believed, as Vonnegut's novel seems to suggest, that destruction was inevitable. Most intelligent Americans genuinely believed that they were living in humankind's last decade.



When the atomic bomb was first invented, many people, including most scientists, simply regarded it as a more powerful form of dynamite. Serious scientists advised taping paper over windows to protect from radiation, and children practiced hiding under their school desks with their heads down in case of nuclear attack. Many people built bomb shelters, believing that if they could avoid the direct impact of a bomb, they could return to their normal lives in days or weeks. Scientists regarded a nuclear war with Russia as inevitable and rushed to produce enough weapons to ensure U.S. victory.

Only after several years did the most devastating effects of the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki become apparent. Once the terrible effects of radiation and the bomb's damage to the environment were understood, people realized that there would be no winners of a nuclear war. *Cat's Cradle* was published about the time this became generally known. In the early 1960s, many assumed that the end of the world was inevitable. They reasoned that no humans, and least of all the very materialistic, petty, warlike, greedy Americans, could be trusted to contain such force.



# Style

## Point of View

*Cat's Cradle* is written in first person past tense. The narrative is told from the point of view of the protagonist, John. It never deviates from John's thoughts and perceptions. The personality, emotions and thoughts of other characters are revealed through actions and dialogue, but never directly. Throughout the novel, there are frequent asides from the narrator, who is clearly John. In particular, the narrator shares from a very early stage that this is the saga of the destruction of life on earth by the release of the secret weapon, Ice-nine. The narrator regularly reveals information that John was not privy to at the time, such as the fact that each Hoenikker brings a thermos of Ice-nine to San Lorenzo.

## Setting

The novel is set primarily in Ilium, New York and in San Lorenzo, an island nation in the Caribbean. Published in 1968, the novel is set in the 1960s, when a new secret weapon called Ice-nine has been invented. There are no technological innovations other than Ice-nine in the novel.

In John's quest to learn more about Felix Hoenikker, father of the nuclear bomb, he travels to Ilium, New York, Hoenikker's hometown. There, John talks with Dr. Hoenikker's supervisor at the Research Laboratory of the General Forge and Foundry Corporation, a weapons manufacturer. In Ilium, John learns much of the Hoenikkers' history through chance encounters with Frank's high school friends, now a bartender and a prostitute.

Frank fatefully receives an assignment to write a magazine article on the "banana republic" of San Lorenzo. The island nation in the Caribbean is densely populated, and the overwhelming majority of people are extremely poor. John encounters many characters on the plane to San Lorenzo, including the Crosbys, the Mintons and two of the Hoenikker offspring.

## Language and Meaning

The opening line of the novel, "Call me Jonah," is reminiscent of both *Moby Dick* and the Bible. The sentence echoes Herman Melville's famous opening, "Call me Ishmael," in *Moby Dick*, a work many consider to be the great American novel. The Biblical Jonah, like Ishmael, was a man swept up in disastrous circumstances utterly beyond his control, without any apparent reason.

The novel's satirical focus on religion is intensified by frequent quotes from the fictional religion Bokononism. Vonnegut intersperses writings from the "sacred books" and



calypso songs of Lionel Johnson, considered the holy man Bokonon in San Lorenzo. In addition to an entire invented system of religious belief, Bokononism includes many invented words and concepts, such as *karass*, a word for an unrelated group of people fated to complete certain tasks together.

Vonnegut shows great economy of language, packing a sarcastic wit and much information into chapters averaging just one to two pages each. An example is the line, "The first sentence in *The Books of Bokonon* is this: 'All of the true things I am about to tell you are shameless lies.'" The author accomplishes a great deal in a small space. With a single remark, Vonnegut skewers all religions as pretty lies designed to distract poor people from their unhappiness. The sentence also provides a commentary on the nature of fiction, as lies that contain universal truths. Despite his terseness, the author is capable of powerful metaphors, such as this sentence from Chapter 13, pg. 27: "My soul seemed as foul as smoke from burning cat fur."

## Structure

The narrative in *Cat's Cradle* unfolds in strict chronological order as the world inexorably marches towards destruction by a powerful secret weapon. The narrator provides insights and precognition, where necessary, but there are no flashbacks. All scenes occur in the present moment of the novel. History is related through dialogue, memory or exposition - but never in scene.

The novel's structure is unique, with 127 chapters averaging just one to two pages each. These short chapters contain staccato bursts of prose like machine gun fire. Each chapter pinpoints important information or an insight. Due to the shortness of the chapters, often a single scene stretches over several chapters.

The author's decision to limit himself to such short bursts of information may have been influenced by the advent of television as a popular entertainment during the late 1950s and 1960s. Many hailed television as the death knell of books, especially of novel-length manuscripts. This is similar to the way that many commentators have suggested that computers and DVDs will mean the end of television. Vonnegut's staccato delivery may have been a commentary on the average reader's decreased attention span or on the prevalence of 30 to 60 second commercials.



## Quotes

"If you find your life tangled up with somebody else's life for no very logical reasons,' writes Bokonon, 'that person may be a member of your *karass*.'" Chapter 2, pg. 2

"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?'" From Newton Hoenikker's letter to John, Chapter 6, pg. 17

"Another guy came in, and he said he was quitting his job at the Research Laboratory; said anything a scientist worked on was sure to wind up as a weapon, one way or another. Said he didn't want to help politicians with their fugging wars anymore. Name was Breed. I asked him if he was any relation to the boss of the fugging Research Laboratory. He said he fugging well was. Said he was the boss of the Research Laboratory's fugging son." Chapter 12, pg. 26

"All your questions are aimed at getting me to admit that scientists are heartless, conscienceless, narrow boobies, indifferent to the fate of the rest of the human race, or maybe not really members of the human race at all." Dr. Breed to John, Chapter 18, pg. 39

"Americans,' [Ambassador Minton] said, quoting his wife's letter to the *Times*, 'are forever searching for love in forms it never takes, in places it can never be. It must have something to do with the vanished frontier.'" Chapter 44, pg. 97

"The words were a paraphrase of the suggestion by Jesus: Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's.' Bokonon's paraphrase was this: 'Pay no attention to Caesar. Caesar doesn't have the slightest idea what's really going on.'" Chapter 46, pg. 101

"The basis for the foot ceremony is this 'Calypso': 'We will touch our feet, yes, Yes, for all we're worth, And we will love each other, yes, Yes, like we love our Mother Earth.'" Chapter 72, pg. 158

"Castle quoted another poem: 'Tiger got to hung, 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.'" Chapter 81, pg. 182

"We made an effort to find someone among the soldiers and the household staff who would admit that he knew the [Bokononist] rites and would give them to 'Papa.' We got no volunteers. That was hardly surprising, with a hook and an oubliette so near." Chapter 98, pg. 219

"I shook my head. 'No, I don't think my conscience would let me support a strike like that. When a man becomes a writer, I think he takes on a sacred obligation to produce



beauty and enlightenment and comfort at top speed." John to Philip Castle, Chapter 103, pg. 231

"And so it was in Mona's and my rock womb. At least we could think. And one thing I thought was that the creature comforts of the dungeon did nothing to mitigate the basic fact of oubliation." Chapter 118, pg. 264

"The girl was not interested in reproduction - hated the idea. Before the tussle was over, I was given full credit by her, and by myself, too, for having invented the whole bizarre, grunting, sweating enterprise by which new human beings were made." Chapter 18, pg. 266





## Topics for Discussion

John's non-fiction book, *The Day the World Ended*, is originally about the day the hydrogen bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. What is the final subject of the book, and how do the two topics relate to each other?

Kurt Vonnegut is a premier satirist. What are some of the ways that Vonnegut skewers religion, greed, businessmen, the military and Americans in general?

What are some of the institutions that are satirized in *Cat's Cradle*?

In *Cat's Cradle*, does Vonnegut offer any hopeful alternatives to the religions that he satirizes?

How does Papa Monzano die?

Is the end of the world ultimately caused by greed or destructiveness, and why?

After Dr. Hoenikker's death, each of the three Hoenikker offspring receives a vial of Ice-nine. How do Angela, Frank and Newton each use it? What does this behavior say about human nature?

Nihilism is the philosophy that life is essentially meaningless. How does Vonnegut satirize nihilism in the novel?

## Literary Precedents

Most obviously, *Cat's Cradle* uses the Book of Jonah and *Moby-Dick* (1851).

This leviathanic motif is broadened by references to Hobbes and in descriptions of the landscape — the highest mountain in San Lorenzo looks like a "blue whale." Some critics have compared the novel to prophetic works such as Blake's *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (circa 1790) and Swift's *Tale of a Tub* (1704), and others have concentrated on its place in the tradition of dystopian literature. However, *Cat's Cradle* is also a mock-apocalyptic novel that reacts to the popularity of books such as *Seven Days in May* (Knebel and Bailey, 1962) and *On the Beach* (Shute, 1957).



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