

Symptomatic of Excess: Apocalypse in the Novels of Kurt Vonnegut

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Foreword: The Importance of the Apocalypse in the Works of Vonnegut

The works of Kurt Vonnegut are best known to his readers for their striking comedy and satirical critiques of American society. Vonnegut presents the reader with a terrifyingly recognizable truth concerning America, yet he leaves the reader with laughter instead of feelings of helplessness. Despite Vonnegut's comical way of addressing mankind's shortcomings, he does emphasize real problems in America that demand attention. Vonnegut notes that the darkness of his novels grows "out of frustration," saying, "I think there is so much we can do—things that are cheap—that we're not doing" ("Playboy Interview" 255). Vonnegut's texts explain that if mankind does not pay attention to these issues, the consequence could be disastrous. In his works, he does this by repeatedly detailing apocalypses, both the physical destruction of the world and a mental apocalypse within a character's mind.

Vonnegut's apocalypses are symptoms of man's ability to do evil, yet Vonnegut recognizes mankind's dual capacity for good and evil. He explained in "Address at Wheaton College Library:" "We are a mixture of good and evil. I am fascinated by the good and evil in myself and in everyone" (Vonnegut 214). His interest in man's ability to be both good and evil pours over into his writing. However, man's potential for evil most concerns Vonnegut since the evil in man leads to destruction. Vonnegut notes that this impurity extends to every person within America: "I am not pure. We are not pure. Our nation is not pure" ("Wheaton College" 215). With the presence of impurity in all people and in the nation of America, social injustices easily arise. This bothers Vonnegut, so he creates apocalypses in his novels to portray the dangers of man's plight.

The apocalypse is often a judgment on mankind for some immoral action. Similarly, Vonnegut uses the apocalypse as a literary device to demonstrate the negative effects of mankind's impurity. Vonnegut is apparently acting as a god figure, judging mankind's impure

sins with an apocalypse. Because of the direct connection between immorality and the apocalypse, readers should not simply laugh at the comedy in Vonnegut's novels. They should attempt to amend their approach to life to avoid the negative consequences that Vonnegut details.

Hope, though, does remain despite mankind's tendency toward impurity. With a clear didactic message, Vonnegut emphasizes his humanist worldview, which states that people should treat others with kindness simply for the sake of doing good. Though Vonnegut did not approve of the state of America during the 1950s and up until his death in 2007, he hoped for something better. He believed that it was his duty as a writer to both point out America's flaws and to help America improve: "I like Utopian talk, speculation about what our planet should be, anger about what our planet is. I think writers are the most important members of society, not just potentially but actually" (qtd. in Davis 45). Vonnegut leaves his readers with a hope for reformation in the face of impending apocalypse.

Chapter One: Introduction to the Apocalypse in Vonnegut's Life and Works

Human nature is tragically flawed—that is the conclusion of much of twentieth century apocalyptic literature. This fear of an approaching apocalypse can be traced as far back as the Bible in Revelation. Exploring the roots of the term “apocalypse,” John R. May writes in *New Worlds for Old* that “[t]he Greek word *apokalupsis*, which produces the English word apocalypse and an alternative title for the Book of Revelation, implies ‘an unveiling, either (a) of future events, or (b) of the unseen realms of heaven and hell’” (5). Often, the unveiling is fearful and overwhelming to the audience. Though Kurt Vonnegut does not use the term “apocalypse,” he clearly uses the theme of a fearful unveiling of the future in his novels. He uses the apocalypse to warn of a threatening future that may be imminent unless humans change their way of living. He argues that this danger can be avoided only if people answer the call to care for and love one another. Vonnegut expands upon this fear by emphasizing that power should be used to help mankind instead of being abused through science and social power, which will ultimately lead to the destruction of the world. However, the works of Vonnegut demonstrate a view that sets them aside from other post-atomic bomb, apocalyptic writers. He breaks down the implications of pursuing influence and authority in excess through both technology and social power, yet he does not leave his readers lacking hope of salvation.

The apocalypse in Vonnegut’s novels can be traced back to man’s tendency to ignore boundaries in life, in both science and social power. Working in the name of progress, individuals seek to perfect their world through the avenues of science or social power, yet they take this too far and begin to abuse their power, causing regression rather than progression. This illustrates the imperfection of mankind as well as the need for boundaries. The events leading up to the apocalypses in Vonnegut’s works demonstrate a lack of proper structure and boundaries in society. Because people attempt to gain power in excess, the world experiences an apocalypse as

power becomes corrupted. Vonnegut constantly returns to the notion that humans “make a mess of things” when left to themselves. This phrase, “make a mess of things,” is repeated in variations by Vonnegut in multiple novels and refers to the disorder of both the world and the impurity of people.¹ He mulls over the implications and possibilities of man’s plight. Raymond M. Olderman recognizes in his work *Beyond the Wasteland* that Vonnegut holds a view that mankind is sinful. Olderman writes, “The dark, tough, apocalyptic quality of Vonnegut’s visions results from his hard-minded recognition that we do commit sins against ourselves which need to be exorcised” (189). Vonnegut was forced to recognize the pain and damage that a fallen world can bring, which influenced his literature.

Kurt Vonnegut realized a sense of apocalypse in his personal life, which can provide insight into the mind of the author. As many comedians arise from trying or difficult situations, using humor to encourage themselves to press on through life, Vonnegut found himself in a similar position. Vonnegut’s family endured the Great Depression. He explains that through this financially difficult time, he found hope by exploring humorous critiques of society. The financial foundation of his family suffered as his father, also named Kurt, a well-established architect, lost work, causing their comfortable, socialite lifestyle to decline. As a result, his father became incredibly depressed. His father’s sadness left an ever-lasting impression on him: “He made wonderful jokes, but he was such an unhappy man” (“Playboy Interview” 288). His father’s depression and detachment from his family influenced Vonnegut’s works as Thomas F. Marvin explains how “[t]he fathers depicted in Vonnegut’s novels are all distant and uninvolved with their children’s lives, reflecting Vonnegut’s relationship with his own father” (3). Without a strong figure head, the Vonnegut family experienced the pains of a lack of structure, and so a sort of apocalypse or collapse within the family occurred. With the social and financial decline

of the family, Vonnegut realized the end of his family's position as a member of the upper class. This brought on an entire new way of life. This economic apocalypse, or the decline in social class, can be found in Vonnegut's novels as well, such as *Deadeye Dick* and *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*. In these works, characters lose their high social standing and are forced to learn how to live without their earlier comforts.

Edith Vonnegut, the mother of Kurt, also contributed to the decay of the Vonnegut household. She killed herself with an overdose of sleeping pills on Mother's Day in 1944 while Kurt was home on leave before being shipped overseas to fight in World War II with the army. Marvin draws a connection between her death and Vonnegut's involvement in the army during World War II: "Edith had voiced her strong opposition to the war, and the timing of her suicide must have burdened her son with an extra share of guilt" (3). Vonnegut deals with the painful guilt that his mother has left him within his literature. As a result, some of the mothers and wives in Vonnegut's novels kill themselves, often by consuming poisonous substances, such as Dran-o.² His mother's depression and eventual suicide left a damaging mark on Vonnegut's life. Vonnegut explains his frustration with both of his parents in an interview, saying, "I'm damned if I'll pass their useless sadness on to my children if I can possibly help it" ("Playboy Interview" 287). Without a strong, parental foundation, the Vonnegut family became shaky at best.

Vonnegut's parents also left their mark on his novels beyond their shortcomings. Vonnegut's interest in science and technology can be traced back to his father pressuring him to study science. Due to his own dissatisfaction with the arts because of his lack of employment as an architect, his father urged Vonnegut to study something "useful" and to focus on science. Taking his father's advice, Vonnegut studied biochemistry at Cornell University. However, he

found himself more interested in writing articles for the newspaper. During Vonnegut's junior year, he dropped out of college, fearing that he would otherwise fail, and joined the army with plans to fight in World War II. Vonnegut explains in an interview with Robert Scholes, "And the war came along, thank God, in the middle of my junior year, and I left most gratefully for the infantry" (92). Despite not being a strong biochemistry student, Vonnegut was indeed intrigued by science, and he was fascinated by science fiction writers, such as H. G. Wells. He admired Wells's ability to combine both the art of writing and science (Scholes 95). However, Vonnegut's affection for science and technology became tainted with cynicism as he began to understand the destruction that could come along with it. Vonnegut explains, "[T]he bombing of Hiroshima compelled me to see that a trust in technology, like all the other great religions of the world, had to do with the human soul" (qtd. in Marvin 39). As a result, Vonnegut's writings also demonstrate a critique of people's reliance on science and technology.

Vonnegut shows that science and technology are not to be glorified, but should be seen as dangerous if followed in excess. Science and technology empower the holders, and so they must be wise and careful with how they command their power. Vonnegut uses science and technology as a literary device to move his plot and bring the end of the world. This further shows his fears of excess. His expansion on the fear of technology is not a new, unique theme in literature, but instead demonstrates a persistent fear. Mulford Q. Sibley explains in "Utopian Thought and Technology" that "[t]he problem of technology arises with the birth of humanity; and when men begin to speculate about it all—assuming they do not ignore it—they cannot really make up their minds as to what attitudes to adopt" (255). Mankind has been worried for some time about excessive use of technological power in excess bringing an apocalypse. Defining a disaster by antithesis, Eric S. Rabkin writes in "Atavism and Utopia," "Often the utopian world is a pastoral

one by virtue of the exclusion of technology” (3). If the absence of technology often contributes to a utopia, then a world overrun by technology could be seen as the opposite—a dystopia. This also seems to be the view of Vonnegut. Dystopian societies are less than desirable, to say the least, and Vonnegut often critiques American society by detailing dystopias. The dystopias of Vonnegut then culminate in an apocalypse.

Vonnegut also critiques a lack of boundaries in relation to social power, an idea influenced by his Uncle Alex. Vonnegut consistently speaks fondly of his Uncle Alex and often uses wise quotes spoken by his Uncle Alex when giving commencement speeches and in his novels. Vonnegut recalls the dedication of his Uncle Alex in the introduction to *Slapstick!*: “When I was a child, he used to tell me what to read, and then make sure I’d read it” (10). Marvin describes Uncle Alex’s connection to Vonnegut’s political views since Alex was a Socialist and introduced Vonnegut to Thorstien Veblen’s *Theory of the Leisure Class* (4). In this work, Veblen explains that the upper “leisure” class does far less significant work than the lower class, yet it is the “leisure” class that makes more money. Vonnegut expresses extreme frustration with this set-up in society and causes members of the leisure class in his novels to make stupid, uninformed decisions that bring on the apocalypse. As a Socialist, Vonnegut’s Uncle Alex helped provide Vonnegut with the tools to critique American society from a Marxist critical framework. Including these critiques of American Society in his novels, Vonnegut shows that too much social power given to aristocratic individuals can bring on the apocalypse.

Vonnegut is far from shy concerning his Socialist ideas. In a question and answer session with John Hickenlooper titled “Timequake, Princess Di and the Great Apocalypse,” Vonnegut speaks of America’s need for economic justice: “I haven’t given up on socialism. I don’t think it’s been discredited by the Soviet Union. I want more economic justice in this country” (3).

The need for economic justice spills over into most of his novels as he examines the problems of American society. He continues in the same question and answer session to expand upon his social views, saying, “My hero is Eugene Debs, who said, ‘As long as there’s a lower class, I’m in it. As long as there is a criminal element, I am of it. As long as there is a soul in prison, I am not free’” (qtd. in Hickenlooper 3). Vonnegut repeats this same reference in his novel *Hocus Pocus*, published in 1990 (2). Because of the importance of this to him, Vonnegut says that he would “rather talk about political stuff and all that” in his novel rather than focusing on character development (qtd. in Hickenlooper 3). Vonnegut has a didactic message to present to his readers beyond simply entertaining them, and social critique is repeatedly one of his major concerns.

Vonnegut similarly critiques the social power of religion. Vonnegut considered himself to be an atheist (Marvin 11). Because he believed in this so deeply, he and his first wife divorced in 1979 when she became a born-again Christian due to the rift in their relationship that their differing religious views caused. He saw danger in the influence of religion and religious leaders who could use their authority to sway mindless individuals. At the same time, Vonnegut did respect the core messages of religion, saying, “I admire Christianity more than anything—Christianity as symbolized by gentle people sharing a common bowl” (“Playboy Interview” 246). Here, Vonnegut affirms the core beliefs relating to the treatment of others. However, he exhibits a fear of religious authority in his novels: he expresses fear of the abuse of religious influence because of the possible manipulation that a leader could cause. It is under these circumstances that Vonnegut writes apocalypses in his novels, perhaps most notably in *Cat’s Cradle*.

Despite having a difficult family life and a cynical view of American society, Vonnegut continues to see hope in mankind. His sense of worth in men can be traced back to the family’s

African-American servant, Ida Young, who helped raise him and was described by Vonnegut as “humane and wise” (qtd. in Marvin 4). Marvin points out that “[e]ven the most despicable characters in Vonnegut’s novels are capable of arousing the reader’s sympathy because they are presented as vulnerable human beings struggling to cope in a difficult world” (4). This is an idea repeated throughout Vonnegut’s works, as is the apocalypse, indicating that hope remains even during the most difficult times. In addition to living during the Great Depression, Ida’s positive influence brought undiminishing hope to Vonnegut’s world view and novels.

Vonnegut admits in *Slaughterhouse-Five* that he never created a villain in his novels because he believes that all men hold some merit, none being entirely good nor evil (8). He finds goodness in mankind, even in *Galápagos*, a novel which explores how man’s “big brain” has betrayed him. Vonnegut begins the novel with an epigraph spoken by Anne Frank, saying, “In spite of everything, I still believe people are really good at heart” (1), which contributes to the tone of *Galápagos*. The fact that Anne Frank spoke these words is significant since she witnessed so much evil in humanity during the Holocaust. Similarly, the narrator of *Galápagos* watches the evolution of mankind for millions of years and repeatedly critiques men for their tendency of harming one another, yet he concludes, “Mother was right: Even in the darkest times, there really was still hope for humankind” (Vonnegut 284). Vonnegut ties these two thoughts together. He believes that it is because of mankind’s capacity for good that hope remains in the world. Vonnegut extends this into his other novels. In his novel *Breakfast of Champions*, Vonnegut provides an indirect statement of his purpose for writing, saying, “I would write about life. Every person would be exactly as important as any other. All facts would also be given equal weightiness” (215). Here, he proclaims equality among all things, from men to facts, which demonstrates his repeated theme of humanity and vulnerability in all people.

Because of this, pure evil cannot exist in men and Vonnegut's humanitarian view drives him to leave bits of hope throughout his novels. Arguing with himself in *Breakfast of Champions*, Vonnegut writes himself into the novel as a character, saying, "I had come to the conclusion that there was nothing sacred about myself or about any human being, that we were all machines, doomed to collide and collide and collide" (225). However, this view is in direct contradiction with his world view, and so he will do all that he can to disprove this line of thinking. As Vonnegut wrote *Breakfast of Champions* around his fiftieth birthday, he re-evaluates life, yet still arrives at the persistent conclusion that hope remains in mankind.

Kurt Vonnegut communicates his hope through humor. He explains that he became the comedian of his family since he was the youngest child of the family. Vonnegut tells Robert Scholes in an interview that humor "is the most satisfactory way to get attention. You don't get punished for it" (107). In the apocalypse of his troubled family—his father's unemployment and his mother's depression and eventual suicide—Vonnegut found the strength to make jokes and gave others hope through his comedy. He had found that other people also gained their strength through comedy in the midst of the dystopia of the Great Depression. Watching the people crowd around the radios, Vonnegut realized the power of a joke while people listened for their daily "dose of humor" (109). May comments on Vonnegut's hope through comedy: "Vonnegut belongs to a purer strain of apocalyptic writers, a tradition that imagines the worst because it believes in something better. Vonnegut's apocalypse is humorous, yet nonetheless genuinely human and hopeful because his imagination clearly conceives of alternatives to catastrophes, however limited those alternatives may be" (192). Vonnegut does not simply write to condemn mankind to his doom. Instead, Vonnegut writes to reveal the change that is so desperately needed. He writes to inspire people to seize the hope and bring about the change necessary to

avoid ultimate destruction through an apocalypse. He uses humor to give his readers access to that hope.

Even after Kurt Vonnegut's death in 2007, the remains of his hope can be found both in the literature he produced and his actions. Vonnegut made his first impression on the world in 1952 with the publication of *Player Piano* and his most renowned novels were published in the later 1960s and early 1970s. However, his influential perspective did not leave the world without hope after his death. David A. Niose takes a look at the hope left by Vonnegut in "Kurt Vonnegut Saw Humanism as a Way to Build a Better World." Niose writes of the societal problems that troubled Vonnegut: "In his novels, Vonnegut often utilized bizarre plots and characters to make the reader see the inconsistencies in society that too often go unquestioned. It troubled him that nations could annihilate one another, including even innocent children, and then sign peace treaties and go on with life as if everything were normal" (22). Vonnegut draws the reader's attention to dangers in society, dangers of both technology and social power, and illustrates the desperation of the situation through the use of an impending apocalypse.

Notes

¹ Vonnegut refers to the condition of the world and humans' contribution to the world's problems as being a "mess" or "messy" throughout his career, beginning with his first novel, *Player Piano* in 1952, and as late as 1990 in *Hocus Pocus*: "Let me put it another way: do you agree things are a mess? ... Everywhere! The world!" (Vonnegut, *Player Piano* 184); "In a messy world we were at least making our little corner clean" (Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle* 246); "...his big brain had made such a mess of things..." (Vonnegut, *Galápagos* 139); "Our children, full-grown now, can never forgive us for reproducing. What a mess" (Vonnegut, *Hocus Pocus* 5). Vonnegut's use of variations of the word "mess" in relation to the world demonstrates his consistent view that the world in general and people in particular need some kind of redemption.

² As a result of his mother's suicide, Vonnegut deals with this catastrophe in his novels. In some of his works, mothers and wives realize their own sense of apocalypse by committing suicide, which he sometimes relates back to his mother's suicide by taking sleeping pills: "And both our mothers committed suicide. Bunny's mother ate Drano. My mother ate sleeping pills, which wasn't nearly as horrible" (Vonnegut, *Breakfast of Champions* 186); "I would be glad to attempt a detailed analysis of Celia Hoover's character, if I thought her character had much of anything to do with her suicide by Drano" (Vonnegut, *Deadeye Dick* 215); "Mary had also taught that the human brain was the most admirable survival device yet produced by evolution. But now her own big brain was urging her to take the polyethylene garment bag from around a red evening dress in her closet there in Guayaquil, and to wrap it around her head, thus depriving her cells of oxygen" (*Galápagos* 26); "She eventually committed suicide. She finally found life too embarrassing" (Vonnegut, *Hocus Pocus* 91); "It was about a wife who was bored with her husband, who had an exceedingly silly love affair and then committed suicide" (Vonnegut, *Hocus Pocus* 134-35); "He told me his father drowned while trying to rescue a Swedish woman who committed suicide by opening the windows of her Volvo and driving it off a dock...." (Vonnegut, *Hocus Pocus* 288); "My mother committed suicide in this one...." (Vonnegut, *Timequake* 103); "...I failed to write a novel about Albert Lieber, and how he was largely responsible for my mother's suicide on Mother's Day Eve, 1944" (Vonnegut, *Timequake* 158). These examples begin as early as 1973 in *Breakfast of Champions*, remain consistent through the 1980's with *Deadeye Dick* (1982) and *Galápagos* (1985), as well as the 1990's in *Hocus Pocus* (1990) and *Timequake*, published in 1997. The repeated presentation of adult female characters committing suicide demonstrates Vonnegut's preoccupation with his mother's death.

Chapter Two: The Apocalypse Through Excessive Progress in Technology and Science

With the rise of power provided by technology and science, the potential to warp humanity's good intentions is consistently present. Fears of this possibility are found in many literary works, such as George Orwell's *1984* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. Vonnegut also deals with these issues in his literature. Vonnegut admits that he "cheerfully ripped off" the plot of *Brave New World* from Huxley for *Player Piano*, Vonnegut's first novel ("Playboy Interview" 263). In *Player Piano*, Vonnegut is concerned about technology and human evil. Though the use of technology and science has a great capacity for good, people can easily abuse the power that technology and science give. Because people are easily corrupted with power, Vonnegut focuses on the dangers of excessive progress in technology and science most finely and clearly in *Player Piano*, concerning technology, and *Cat's Cradle*, concerning science.

Vonnegut makes a clear distinction between "technology" and products of "science" in his novels, each bringing on separate consequences. At times, this line can be unclear, but for the most part, Vonnegut holds more fear of technology than science. Technology is that which is created by engineers; this can range from small electronic gadgets to destructive weapons, such as guns. Science, on the other hand, produces more organic dangers and these products are arrived at by the explorations of scientists. The dangers produced by science include the atomic bomb, which, although it is a weapon made by engineers, it is created by scientific disciplines, such as chemistry and physics. The very act of scientific exploration leads to destruction in the novels of Vonnegut. Though some people may not make a distinction between science and technology, Vonnegut does see a difference. It is important to understand this since Vonnegut writes in *Player Piano* that the speaker does not have a problem with science or progress, but is offended by the actions of the engineers and the managers. Since Vonnegut notes this difference

in his first novel, it is important for his readers to understand the distinction for the readers to then appreciate Vonnegut's critique of the harms of technological progression, because it will then inform Vonnegut's later opposition to science.

As with many other novels that explore the fears brought on by technology, the consequence of pursuing technological advancement in Vonnegut's novels is a dystopian society. Vonnegut plagues his dystopias with the problems of capitalism that Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels note in their works. With the establishment of a dystopia, Vonnegut uses a Marxist framework to critique American society. Dystopian societies are a re-occurring aspect of apocalyptic literature, especially those set in the future, setting the stage for people to struggle for freedom as David W. Lovell explains that "ideal futures for which many had worked and hoped had turned into cruel caricatures" (581). David Ketter re-enforces the usefulness of a futuristic setting in *New Worlds for Old* saying that "[a] writer may extrapolate the future consequences of present circumstances, in which case he will probably produce sociological science fiction within the 'utopia'/dystopia range" (16). Similarly, the characters of Vonnegut's *Player Piano* experience a futuristic dystopia as they become slaves to the very capitalism that they have labored to form as machines replace them in their work and dictate their lives. In fact, the original title of *Player Piano* was *Utopia-14* (Marvin 13), which suggests that Vonnegut was indeed considering the implications of dystopian societies when writing the novel. Harold L. Berger writes in *Science Fiction and the New Dark Age* that "[t]he debasement or annihilation of man by the sophisticated inventions of modern science or a power elite armed with them constitutes one of the dominant features of dystopian fiction" (3). While the machines in *Player Piano* are not necessarily killing the humans, the people are certainly oppressed by the

technology and a “power elite” is in fact “armed” with technology in a sense as the upper class uses the machines to establish their wealth and to separate the classes.

Player Piano exemplifies the fear of technology as machines enslave their makers. The people are tied to the machines and lose their occupations, identities, and self-worth as the machines create new demands on the workers. The culture in the novel has passed through multiple Industrial Revolutions. The machines have been able to replace “[f]irst the muscle work, then the routine work, then, maybe, the real brain work” (Vonnegut, *Player* 15). The first Industrial Revolution (1820-1870) is indeed historical, and the machines were able to assist with manual labor. However, instead of harming the jobs of individuals, the first Industrial Revolution is remembered as a movement that brought new jobs in the cities for citizens and immigrants alike. This also had its drawbacks as Marx and Engels describe the Industrial Revolution, saying, “steam and machinery revolutionised industrial production. The place of manufacture was taken by the giant, Modern Industry, the place of the industrial middle class, by industrial millionaires, the leaders of whole industrial armies, the modern bourgeois” (*The Communist Manifesto* 770). This “modern bourgeois” mentioned by Marx has the ability to oppress the lower class with control. This separation of classes and the frustration of the lower class leads to revolt is clearly seen in *Player Piano*.

As *Player Piano* is set in the future, the second fictional Industrial Revolution has already taken place. It eliminated the need for routine or factory work. Because of this step in technological progress, many people find themselves out of work and higher degrees are required for even the smallest of jobs. As machines are more efficient and stronger through better design, they are able to do more work, more quickly, and more effectively without the limitations of humans. In the novel, the president of one company breaks down this idea, explaining, “One

horsepower equals about twenty-two manpower—*big* manpower. If you convert the horsepower of one of the bigger steel-mill motors into terms of manpower, you'll find that the motor does more work than the entire slave population of the United States at the time of the Civil War could do—and do it twenty-four hours a day” (Vonnegut, *Player* 52). Because of the machines' ability to do more work, it becomes more cost effective for businesses to buy machines than to employ individuals, resulting in job loss.

The Third Industrial Revolution is developing in *Player Piano* as the action in the story takes place. In this phase, the machines have the ability to think and create. Ultimately, this will lead to the elimination of most engineers and managers. That which has given the engineers their high place in society (the ability to create advanced machines) will also take their position and wealth away. Some engineers find themselves without jobs as they invent machines that can do their own jobs better than themselves. As a result, engineers are placed in the same situation as the lower class. Todd F. Davis writes in *Kurt Vonnegut's Crusade, Or, How a Postmodern Harlequin Preached a New Kind of Humanism* that “[t]he master narrative of *Player Piano* is a myth common to America and often reified in the genre of utopian science fiction: Mechanical progress means a better future for all” (42). Vonnegut instead seems to argue that mechanical progress leads to no future for any since ever the engineers find themselves in danger of losing their jobs.

In *Player Piano*, the machines are taking over every part of society and creating even more dramatic divisions between people. The narrator explains the three class divisions and also the three geographical divisions of residence which reflect this society: “In the northwest are the managers and engineers and civil servants and a few professional people; in the northeast are the machines; and in the south, across the Iroquois River, is the area known locally as Homestead,

where almost all of the people live” (Vonnegut, *Player 1*). In this society, the classes are divided into upper class, machines, and lower class, completely eliminating the middle class. Those in the upper class are those who are able to create new machines and repair broken ones as well as those who manage the engineers. The upper class is reduced to a select few who are able to pass rigorous placement tests and earn multiple higher degrees. As a result, the majority of the others are banned “across the Iroquois River” where they either join the Army or do manual labor in the “Reeks and the Wrecks,” a manual labor organization in which employees spend their time filling pot holes for little wages—both of which are presented as mindless occupations that devalue human identity. Marvin speaks of the damage caused by the Reeks and the Wrecks, saying, “Neither of these occupations offer any possibility for creativity or a sense of satisfaction with a job well done” (34). Those who are not placed in the upper class are excluded from a stable, rewarding job. Segal affirms the severity of the separation of classes in *Player Piano*: “Not only are the overwhelming majority of citizens excluded from childhood on from significant jobs, but even most of those who manage to obtain Ph.D.’s—nearly all of them in technical areas—are excluded too, so small is the ruling elite” (163). The fates of most of the characters of *Player Piano* are determined before their births.

The separation of classes is perhaps one of Marxism’s largest criticisms of capitalistic societies, and Vonnegut’s work exemplifies the application of this critique to the societies of the future. Marx and Engels explain in *The Communist Manifesto* that “[t]he bourgeoisie has stripped of its halo every occupation hitherto honoured and looked up to with reverent awe” (771). The members of the upper class in *Player Piano* hurl insults at the lower class, full of disrespect. Rigid laws keep them in a lower status of life and their occupations have certainly been “stripped” of their honor as they are replaced with machines (Marx and Engels, *Manifesto*

771). Marx and Engels continue to state that “[t]he bourgeoisie keeps more and more doing away with the scattered state of the population, of means of production, and of property. It has agglomerated population, centralized means of production, and has concentrated property in a few hands” (*Manifesto* 772). Vonnegut agrees—relatively few people are included in the upper class and “most of the people” live across the river as members of the lower class.

It becomes nearly impossible for someone born of a lower class family to rise out of it and even those who are the children of engineers and managers cannot expect to live a comfortable life without an advanced education. For example, one working class man begs Paul to hire his son as “his heart’s in the right place,” but he “didn’t do nearly well enough for college” on the National General Classification Tests (Vonnegut, *Player* 30). Paul, though, tells him the truth—that he has “got to have a graduate degree” (31). Without natural intelligence, supportive parents, and money, those in the lower class have no hope for rising into a better life. Even if a person does establish himself academically in college and also as a strong engineer in the workforce, success and place in society can easily be taken away. In fact, one particular engineer is threatened with losing his career because his doctorate has been revoked. The possibility exists that he may have graduated without having taken a gym class. While this situation is amusing, it points out the lack of security that the people feel. The engineer receives a letter explaining, “[Y]ou are transferred from staff to probationary status for a period of eight weeks, in which time you will return to Cornell and make up this deficiency” (Vonnegut, *Player* 209). To fix this situation, the man must pass the final exam, which is entirely on physical fitness. Since the man is older and possibly out of shape, these are feats that he may not be able to accomplish. If so, he will lose everything he has worked for over a gym class. His hard work

and intelligence mean nothing. Such complexities and issues being present in the society add to the frustrations that detail the dystopia.

The most apparent oppression in *Player Piano* is a loss of personal identity and worth. With the extreme use of technology in the society, individuals are stripped of their sense of worth as they are replaced by machines. This fear of replacement is illustrated in the life of a housewife. Wanda laments after discovering that her husband is having an affair: “Nobody needs me. You or even little old Delores could run the house and all, it’s so easy. And now I’m too fat for anybody but the kids to love me. My mother got fat, and my grandmother got fat, and guess it’s in the blood; but somebody needed them, they were still some good” (Vonnegut, *Player* 167). Here, Wanda demonstrates typical frustration with her aging-self, but she suffers further as she feels useless and without a purpose in her home because machines make housework easy enough for children. Marvin explains, “Even the nuclear family may be torn apart by the social forces created by technological progress” (32). While the managers and engineers justify taking people’s sense of worth away with the notion that the machines have made everyone’s lives better, Wanda does not support this idea. When one of her many appliances breaks, she does not fall to pieces with helplessness. Instead she remarks, “It’s kind of a relief. A body needs a change. I don’t mind. Gives me something to do” (165). Here, Wanda welcomes the change; the act of having to do her own work is a “relief,” not a burden. This would not be the case if the machines were not used to such excess. Segal writes that “[t]hey appreciate the material benefits of technology but resent their loss of meaningful labor and in turn of personal identity and social purpose” (163). Wanda may have new, progressive technology in her house, but Vonnegut points out that it is at the cost of her own self-worth. Paul Proteus, a top engineer and the protagonist of *Player Piano*, understands this as he explains

to his wife, “In order to get what we’ve got, Anita, we have, in effect, traded those people out of what was the most important thing on earth to them—the feeling of being needed and useful, the foundation of self-respect” (175). Without a purpose, the people across the river lose their notion of self-worth, causing depression and feelings of inferiority.

The extreme separation of classes in *Player Piano* emphasizes both the devastating apocalyptic result of excessively moving in one direction and the realization of the potential of Marxist fears. Vonnegut’s geographical separation of the lower class and the upper class with a river is not a unique device. George Orwell’s *1984* also features this same separation with a river, and it is the Proles (the lower class) who hold any hope of change since they understand the danger of the society (69). Similarly, Vonnegut’s lower class experiences the pains of being the laborers and backbone of the structure. This exemplifies the ideas of Thorstien Veblen’s *Theory of the Leisure Class*, which expresses frustration with the fact that those who do more physically-trying work are the ones who receive the lowest pay. What is further odd about this set-up is that this low-paying, more demanding work is actually much more important in supporting the society’s structure.

The lower class in *Player Piano* is known to give in to their physical desires more than the upper class. Marx and Engels explain in “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844” that “man (the worker) no longer feels himself to be freely active in any but his animal functions—eating, drinking, procreating, or at most in his dwelling and in dressing-up, etc.; and in his human functions he no longer feels himself to be anything but an animal. What is animal becomes human and what is human becomes animal” (767). The workers in *Player Piano* also seem to find satisfaction only in animalistic activities, especially consuming alcohol in bars. This, however, is not seen as a negative in *Player Piano*, but a state of being honest and true to

oneself. Finnerty, who has left his place in the upper class as an engineer, argues his appreciation for the lower class, saying, “Those dumb bastards across the river—they’re *my* kind of people. They’re real, Paul, real!” (142). Although he appears to be insulting the working class, he also admires their honesty as opposed to the engineers and managers who politic and backstab to climb the social ladder. Paul Proteus also finds himself drawn to the “other side of the river” and frequently visits the bars before returning home. This, of course, is frowned upon by other members of the higher society since he is stepping outside of his class (102).

The extreme separation in class, though, brings discomfort and apocalyptic themes as the workers become slaves to their craft. They are stripped of any and all capabilities of rising to a higher status since they must compete with machines for work. One character in *Player Piano* explains that machines are slaves since they are forced to labor constantly without a break. This statement reinforces Kroner’s description of the beauty of a machine’s efficiency: they run more smoothly and effectively than the entire slave population could have. The character making the comparison continues to say that “[a]nybody that competes with slaves becomes a slave” (Vonnegut, *Player* 281). Also, the workers of the lower class repeatedly find themselves without work. Because their positions are replaced with machines, they must strive to make themselves appear to be better and more beneficial than a machine. As a result, they place themselves in competition with the machines, and they must endure all of the hardships that a machine is engineered to overcome. Thomas L. Wymer, author of “Machines and the Meaning of Human in the Novels of Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.,” explains that this is a repeated theme in Vonnegut’s novels—the idea that “man himself is or may become a machine” (41). This theme is similar to the problem of humans becoming slaves since they compete with machines that operate as slaves.

However, the workers are human, so they experience physical pains of exhaustion while the machine has no nervous system. Marx and Engels speak of this concern in “Capital, Volume I”:

The capitalistic mode of production ... produces thus, with the extension of the working-day, not only the deterioration of human labour-power by robbing it of its normal, more and physical, conditions of development and function. It produces also the premature exhaustion and death of this labour-power itself. It extends the labourer's time of production during a given period by shortening his actual life-time. (784)

The workers of *Player Piano* also must endure longer work days and the use of physical force that is beyond them in order to remain in competition to provide for their families.

Thus, this dystopia produces many frustrations. As a result, a revolutionary group develops in the *Player Piano* culture. The members of this society believe that “the world should be restored to the people,” which sounds quite Marxist in the notion of redistributing wealth (Vonnegut, *Player* 287). The members of the society appeal to Paul Proteus since he is a well-known engineer who has resigned from his position. They petition for Proteus' help, saying, “If a Messiah shows up now with a good, solid, startling message, and if he keeps out of the hands of the police, he can set off a revolution—maybe one big enough to take the world away from the machines, Doctor, and give it back to the people” (291). They need Proteus only as a figure head and have the plans drawn out; they need only an influential mouth to place the words in. Susan Reid expands on Paul's divided feelings in “Kurt Vonnegut and American Culture; Mechanization and Loneliness in *Player Piano*,” saying, “Paul would like to depend on the Company as everyone else does and feel secure in rank and sure of purpose, but he cannot. He is aware of a growing dissatisfaction, a rebellious streak within him” (50). Paul chooses to

embrace the rebels instead of remaining with the Company. Agreeing to the rebels' plan, Proteus sends out a message to the people, which mirrors Vonnegut's convictions of the need for boundaries: "I deny that there is any natural or divine law requiring that machines, efficiency, and organization should forever increase in scope, power, and complexity, in peace as in war. I see the growth of these now, rather, as the result of a dangerous lack of law" (301). Here, Vonnegut explains that indefinite "progress" should not be expected, but limitations must be established. If boundaries are not respected, regression will occur as well as the eventual apocalypse. Segal claims that "technological progress has not meant and probably will never mean equivalent social progress" (179). To avoid such a catastrophe and to dismantle the dystopian world, the Ghost Shirt Society offers this position: "I propose that the men and women be returned to work as controllers of machines, and that the control of people by machines be curtailed" (302). This proposition seems simple enough, yet the companies in power do not agree, leading up to the inevitable apocalypse at the climax of the novel.

As the lower class claims power over machines and re-establishes their position in society once again, the entire city is set to fire. This image of a great, destroying fire is found in both the Bible (Revelation 9.18) and multiple novels by Vonnegut. Vonnegut writes, "the sun arose over Ilium, and the embers of the town seemed gray in the light of the eternal fire ninety-three millions of miles away" (*Player* 335). Even though the rising of the sun indicates possible hope, the remains of the destructive fires cannot be ignored. The "embers of the town seem gray in the light," reminding readers of the apocalypse that the city has endured. Furthermore, death remains in the town: "Bodies lay everywhere, in grotesque attitudes of violent death" (335). The revolution has not gone as hoped and the result is the ultimate destruction of the city. What is worse, though, beyond the obvious decay of the city, is that even the members of the Ghost

Shirt Society have been so corrupted by the goal of progress through machines that they cannot stop themselves from thinking of engineering and inventing even at this moment. Upon finding an “Orange-O” machine, a large group of people works together to repair it. Vonnegut explains that the Orange-O machine creates a substance that “no one in the whole country, apparently could stomach,” yet now “was as popular as a nymphomaniac at an American Legion convention” (337). The people manage to repair the machine, which simply produces useless, disgusting liquid. More important, its restoration goes against all that they had fought for. One member brags of the inventions he could create out of the scrap metal lying on the ground: “I’ll betch anything I could make a gadget that’d play drums like nothing you ever heard before” (339). Walking over the ruins of the city, the people hold such a need to create useless machines that they begin thinking of ways to create out of the extremes that they have just destroyed. This reaction illustrates mankind’s tendency toward excess, which could ultimately lead to the people enslaving themselves to the machines once again, causing another dystopian society and then an apocalypse.

Vonnegut’s use of a fiery image of the apocalypse can also be found in his other novels.¹ It represents how scientific creations go beyond human control. While humans research and make new discoveries through science in the name of progress, the newly gained knowledge is often more dangerous than originally anticipated. With too much power in human hands, Vonnegut explains that disaster can easily be unleashed despite the best of intentions. This fear is rooted in apocalyptic literature often revolving around the invention of the atomic bomb, a weapon that could allow killings on a massive scale and also the complete desolation of cities with just one bomb. Berger affirms this claim, stating, “The atomic bomb that leveled Hiroshima fertilized the soil from which science fiction grows. The genre’s eschatological vision had long

been traditional but it had always evolved from the raw material of sheerest fancy” (147). With the potential of destruction through science now accounted for, these fears are expanded upon in literature.

Vonnegut’s novel *Cat’s Cradle* centers on the fears of atomic bomb and how new tools meant for good can easily be turned into weapons of mass destruction. This novel is thought to be one of Vonnegut’s great successes. The novel itself was accepted as the thesis of his master’s degree in anthropology years after he left the program at the University of Chicago in 1971 (Marvin 7). Because *Cat’s Cradle* explores the fears of man, the university proposed that he present it. In this novel, fear of the apocalypse through invention becomes the fore-front issue. The apocalypse is brought on by handling dangerous substances, particularly *ice-nine*, with carelessness. The author of *Toward a New Earth* explains that one of the reasons for the “imagined apocalypse” in *Cat’s Cradle* is “the pastiche of uncontrolled invention” (May 199). Because of a lack of boundaries concerning scientific inventions, the apocalypse occurs.

Vonnegut is so concerned with dictating the fears of the apocalypse through scientific discoveries that *Cat’s Cradle* itself is set up as an account of an author writing a historical book. The narrator, Jonah, describes the book, saying, “I began to collect material for a book to be called *The Day the World Ended*. The book was to be factual. The book was to be an account of what important Americans had done on the day when the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, Japan” (Vonnegut, *Cat’s* 1). Jonah then goes on to describe the entire process of collecting data and research in order to write the book. The very title of Jonah’s book, *The Day the World Ended*, suggests an apocalypse. It seems to say that the first atom bomb was the beginning of the end of the world—ultimately, the destruction of the entire planet or apocalypse.

Jonah finds most of his material for his novel centering on a man named Dr. Felix Hoenikker who was one of the inventors of the atomic bomb. His son, Newton, explains to Jonah in a letter that on the day the bomb was dropped, his father had a “manuscript of a novel that a man in prison had sent him. The novel was about the end of the world in the year 2000, and the name of the book was *2000 A.D.* It told about how mad scientists made a terrific bomb that wiped out the whole world” (Vonnegut, *Cat’s* 9). The novel manuscript details the fears present in *Cat’s Cradle* as well as the reservation that many other individuals held regarding the atomic bomb. Since the author of the manuscript is a man in prison, the fear surrounding the atomic bomb extends to every sector of society. Other scientists also demonstrate fear of the bomb. Newton describes “the day they first tested a bomb out at Alamogordo,” saying, “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?’” (17). Here, the scientist clearly notes the danger of the bomb due to its potential to annihilate a city. However, Hoenikker holds an unhealthy extreme of acceptance of the bomb in the name of scientific progress. He believes in science so much that he refuses to recognize any negative aspect of it. Additionally, Davis writes that “Hoenikker represents Vonnegut’s greatest fears: a man who has a mind so brilliant that he can find the means to destroy the world, but who has no conception of right or wrong, of moral value” (64). To Hoenikker, there is no morality concerning how the bomb could be used.

Other characters exhibit contrasting views of both scientific exploration and Dr. Hoenikker specifically. Angela, the daughter of Hoenikker, responds with extreme defense for her father and the atomic bomb. After Newton insults his father on the day that the atomic bomb is dropped, he explains that Angela slapped him multiple times, saying, “He’s one of the greatest

men who ever lived! He won the war today!” (Vonnegut, *Cat's* 16). Here, her statement that he is “one of the greatest men” is a bit extreme, which is often a negative characteristic in Vonnegut’s novels since such extreme thoughts can be dangerous. She takes the stance that the atomic bomb is a war-winning tool, thus she justifies the bomb and the deaths. On the other hand, some see the bomb more simply as a tool of excessive destruction. Marvin Breed, a graveyard overseer and Dr. Asa Breed’s brother, cannot fully accept Dr. Hoenikker as a hero despite being related to science so closely: “[H]ow the hell innocent is a man who helps make a thing like an atomic bomb?” (68). With this statement, he suggests that the creator of the atomic bomb is also responsible in at least some sense for how the bomb is used, making Hoenikker a creator of death.

Despite the differing views of Dr. Hoenikker, it is the extreme belief in the supremacy of scientific progression that Vonnegut takes issue with. Dr. Hoenikker’s supervisor, Dr. Asa Breed sees science as the ultimate answer for all of humanity’s problems. One character recounts that Dr. Breed once said, “The trouble with the world was ... that people were still superstitious instead of scientific. He said if everybody would study science more, there wouldn’t be all the trouble there was” (Vonnegut, *Cat's* 24). From this perspective, Dr. Breed denounces the validity of religion and spirituality; he proposes that man look at the world objectively with a scientific view, only relying on empirical evidence. This would solve “trouble” in the world since everyone would have tangible proof to support their opinions and people might agree more. However, Vonnegut argues that there is more to mankind and the world than what can be proven through science. To ignore this is to not look at the world from every available angle. Dr. Breed continues to explain his extreme belief in scientific progression, saying, “New knowledge is the most valuable commodity on earth. The more truth

we have to work with, the richer we become” (41). Once again, Dr. Breed believes that truth can only be arrived at through science. This “new knowledge” through science becomes the “most valuable commodity” and so he believes in the importance of (and demands) the progression of science, even if it means arming the world with the means of destroying itself. Marvin writes that “*Cat’s Cradle* points out that science became a kind of false religion that filled a spiritual vacuum in the twentieth century. . . . Dr. Breed described the advancement of scientific knowledge as a holy quest that will lead to paradise on earth” (89). This becomes a dangerous stance if the power of science is placed in the wrong hands—as it will later in the novel with *ice-nine*.

The infamous *ice-nine* of *Cat’s Cradle* mirrors the threats brought on by the atomic bomb, but does so on a grander scale; the atomic bomb threatens to destroy entire cities while *ice-nine* is capable of freezing over the oceans, thus destroying the entire world. Jonah later describes *ice-nine* as “something better than the hydrogen bomb” (Vonnegut, *Cat’s* 241). Dr. Breed tells the background story of *ice-nine* to Jonah explaining that a Marine general requested that Hoenikker invent a small “pill or a little machine” that the Marines could carry to freeze the mud because “[t]he general, as their spokesmen, felt that one of the aspects of progress should be that Marines no longer had to fight in mud” (43). Dr. Felix Hoenikker was intrigued by the idea of creating a small substance that would have such a high freezing point that it could freeze the mud instantaneously in response to the issue so that then the Marines could simply walk on the ice instead of wading through water. Dr. Breed describes Dr. Hoenikker’s hypothesis regarding *ice-nine*: “One Marine could carry more than enough of the stuff to free an armored division bogged down in the Everglades. According to Felix, one Marine could carry enough of the stuff to do that under the nail of his little finger” (43). Of course, this could not occur without

consequences: the *ice-nine* would travel through the water in the mud, causing all of the water to freeze. He goes on to say that even the rain would be troublesome: “When it fell, it would freeze into hard little hobnails of *ice-nine*—and that would be the end of the world!” (50). From the beginning, it is recognized that *ice-nine* would have potential to bring on “the end of the world” or the apocalypse. However, according to Dr. Breed, the end of the world could not be brought on by *ice-nine* because Dr. Hoenikker died shortly after thinking of the substance, so he never created it. Jonah, on the other hand, knows the truth. He narrates that Dr. Hoenikker had indeed “made a chip of *ice-nine*. It was blue-white. It had a melting point of one-hundred-fourteen-point-four-degrees Fahrenheit” (51). The creation of *ice-nine* would prove to be an invention that could not be to be contained by anyone.

Dr. Hoenikker’s invention of *ice-nine* becomes a symbol of the atomic bomb as it too is capable of such extreme destruction. Vonnegut uses it to demonstrate just how hazardous scientific inventions of this kind can be when placed in the wrong hands—*ice-nine* certainly falls into clumsy hands. After inventing *ice-nine*, Dr. Hoenikker saved one chip of it in a bottle and Vonnegut writes that he “died on Christmas Eve, having told only his children about *ice-nine*. His children had divided the *ice-nine* among themselves” (*Cat’s* 51). As a scientist, he was able to contain the potential threat posed by *ice-nine* and avoided an apocalypse; however, he cannot be looked upon with strong respect since he only had to accomplish this for a short period of time as Vonnegut writes that his death soon followed the creation of it. Also, he is not purely without blame since he told his children about *ice-nine*; thus, he allowed them to take it after his death. This act of irresponsibility reflects his poor judgment since his children were without the proper training, understanding, and restraint to deal with *ice-nine*. In a way, this mirrors Dr. Hoenikker’s treatment of the atomic bomb. He invented both *ice-nine* and the atomic bomb and

then gave both of the potentially apocalyptic pieces of science to people without also providing them with instructions—what to do with the two was completely left up to the recipients’ discretion, an extremely dangerous act when dealing with terrifyingly potential death. Because of this, Dr. Hoenikker is indirectly responsible for the deaths caused by the atomic bomb as well as the apocalypse later brought on by the careless handling of *ice-nine*.

This abuse of science by carelessly handling *ice-nine* later occurs on the island of San Lorenzo, a dystopian society. With an additional dystopian society serving as the backdrop for yet another apocalypse in Vonnegut’s novel, *Cat’s Cradle* moves Jonah to the island of San Lorenzo as he is “assigned by a magazine to do a story” there (84). This dystopia will later be explored in “Chapter Three: The Apocalypse Through Excessive Social Power in Politics, Religion, and Class,” yet it is important to understand how the dystopia accelerates the apocalypse from a scientific perspective. Instead of a dystopia forming as a result of excessive pursuit of technological advances as with *Player Piano*, the exact opposite occurs in *Cat’s Cradle*: an extreme lack of education and interest in progress leads to poverty and then poor living conditions. In fact, the people of San Lorenzo have no interest in almost anything, including the politicians that dictate their lives. All of the San Lorenzans follow the Bokononist religion, which plays on the Christian message “Render unto Caesar what is his.” Bokononists say, “Pay no attention to Caesar. Caesar doesn’t have the slightest idea what’s *really* going on” (Vonnegut, *Cat’s* 101). This suggests that the government is not worth considering and also that the politicians themselves lack intelligence. This certainly appears to be the case as the political leaders demonstrate a lack of understanding and uniformity in their ruling. The original intention of the founders of San Lorenzo was to form a Utopia, yet they “failed to raise the people from misery and muck,” as explained by one citizen (133). Despite their efforts, life on

San Lorenzo is described as “short and brutish and mean as ever” (174). These adjectives demonstrate quite the opposite of a desirable society, creating the atmosphere of a dystopia.

As the President of San Lorenzo, “Papa,” claims that the nation is a capitalist country, the workers exhibit similar symptoms of discontent as the characters in *Player Piano*. The workers of San Lorenzo demonstrate disinterest in most any activity that does not feed the animalistic needs of humans, just as in *Player Piano*. All of the people of San Lorenzo practice the Bokononist religion, which includes a ceremony of intimacy involving the placing of the soles of their feet together. This is called “*boko-maru*, or the mingling of awareness” as “Bokononists believe that it is impossible to be sole-to-sole with another person without loving the person, provided the feet of both persons are clean and nicely tended” (Vonnegut, *Cat's* 158). While this sounds odd and innocent enough, the process and end-result is described in erotic terms. Likening *boko-maru* to sexual intimacy demonstrates the workers’ extreme interest in animalistic activities. Jonah first learns of this when stumbling upon two painters who should have been working: “the two painters weren’t painting when I appeared” (157). It is no coincidence that these Bokononists are workers avoiding their job. By detailing that they are workers, Vonnegut is able to show that the suppressed worker “no longer feels himself to be freely active in any but his animal functions,” among which Marx and Engels list “procreati[on]” (“Manuscripts” 767). The historian of San Lorenzo, Philip Castle, affirms the suspicion concerning the San Lorenzans’ limited concerns: “The people of San Lorenzo ... are interested in only three things: fishing, fornication, and Bokononism” (Vonnegut, *Cat's* 234). Fishing, of course, fuels the animalistic need to eat and the fornication refers to *boko-maru*. Vonnegut affirms the problems of a capitalist society, using Marxist theories to depict a dystopia to establish the necessary foundation for the location of his apocalypse.

Although the citizens of San Lorenzo show no interest in scientific progress, the President is very interested—particularly in *ice-nine*. “Papa” Monzano welcomes the son of Felix Hoenikker, Franklin, to the country because he recognizes the value of science, especially after learning of Franklin’s possession of *ice-nine*. “Papa,” stricken with cancer and near death, knows that he must arrange a successor, and so he says in front of everyone, “Franklin Hoenikker—you will be the next President of San Lorenzo. Science—you have science. Science is the strongest thing there is” (Vonnegut, *Cat’s* 146). The President’s statement has double meaning: Franklin is known to have a natural gift with science like his father, but, more appropriately, he holds the “gift” of *ice-nine*, a product of his father’s science. By holding such a dangerous material, Franklin could command respect of other nations with threats to use it as a weapon. It is more the *ice-nine* that moves the decision of “Papa,” not Franklin’s ability, as Jonah will later discover that Franklin used *ice-nine* to bribe his way into a high-ranking job in the military—it is not his intelligence that he used. The President’s enthusiasm—opposed to what should be fear—for *ice-nine* demonstrates his excessive appreciation for the destructive attribute of science as well as his contribution to the impending apocalypse.

Vonnegut uses the careless treatment of *ice-nine* to note the incapability of man to harness the power offered by dangerous progress in science; here, he is able to note the need for restraint. While traveling to San Lorenzo, Jonah meets Newton and Angela on a plane. Although he does not know it at the moment, he would later learn that both of the children of Felix Hoenikker were carrying particles of *ice-nine*. He is horrified to think of the danger that the two guardians of *ice-nine* put the entire planet in by traveling over water: “The little son of a bitch had a crystal of *ice-nine* in a thermos bottle in his luggage, and so did his miserable sister, while under us was God’s own amount of water, the Caribbean Sea” (Vonnegut, *Cat’s* 111). If

the plane had crashed or if somehow the pieces of *ice-nine* fell into the water, then the apocalypse would have been quickly ushered in as the sea would freeze, causing a chain reaction and ushering in a new ice age. In addition to this moment of carelessness, Newton and Angela also let their guard down regarding the *ice-nine* by telling their secret to their life companions. However, these “companions” had actually deceived Newton and Angela in order to steal particles of *ice-nine* in order to supply their governments with the substance for weaponry. Jonah explains how the world’s two super powers of the time now held the incredibly dangerous *ice-nine*: “The United States had obtained it through Angela’s husband, whose plant in Indianapolis was understandably surrounded by electrified fences and homicidal German shepherds. And Soviet Russia had come by it through Newt’s little Zinka, that winsome troll of Ukrainian ballet” (Vonnegut, *Cat’s* 244). Vonnegut purposely chooses the United States and Soviet Russia to be the two countries that obtain *ice-nine*. During the Cold War, the world feared that it was on the brink of an atomic war since both nations possessed atomic bombs. Vonnegut is able to comment socially on the dangers of excessive scientific progress because *ice-nine* is similar to an atomic bomb in potential for destruction, yet on a grander scale. Vonnegut suggests that sometimes it is best just not to gain knowledge if that knowledge provides inevitably-flawed, fallen man with the ability to destroy the entire world.

Vonnegut emphasizes that all men—not just the Hoenikker family—holding such power through science will end in corruption no matter the process as Jonah questions, “What hope can there be for mankind ... when there are such men as Felix Hoenikker to give such playthings as *ice-nine* to such short-sighted children as almost all men and women are?” (Vonnegut, *Cat’s* 245). As Vonnegut labels the Hoenikker children as “short-sighted,” he is sure to note that this title belongs to all mankind as he continues “as almost all men and women are,” indicating that

this is no special circumstance; this could (and probably would) happen to nearly every person.

Vonnegut seems to say that inventing dangerous substances that can be used as weapons to destroy will lead to the apocalypse in most every situation.

Vonnegut further comments on the dystopian society of San Lorenzo by noting the incapability of its leader. Vonnegut notes that excessive reliance solely on science leaves one with incomplete answers. After Frank Hoenikker realizes that he must take control of the country, he grows fearful because he knows that he will make an imperfect leader. “Papa” has chosen him for only two intertwining reasons: first, he has *ice-nine* and secondly, he is naturally gifted with science. However, these two aspects of Frank are far from enough to supply him with the resume to be the president of a country—let alone one that is economically downtrodden. Frank understands that he must find someone more qualified to take his place. He decides to nominate Jonah and pleads with him, saying, “You’re a worldly person, used to meeting the public; and I’m a technical person, used to working behind the scenes, making things go” (196). Because Jonah is a skilled communicator, Frank believes that he will make a better president since he is a strong speaker. Frank promises to support him by standing behind him as a scientific advisor. This, though, does not easily fix Frank’s problem, but instead demonstrates that the leaders of San Lorenzo are very misinformed, short-sighted, and almost idiotic. Jonah is a writer, not a political leader; he does not have the background in any sense that would make him a strong president. He does accept the position as he is promised that the beautiful daughter of “Papa,” Mona, will marry him if he does. Here, one president is replaced with another and another, each becoming less and less capable of leading the country. Without strong, informed leaders, a country cannot flourish, which speaks to the dystopia of San Lorenzo,

demonstrating that the problems in the country may be drawn back to those at the top of the class system: the leaders.

Poor leadership of the country acts as a catalyst for the destruction of the world as “Papa,” who is fascinated with science, contributes to the introduction of *ice-nine* to the world. As “Papa” suffers from his cancer, he decides to kill himself so that he may be free of his pain. He has apparently obtained *ice-nine* from Frank at some point, and he drops a piece of it in his mouth. The *ice-nine* reacts to the natural water within his body, causing him to immediately freeze over frosty, icy, and blue. He could have chosen some other way to kill himself that would be less threatening to others, but he instead places the rest of the world in danger by exposing the substance. Right before he does so, Jonah narrates that “Papa” says, “Now I will destroy the whole world” (Vonnegut, *Cat’s* 238). Jonah is assured that this is simply what all Bokononists say before they kill themselves, yet the actions of “Papa” actually do ultimately “destroy the whole world,” but whether or not he meant to do so is unclear. His doctor, Von Koenigswald, unaware of what has happened fully, touches the lips of “Papa” to see why he has turned to ice. After this, Von Koenigswald then washes his hands, which reacts to the *ice-nine* present on his skin, causing him to also freeze entirely and die. The President’s choice of *ice-nine* as the substance to kill himself has direct consequences for those around him and the implications of this are almost immediate with Von Koenigswald’s death.

“Papa’s” choice in method of suicide does not only lead to Von Koenigswald’s death, but the entire world turns to *ice-nine*, something Vonnegut describes with very biblically apocalyptic imagery. Jonah and the Hoenikker children demonstrate bad judgment just as leaders of San Lorenzo do by not properly disposing of the two dead bodies covered in the deadly, highly-contagious substance. Instead, they attend a ceremony as an outward sign of their

duty, but their true leadership is compromised by not taking care of the dangerous situation, fueling the idiocy that has added to the dystopia at present. During the ceremony, a jet accidentally crashes into “Papa’s” castle, causing the two bodies to fall into the sea—“Papa” certainly has contributed to “destroying the whole world” as he had promised right before taking his life. This, of course, causes a terrible chain reaction as the sea freezes over and the earth begins to crack. Jonah explains the impending apocalypse and the earthquake, saying, “The ragged rim of oblivion was now inches from my curling toes” (Vonnegut, *Cat’s* 259). The breaking of the ground in relationship to the freezing of the sea demonstrates just how severe the situation is; losing the sea to ice is not the only consequence for abusing *ice-nine*. Leonard Mustazza points out in *Forever Pursuing Genesis* that Vonnegut alludes to the apocalypse in the Bible to detail his apocalypse in *Cat’s Cradle*: “Vonnegut also employs here bitter echoes of the book of Revelation, leaving us with a vivid image of the destroyed Earth, of the Earth where ‘there was no longer any sea’ (Revelation 21:1)” (76). Vonnegut uses other biblical symbols to reinforce the emotion following the apocalypse, saying, “There was sound like that of the gentle closing of a portal as big as the sky, the great door of heaven being closed softly” (*Cat’s* 261). This is in reference to the book of Revelation when the Apostle John (which happens to be Jonah’s real name) is taken to heaven through a door to see what would happen during the Christian apocalypse: “After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven. And the voice I had first heard speaking to me like a trumpet said, ‘Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this’” (Revelation 4.1). In a sense, it is as if Vonnegut is pointing out that the door to heaven is now closed since the apocalypse has come to pass as predicted in Revelation.

As the *ice-nine* freezes the entire sea, the equilibrium of the world is disrupted and natural disasters wreck the world. This substance that has been created from nature out of ice and manipulated by science demonstrates the problems with excessive scientific exploration.

Jonah writes:

The sky darkened. *Borasisi*, the sun, became a sickly yellow ball, tiny and cruel.

The sky was filled with worms. The worms were tornadoes....[T]ornadoes, strewing the poisonous blue-white frost of *ice-nine* everywhere, tore everyone and everything above ground to pieces. Anything that still lived would die soon enough of thirst—or hunger—or rage—or apathy. (Vonnegut, *Cat's* 264)

While tornadoes occur naturally and so does ice, the high freezing point of *ice-nine* is not natural and disrupts the world: the freezing point of the ice also would seem excessively high, similar to the problems of attempting scientific progress in excess. Clark Mayo speaks of this in *Kurt Vonnegut: The Gospel from Outer Space*: “Here is the ultimate threat in an Absurd universe: not even the physical world is stable” (29). Also, Jonah notes that everything which somehow survived would eventually die of extremes: thirst (extreme lack of water), hunger (extreme lack of food), rage (extreme anger), or apathy (extreme lack of caring). Without a nourishing planet to provide for the people, they could not live. This includes Jonah and a few others who manage to escape to an underground bomb shelter. The use of the bomb shelter illustrates the fear of atomic warfare. Vonnegut plays with the image of the bomb shelter to reinforce that what is occurring with the abuse of *ice-nine* could just as likely happen with an atomic bomb. It also remains true that those who somehow find safety in a bomb shelter could still lose their lives for want of physical nourishment or for emotional issues (i.e., rage or apathy). These extremes all

mirror the uncontrolled limitations with which the characters of *Cat's Cradle* pursued scientific advancement: their fascination without limits brought on the pain of an apocalypse.

Through the symbolism of technology and science, Vonnegut demonstrates mankind's inherent thirst for power and how this in combination with excessive power can result in extreme dangers for the world. Technology offers to make life simpler for people and also to empower those who can invent new gadgets as an occupation. However, Vonnegut explains in *Player Piano* that people should not be forced out of their jobs simply because a machine can do their work more effectively. Everyone should be entitled to the self-respect that comes with an occupation if the person is willing to work hard and do their best. Similarly, Vonnegut explores the dangers that come with excessive science exploration. He explains that just because a world-threatening substance *can* be created does not necessarily mean that it *should* be. Vonnegut believes that mankind is easily corrupted when given power, and scientists should recognize the necessary boundaries of power. In both of these situations, without boundaries, the power achieved result in dystopian societies and then the apocalypse harms the entire world.

Notes

¹Vonnegut uses fiery imagery to evoke the image of an apocalypse in his novels, such as *Player Piano*, *Cat's Cradle*, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, and *Breakfast of Champions*.

Chapter Three: The Apocalypse Through Excessive Social Power: Religion, Class, and War

The corruption of social power often appears in the novels of Kurt Vonnegut since social justice concerned him greatly. Because man stands inherently flawed, Vonnegut's characters are unable to maintain power with any purity. They instead abuse the privilege of social power, bringing about the apocalypse. Those in power frequently intend to use their influence to better mankind, but they are unable to maintain necessary limitations and harmony due to their human nature. In addition to this basic problem, humans take the next step of unconsciously developing dystopian societies due to the corruption of power, which then culminates in an apocalypse. Similar to the abuse of power through science and technology, social dystopias move humans toward the apocalypse. The characters of Vonnegut's novels often abuse the social power they gain through religion, class, and war.

While Vonnegut considered himself to be an atheist (Marvin 11), the dangers of religious power are examined in *Cat's Cradle*, but not to the extreme of condemning all religion. Instead, Vonnegut notes the danger of religion being used to control or manipulate. In *Cat's Cradle*, Bokonon, a religious leader, develops lies with the intention of helping the people, yet an untruth cannot bring happiness since lies cannot stand up to reality. The leader of the religion, Bokonon, gains unquestionable influence over the people, and as a result, he brings about the apocalypse by misguiding his followers. David Ketter explains in *New Worlds for Old* that "the religious element remains a constant identifying characteristic of the apocalyptic imagination" (333). It is by no accident, then, that Vonnegut uses religion to illustrate the dangers of an apocalypse.

In *Cat's Cradle*, Bokononism is a religion, which is based on the belief that truth cannot be found. Jonah, the narrator of *Cat's Cradle*, explains that Bokonon begins *The Books of Bokonon* warning, "All of the true things I am about to tell you are shameless lies" (Vonnegut 5). "[T]rue things" and "shameless lies" are placed in opposition with one another, creating an

oxymoron. From the beginning, Bokonon acknowledges that the answers and wisdom that he offers have no basis of truth, making them illegitimate. Despite this acknowledgement, Bokonon proceeds to tell lies anyway. Peter J. Reed writes in “Vonnegut’s Bitter Fool: Kilgore Trout” that “Bokonon is a debunker, a demystifier, a mocker, an alternative voice through which Vonnegut can find the freedom to be as iconoclastic as he pleases” (69). Vonnegut uses Bokonon to illustrate the possible deception of religion. In order to deliver these untruths to the people, Bokonon follows the model of many other religions by illustrating his messages with parables and poetry in the form of Calypsos. Even these pieces of religious literature acknowledge the mistruths of Bokononism. One such parable ends with a message saying, “She was a fool, and so am I, and so is anyone who thinks he sees what God is Doing” (Vonnegut, *Cat’s* 5). Bokonon does not deny the existence of God or of truth, but states that man cannot find it. Marvin writes that “[w]hile most religions encourage their adherents to believe in the truth of the stories they tell, Bokonon considers belief dangerous” (88). This Postmodern idea, however, does not stop Bokonon from telling his “shameless lies,” nor does it stop people from dedicating their lives to Bokononism.

Because the novel slowly introduces the concept of Bokononism, Vonnegut first warns of the dangers of religion by demonstrating the extreme of an absence of religion through scientists. The scientists rely on finding universal truths and answers to life through the avenue of science as opposed to religion. They remark that people’s religion become a problem as people are “superstitious instead of scientific. [I]f everybody would study science more, there wouldn’t be all the trouble there [is]” (Vonnegut, *Cat’s* 24). As the people sit in a bar discussing science, one person remembers a scientist promising that “science was going to discover the basic secret of life someday” (24). This “secret of life” is not as enlightening as one would hope for as the

people cannot remember what it concerned, only that it was “something about protein” (25). The people in the bar represent everyday man, and scientific exploration does not prove to be efficient in satisfying mankind’s questions in life. The scientist’s uncovered secret significance is not accessible by average people. As mentioned in Chapter Two, however, such an approach to life does not bring about satisfaction of humanity’s longings, only destruction, yet it is important to note the attitude of the scientists as a polar opposite of the Bokononists. However, the Bokononists will bring about destruction as well since they are also operating on an extreme.

In opposition to science, the religion of Bokononism is an invention with the purpose of helping the people of San Lorenzo who are depressed both emotionally and economically. It is explained to Jonah that “McCabe and Johnson dreamed of making San Lorenzo a Utopia. To this end, McCabe overhauled the economy and the laws. Johnson designed a new religion” (Vonnegut, *Cat’s* 127). Johnson re-named himself Bokonon and created the religion to give hope to the people, yet it was hope based on deception. In response to this, Bokonon composes a calypso:

I wanted all things
To seem to make some sense,
So we all could be happy, yes,
Instead of tense.
And I made up lies
So that they all fit nice,
And I made this sad world
A par-a-dise. (127)

Bokonon presents the world before his religion was created, calling it “tense” and a “sad world,” but he believes that his “lies” will intermingle with the people of San Lorenzo to “fit nice” and create a “paradise.” Interestingly enough, San Lorenzo itself does appear to be the typical vision of paradise with a tropical climate, waterfalls, and a jungle. However, it is explained to Jonah that the economic state of the island was hopeless, so a religion was created to bring the island closer to utopia: “Well, when it became evident that no governmental or economic reform was going to make the people much less miserable, the religion became the one real instrument of hope. Truth was the enemy of the people, because the truth was so terrible, so Bokonon made it his business to provide the people with better and better lies” (172). San Lorenzo boasts beautiful landscapes; however, the lovely appearance of the island is deceptive. The conditions of life are less than desirable because everyone suffers in poverty, mirroring Bokononism with desirable, optimistic lies on the surface while the reality of life is stark and poisonous.

The lies of Bokononism began to extend beyond simple mistruths as the people relied on the religion for all of their hope, all the while knowing in their hearts the truth. To make the religion more exciting, Bokonon added another lie by banishing himself. Jonah learns that “[i]t was his own idea [to become an outlaw]. He asked McCabe to outlaw him and his religion, too, in order to give the religious life of the people more zest, more zang” (Vonnegut, *Cat's* 173). Bokonon continued to create falsehood with his religion by exiling himself and making the practice of Bokononism illegal. Olderman states that Bokonism “is probably Vonnegut’s most complete and imaginative creation of an illusionary mythology” (201). Vonnegut is able to create a complex, detailed history of the religion, complete with Bokonon’s banishment of himself. Once again, Bokonon composes a Calypso to document the occasion:

So I said good-bye to government,

And I gave my reason:
 That a really good religion
 Is a form of treason. (173)

This calypso presents a double meaning because Bokonon's "good religion" truly was "a form of treason" as he deceived the entire country with his lies. This decision began an even larger charade: Bokonon and McCabe found themselves investing in their pretend roles to such an extreme that they began to believe in the game themselves. In response to the new "zang" and "zest," "[t]he truth was that life was a short and brutish and mean as ever. But people didn't have to pay as much attention to the awful truth. As the living legend of the cruel tyrant in the city and the gentle holy man in the jungle grew, so, too, did the happiness of the people grow" (174). The people are content when following the religion of Bokononism, yet this does not make up for the fact that all they believe in is a lie. Olderman explains that the people of San Lorenzo "are given an array of illusions to live by, but can make no use of them, for how can an illusion be anything but an illusion if we are conscious that it *is* one?" (190). Because the religion is a lie, Bokonon's offered hope is useless. Bokonon's intentions seem to be for the better, yet the hope he offers is impure. Playing the part of a religious leader to such an extreme causes both him and McCabe to lose their hold on reality, which later will act as a catalyst for the apocalypse.

The illegal "zest" and "zang" surrounding Bokononism continued to alter the function of San Lorenzo as laws were instated to assist the hype, but these laws were founded on falsehood since everyone secretly acknowledges that all people of San Lorenzo follow the religion. The leaders of San Lorenzo proudly proclaim that it is a "Christian country," and signs are placed throughout the land proclaiming penalties for following Bokononist rituals and rewards for the

life of Bokonon, such as “ANYBODY CAUGHT PRACTICING BOKONISM IS SAN LORENZO WILL DIE ON THE HOOK!” and “THIS IS A CHRISTIAN NATION! ALL FOOT PLAY WILL BE PUNISHED TO BY THE HOOK” (Vonnegut, *Cat’s* 134-135). This “foot play” mentioned is a ritual called *boko-maru*, which is described by a Bokononist as being “*boko-maru*, or the mingling of awareness. We Bokononists believe that it is impossible to be sole-to-sole with another person without loving the person, provided the feet of both persons are clean and nicely tended” (158). *Boko-maru* creates a strong intimacy between two people, and after experiencing *boko-maru* for himself, Jonah cannot understand to promiscuity of others. Instead, he demands monogamy of his partner, but she exclaims that love of that kind is meant to be shared. Despite the reaction of Bokononists to *boko-maru*, it actually is as meaningless as the rest of the religion. Vonnegut defines the ritual with playfulness as the act of placing one’s feet with another’s seems quite insignificant. The sanctity of religious ritual here is ridiculed as *boko-maru* holds no true meaning, yet Bokonon continues to bring the people happiness through deception. The thrill of *boko-maru* can be attributed to the fact that it is outlawed, defying any true aspect of spirituality in the ritual. When Jonah accidentally walks in on two workers performing the ritual, they beg him not to tell, but he sincerely does not understand why they fear that they will get in trouble. If the act were illegal, *boko-maru* would lose its meaning.

However, the people believe that if one were caught practicing Bokononism or taking part in *boko-maru*, no matter how insignificant the act of it leads to the “hook”—that is, death on “the hook,” a large hook meant for the public execution of Bokononists. The hook functions to fuel the excitement of practicing the religion illegally. Jonah is told that the leader of San Lorenzo “executes one [Bokononist] every two years—just to keep the pot boiling” (Vonnegut, *Cat’s* 176). Although everyone in San Lorenzo is a Bokononist and “Papa” even requests a

Bokononist ceremony on his deathbed, people still are killed for following the religion. This is for the simple purpose of keeping the religion thriving despite the fact that everyone understands that it is entirely a farce. Mayo agrees with this reading of the hook's importance: "Religion needs a threat to itself to be important and 'meaningful,' and in San Lorenzo, the hooks replaces the lions" (30). The consequence of the hook re-enforces the importance of Bokononism for its followers, yet the punishment of the hook is contrived for that purpose, making it insignificant.

Althusser gives a name to the methods used in San Lorenzo in his "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." Althusser explains that ideological state apparatuses are "a certain number of realities which present themselves to the immediate observer in the form of distinct and specialized institutions" (1489). These apparatuses include churches or religion. The ideological state apparatuses are used to indoctrinate the citizens and assimilate them into society as the government deems necessary. Bokononism is a prime example of this. All of the people of San Lorenzo follow Bokononism without question to a dangerous extreme. When the ideological state apparatuses fail, the government has a secondary, more severe enforcement. Althusser explains that the "State is a 'machine' of repression" and so at times the repressive state apparatuses is necessary when the Ideological State Apparatuses fail (1487). The hook stands as an example of one of the repressive state apparatuses of San Lorenzo because when the ideology is not effective, force is required. These approaches are at odds with one another, yet both are imposed by the government: A person becomes a Bokononist because of the ideological state apparatus, but if the person is unlucky enough to be the "one every two years," then he will die on the hook, which is the repressive state apparatus. Despite the fact that Vonnegut places the apparatuses at odds with one another, they also assist one another. The ideological state apparatus provides the repressive state apparatus with Bokononists to execute,

and the thrill of the use of the repressive state apparatus then strengthens the ideological state apparatus by adding the “zang” of inspiration, bringing about more Bokononists. This cycle continues on and on so that being a Bokononist is continually more and more thrilling and there is always a Bokononist to execute. Thus, power is used to an unhealthy extreme since people are being harmed for the sake of a religion that is based merely on lies.

After the government has created Bokononists of all of the people of San Lorenzo, Bokonon abuses the power he has gained following the apocalypse caused by *ice-nine*. Jonah manages to escape the apocalypse brought on by *ice-nine* and hides away in an old shelter. When he goes to see the remains of the world, he discovers instead the destruction caused by abuse of social power through religion. Jonah narrates that he stumbled upon “thousands upon thousands of dead. On the lips of each decedent was the blue-white frost of *ice-nine*. ... And, since each corpse had its finger in or near its mouth, I understood that each person had delivered himself to this melancholy place and then poisoned himself with *ice-nine*” (272). Here, it is apparent that the people all chose to commit suicide for some reason. Upon further examination, Jonah realizes what has caused them to do this when he finds a note left by Bokonon:

To whom it may concern: These people around you are almost all of the survivors on San Lorenzo of the winds that followed the freezing of the sea. These people made a captive of the spurious holy man named Bokonon. They brought him here, placed him at their center, and commanded him to tell them exactly what God Almighty was up to and what they should now do. The mountebank told them that God was surely trying to kill them, possibly because He was through with them, and that they should have the good manners to die. This, as you can see, they did. (Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle* 272-273)

Bokonon deceives the people for the last time with his lies by telling them that they should kill themselves, the ultimate abuse of power and influence. The innumerable dead bring out the feeling of the apocalypse. Bokonon does not act as a reliable prophet of God, but instead gives the message that would benefit himself only: As Bokonon is “made a captive,” he is able to defeat his enemies, the people, by tricking them into killing themselves so that he may escape. Jonah reacts to this finding in horror, but a fellow Bokononist survivor, Mona, responds differently, saying, “He always said he would never take his own advice, because he knew it was worthless” (273). With an understanding of Bokononism, Mona is able to recognize that a true follower of the religion would know that Bokonon’s prophesies are simply lies. However, this does not stop Mona from conforming to Bokonon’s message—she, too, takes up the *ice-nine* and kills herself. Bokononism no longer offers hope, but now hopelessness and death. The people of San Lorenzo devote themselves to the religion to a destructive extreme as Bokonon abuses his social-religious power to bring about the apocalypse.

In response to seeing the destruction of Bokononism, Jonah searches for answers in a decaying world only to find himself deceived as well. As he finds life to be meaningless, he longs to place a symbol on Mount McCabe and contemplates the state of life by writing a book, presumably the book that the reader holds in his hands. Going for a walk, Jonah finds Bokonon writing the final book of Bokonon, which reads, “If I were a younger man, I would write a history of human stupidity; and I would climb to the top of Mount McCabe and lie down on my back with my history for a pillow; and I would take from the ground some of the blue-white poison that makes statues of men; and I would make a statue of myself, lying on my back, ginning horribly, and thumbing my nose at You Know Who” (Vonnegut, *Cat’s Cradle* 287). It is with this that *Cat’s Cradle* ends. Oddly enough, Bokonon seems to know exactly what Jonah

is searching for. Bokonon mentions “a history of human stupidity,” which would be the book that Jonah wrote. Bokonon also states that Jonah should take this book to the top of Mount McCabe, the exact place where Jonah hoped to leave a symbol. It seems that Bokonon suggests that Jonah implant himself as the symbol by killing himself with *ice-nine* in defiance to God. While Jonah’s reaction is not entirely clear, it can be assumed that Jonah followed Bokonon’s advice since the book ends. Of course, if Jonah did kill himself with his book under his head, he would not have been able to write this act down for the reader to learn. If this reading is accepted, then Jonah has fallen into the same trap of deception just as the rest of the San Lorenzans. Such a reading is probable as Jonah studied the writings of Bokonon for six months before the ending of the text. Olderman explains that “we too are headed for cataclysm unless we find something to live by” (191), and Vonnegut demonstrates that lies, no matter how attractive, simply will not do.

While people may allow themselves to be manipulated by a powerful religious leader, most individuals cannot escape the influence of social class. Social class is built into the structure of society. The misfortunes of abusing social power through class can be recognized throughout the novels of Kurt Vonnegut as a repeated theme. Because Vonnegut’s family was well-to-do prior to the Great Depression, he was able to understand the ease available to the members of the upper class. However, his family members lost most of their money during the Great Depression, and his father went without work as an architect for over ten years, draining the family of its funds and status. Because of this, Vonnegut is able to see both the lifestyles of the rich and the poor. Vonnegut remarks in interviews and comments in his novels show that he believes it is a crime for some people to have so much while others have so little. He explains in an interview with John Hickenlooper, “I’d say, because of the unequal distribution of wealth in

this country and of jobs and of education and so forth, we're failing" (3). Because the members of the upper class gain so much power, they take power away from the lower class as the class divisions separate further. It is because of that the upper class's excessive social power damages the lower class: the upper class utopia creates the lower class dystopia, culminating in the apocalypse.

Vonnegut repeats his ideas concerning social class throughout his novels, but concentrates these claims in his work *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, a novel published in 1965. This work by Vonnegut examines money and the social power associated with it. Vonnegut admits from the very beginning, "A sum of money is a leading character in this tale about people" (*Rosewater* 1). Here, Vonnegut explains that the novel is about people themselves, and the money is what ties them together. The "money" mentioned is the Rosewater fortune. Eliot Rosewater, the heir of the fortune and protagonist of the novel, defies his place in society by acting in a way that Vonnegut would praise. Eliot is a member of a well-to-do family that traces its wealth back from the beginning of the United States, but Eliot is able to escape the repeated dangers and corruption of social power and class. Josh Simpson explains in "This Promising of Great Secrets': Literature, Ideas, and the (Re)Invention of Reality in Kurt Vonnegut's *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and *Breakfast of Champions*" that Eliot Rosewater cannot fully escape the implications of a corrupt society simply because he tries to be generous with his wealth:

knowing that [Eliot Rosewater] has done nothing to earn such wealth and comfort, is filled with grief and compassion when he recognizes how impoverished virtually everyone else in America is. Overcome with guilt, he

develops a severe drinking problem and turns to the arts—science fiction in particular—in an attempt to understand better himself and the world in which he lives. (n. pag.)

While Eliot tries to avoid adding to the dystopia of the lower class, he will ultimately experience his own apocalypse.

Exploring the origins of the Rosewater fortune, Vonnegut glances at the history of wealth in America, noting the problems of excessive power associated with money. Vonnegut explains, “When the United States of America, which was meant to be a Utopia for all, was less than a century old, Noah Rosewater and a few men like him demonstrated the folly of the Founding Fathers in one respect: those sadly recent ancestors had not made it the law of the Utopia that the wealth of each citizen should be limited” (*Rosewater* 8). As America was meant to be an ideal, new society of equality, Vonnegut notes that without a limit on wealth, not every man could be equal. Charles B. Harris explains in *Contemporary American Novelists of the Absurd* that “[u]sing Eliot as his spokesman, Vonnegut makes clear his belief that the American dream has failed” (59). Without equality, the utopia of America becomes a dystopia for many. Ketter affirms this notion, saying, “American society is, in fact, a projected utopia that now seems to have turned into a dystopia” (23). Vonnegut details the connection between the American utopia myth by applying Marxist theories to the Rosewater family’s fortune.

As the Rosewater fortune is passed down, the power surrounding the money continues to grow and Vonnegut’s understanding of Marxist ideas can be recognized. Vonnegut notes that such power easily leads to corruption:

And Samuel bought newspapers, and preachers, too. He gave them this simple lesson to teach, and they taught it well: *Anybody who thought that the United*

States of America was supposed to be a Utopia was a piggy, lazy, God-damned fool. Samuel thundered that no American factory hand was worth more than eighty cents a day. And yet he could be thankful for the opportunity to pay a hundred thousand dollars or more for a painting by an Italian three centuries dead. (Rosewater 10)

Samuel, the new heir of the fortune, uses his money and class to gain social power. He takes over avenues of communication with his influence, the newspapers and religion through preachers. Here, Vonnegut returns to the idea presented by Althusser as previously mentioned with *Cat's Cradle*. Althusser explains that “churches” and “most newspapers” are “of *private* domain,” making their influence part of the ideological state apparatus (1489). Marvin provides a Marxist reading of *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* by noting “the novel’s depiction of how the ideology of the rich is forced on the working class” (110). The newspapers and preachers bought up by Samuel serve as his mouth piece and his means to push his ideology onto the working class. While the government may not directly be involved in Samuel’s control, he and many other Rosewaters become involved in politics. As members of the upper class, or bourgeois, it is in their interest to suppress the demands of the lower class in order to maintain their wealth and position in society. Samuel reduces the factory worker to a commodity, noting that he is not worth “more than eighty cents a day;” because Samuel claims that the factory worker himself is not worth much opposed to saying his work is not worth much, the worker loses his place in society as an individual and becomes a commodity. Despite Samuel’s criticism of the lower class American worker’s worth, Vonnegut points out that he was fortunate enough to use his money to purchase expensive art. This is reminiscent of ideas of Karl Marx and Fredrich Engels: “With the *increasing value* of the world of things proceeds in direct proportion the *devaluation*

of the world of men” (“Manuscripts” 764). Samuel points to the laziness of working men and devalues them, yet Samuel himself has done little to no labor in order to earn his fortune. The idea of utopia is disbanded as Samuel is permitted to enjoy wealth and ease in life while others suffer. The progression of Samuel’s utopia is equal to that of everyday-man’s dystopia.

Eliot Rosewater, however, becomes a different type of rich man. He gives from his fortune to help others. Vonnegut recognizes that this can be a common longing for members of the upper class, but few fully act on it. Eliot lives his life preaching fairness and kindness. He writes in a letter to his unknown successor: “Be generous. Be kind. ... Be a sincere, attentive friend of the poor” (Vonnegut, *Rosewater* 12). Eliot lives out his commandment himself by living in an area called Rosewater and giving advice and money to anyone in need. In response to his generosity, the people of Rosewater always have someone to go to when they are in need and they frequently end their phone calls saying, “God bless you, Mr. Rosewater!” Eliot becomes a father figure to everyone in need, which a person’s father will later prove to affect the child’s life drastically.

Even those lucky enough to be born into the “right” family are not always welcomed into the upper class if they do not have the “right” father. Fred Rosewater, a cousin of Eliot Rosewater, does not enjoy the family’s money. Instead, he labors and suffers as a hard-working member of the lower class as a life insurance salesman: “Poor Fred worked like hell for the few dollars he brought home once in a while” (Vonnegut, *Rosewater* 135). Vonnegut notes that so much in life heavily depends on the identity of one’s father. Fred Rosewater’s parents did not have access to the family money, but were able to make a decent living through the stock market. However, this did not last as the family lost all of its money in the stock market crash of the Great Depression. In response to this steep loss, his father killed himself, leaving a heavy

impression on Fred. Vonnegut explains that “[s]ons of suicides often think of killing themselves at the end of a day, when their blood sugar is low. And so it was with Fred Rosewater when he came home from work” (*Rosewater* 196). Luckily, Fred does not kill himself as he thinks of his own son and his place as a father: “Fred thought of taking a lot of sleeping pills, remembered his son again” (Vonnegut, *Mr. Rosewater* 198). Here, Fred does not wish to continue the cycle of leaving a son fatherless.

Vonnegut presents Fred’s foil through Stewart, another man whose life was altered by losing his father at a young age. Stewart’s life is very different, though, because his father left behind a large sum of wealth and a comfortable lifestyle. Vonnegut first introduces the reader to Stewart by following his daughter, Lila, through her neighborhood: “Lila Buntline peddled her bicycle through the muffled beauty of Piquontuit’s Utopian lanes. Every house she passed was a very expensive dream come true. The owners of the houses did not have to work at all. Neither would their children have to work, nor want a thing, unless somebody revolted” (*Rosewater* 163). After having seen the life of Fred, Stewart’s can be recognized as being much more luxurious even before entering his home. Not only does Vonnegut call the neighborhood a “Utopia,” but the home owners do not have to work. Their abundance stands in contrast to Fred, who works hard at a depressing, mindless job and has very little. After Lila enters her home, she checks on her father who is sleeping. Vonnegut explains that this is more or less his life— simply sleeping on the couch next to his alcohol. This lifestyle is possible because “[h]is father had left him fourteen million dollars, tobacco money mostly” and it “had increased by about eight hundred thousand dollars a year since it had been put in Stewart’s name. Business seemed to be pretty good. Other than that, Stewart didn’t know much about business” (Vonnegut, *Rosewater* 164). Here, Vonnegut emphasizes the corruption of the leisure class. Stewart does

nothing to provide for his family; he simply exists and allows someone else to take care of the business.

Stewart, though, is not left as a villain simply because he was born rich since Vonnegut emphasizes the humanity in all people. Vonnegut explores Stewart's true desires despite appearing to be lazy. After Stewart completed his first year as a student at Harvard, he approached his investors with the hope of sharing his wealth with the poor, saying, "The world is full of suffering, and money can do a lot to relieve that suffering, and I have far more money than I can use. I want to buy decent food and clothing and housing for the poor, and right away" (Vonnegut, *Rosewater* 168). Stewart's decision is an admirable one and exemplifies the compassion that Vonnegut would like to believe is at the heart of every man. However, Stewart's plans do not go through as his investors argue: "One of the principal activities of this firm is the prevention of saintliness on the part of our clients. You think you're unusual? You're not" (169). They claim that his idea is short sighted and misinformed by his professors. Instead, he should embrace his money and enjoy the comfortable life that his money brings: "Money is dehydrated Utopia. This is a dog's life for almost everybody, as your professors have taken such pains to point out. But, because of your miracle, life for you and yours can be a paradise!" (171). Once again, money and high class is attributed to the idea of "utopia," but those without money must live the "dog's life," or a dystopia.

Eliot Rosewater stands as a person who has committed his life to giving to the poor, yet his family members do not hold the same dedication. Eliot's father, Senator Rosewater, is disgusted by Eliot's decision, saying, "If Eliot's booze were shut off, his compassion for the maggots in the slime on the bottom of the human garbage pail would vanish" (Vonnegut, *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* 58). Clearly, Senator Rosewater sees the poor as lesser people as he

likens them to maggots. Harris analyzes Senator Rosewater's choice of description: "The metaphors he uses to describe the poor contain images often associated with evolutionary theory" (59). Senator Rosewater, holding a view of social Darwinism, sees himself as better and stronger than the poor because of his success. Because of his commitment to capitalism, Senator Rosewater asks Eliot if he has betrayed his country by becoming a Communist, and Eliot is able to respond with a balanced answer: "Nobody can work with the poor and not fall over Karl Marx from time to time—or just fall over the Bible as far as that goes" (121). This actually aligns with much of Vonnegut's own convictions concerning fairness, which he attributes to the Bible. More than forty years after writing *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, Vonnegut wrote in *A Man Without a Country*, "[I]f Christ hadn't delivered the Sermon on the Mount, with its message of mercy and pity, I wouldn't want to be a human being. I'd just as soon be a rattlesnake" (81). Eliot elaborates on his Marxist ideas, relating everything back to fairness and the need to share:

I think it's terrible the way people don't share things in this country. I think it's a heartless government that will let one baby be born owning a big piece of the country, the way I was born, and let another baby be born without owning anything. The least a government could do, it seems to me, is to divide things up fairly among the babies. Life is hard enough, without people having to worry themselves sick about *money*, too. There's plenty for everybody in this country, if we'll only *share* more. (Vonnegut, *Rosewater* 121)

Here, Eliot seems to call for a Marxist redistribution of wealth. He states that it is necessary for the government to do, taking the power of one's money out of the owner's hands. Eliot notes the government is "heartless" in not doing this since it is "unfair" to babies, which appeals the reader's emotions more than the use of an adult would. Though, Eliot does put his "money

where his mouth is” by “sending a share of International Business Machines stock to each child born in the county” (127). Here, Eliot does redistribute his wealth to babies by giving them stock when they are born.

Despite Eliot’s attempts at creating a fairer world, the effects of the conflicting utopian and dystopian societies in America bring a mental apocalypse to the Americans without discrimination. Both members of the lower class and the upper class experience insanity and mental breakdowns. Eliot’s wife and a member of the upper class, Sylvia, has a mental breakdown and a new psychological term is coined in her honor: “*Samaritrophia ... hysterical indifference to the troubles of those less fortunate than oneself*” (Vonnegut, *Rosewater* 51). Even after she is supposedly cured, Sylvia recognizes that she cannot continue to be married to Eliot with such differing views and plans to divorce him. Eliot himself fights for his mental stability as well at points, and Sylvia’s doctor states that “so deep is [Eliot’s] commitment to compassion, that, were he to come down with samaritrophia, I sense that he would kill himself, or perhaps kill a hundred others and then be shot down like a mad dog, before we could treat him” (54). This description presents an apocalyptic image of Eliot losing his mind and becoming a homicidal and suicidal monster. Members of the lower class are no different as Fred Rosewater continually battles thoughts of suicide. Also, the people whom Eliot labors so hard to assist often exhibit signs of mental illness. All of these examples of insanity and mental breakdowns can be attributed to the extreme separation of classes and the frustrations of the conflicting utopian and dystopian societies, which culminates in the apocalypse.

A recognizable apocalypse occurs while Eliot is traveling. However, this vivid image of fire coming down from the heavens is merely in Eliot’s mind. As Eliot travels, he finds himself reading a book titled *The Bombing of Germany*, which tells of the fire-storms in Dresden. This

topic is very important to Kurt Vonnegut since he was a prisoner of war in Dresden when the bombings took place. Afterward, Vonnegut continued to experience images of the apocalypse as he was forced to set fire to the dead bodies to avoid the spread of disease. Vonnegut would publish *Slaughterhouse-Five* four years after the publication of *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* and further explore this topic, including Eliot in his novel. In *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, Eliot sees a “firestorm of Indianapolis” in which “[h]e was awed by the majesty of the column of fire, which was at least eight miles in diameter and fifty miles high” (Vonnegut, *Rosewater* 253). This image of destruction is very similar to the biblical description of when fire would pour down from the skies during the apocalypse (Revelation 8.7). In fact, the narrator even states that “[t]he white seemed holy” (253). As holiness is associated with the fiery destruction, a biblical tone is further expressed. God’s judgment on the world during the apocalypse would be holy, making the apocalypse in Eliot’s mind noticeably biblical.

Simpson points out the consistency between *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, saying that Stanley Schatt once remarked, “Just as money is a central character in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, death serves that role in *Slaughterhouse-Five*,’ Vonnegut's much-anticipated and long-awaited Dresden book” (“This Promising”). Vonnegut explores mankind’s lack of self control concerning destruction, which can be exemplified by war. Vonnegut notes the dangers of a collective force moving forth for a political purpose. As a veteran of the Second World War, Vonnegut had personal emotions invested in the damage that war can bring since he witnessed scarring images with the fire-bombing of Dresden. He wrestled with his memories of the war, wanting to write a novel discussing the war, but the act of writing a novel on such a subject proved to be difficult:

When I got home from the Second World War twenty-three years ago, I thought it would be easy for me to write about the destruction of Dresden, since all I would to do would be to report what I had seen. And I thought, too, that it would be a masterpiece or at least make me a lot of money, since the subject was so big. But not many words about Dresden came from my mind then—not enough of them to make a book, anyway. And not many words come now, either, when I have become an old fart with his memories and his Pall Malls, with his sons full grown.

(Slaughterhouse-Five 2)

The difficulty that Vonnegut explains perhaps comes from his mixed feelings concerning war. Throughout the novel, he does not villainize the Germans nor does he condemn the war. The novel has a tone of certain fatalism—what is meant to happen will and all that one can do is make the best of life. In the preface of the novel, Vonnegut admits that an anti-war book is just as useful as an anti-glacier book: “there would always be wars, ... they were as easy to stop as glaciers. I believe that, too” (*Slaughterhouse 3*). Vonnegut explains that there is something inherent in man that leads him to war when he holds the proper weaponry and the means to attack, but this fact does not justify massive death as Vonnegut will detail with the apocalyptic bombing of Dresden. Instead, war should be acknowledged for the apocalypse that it is. Vonnegut tells his sons “that they are not under any circumstances to take part in massacres, and that the news of massacres of enemies is not to fill them with satisfaction or glee” (19). Commanding this of his sons, he also speaks to the reader, noting the danger that follows justifying such actions. Thus, Vonnegut finally completed his war novel—*Slaughterhouse-Five*.

While American’s dropping the atomic bomb Hiroshima is recognized as the beginning of apocalyptic fears in literature, the bombing of Dresden had a similar effect on Vonnegut. He

explains that the bombing of Dresden actually caused more deaths than the atomic bomb did on Hiroshima: “Not many Americans knew how much worse it had been than Hiroshima, for instance. I didn’t know that, either. There hadn’t been much publicity” (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse 10*). Despite not understanding the immediate magnitude of the attacks on Dresden, Vonnegut’s exposure to death left him with feelings similar to those who reacted to the bombing of Hiroshima despite not having seen the aftermath. Vonnegut remarks that 135,000 died in Dresden with “conventional weapons” whereas 71,379 died in Hiroshima with the use of an atomic bomb (188). While Vonnegut may not have known the death toll or the total implications of the Dresden bombing, perhaps the fact that such immense damage could be done with “conventional weapons” would lead to a stronger feeling of certain apocalypse. The invention of the atomic bomb was meant for massive destruction, but he saw that the atomic bomb was not needed for the collapse of the world as national leaders already held such potential through these “conventional weapons.” Raymond M. Olderman, author of *Beyond the Wasteland: A Study of the American Novel in the Nineteen-Sixties*, explains this horrific realization by Vonnegut: “This is the moment that Vonnegut himself keeps coming back to, a moment he actually witnessed as a prisoner of war; it is the personal basis of the apocalyptic darkness in his vision, for it man is capable of a senseless and absolutely gratuitous slaughter like Dresden, then he is capable of total world destruction” (196). Having witnessed the bombing of Dresden, Vonnegut finds himself terrified by man’s capacity to harm himself. Vonnegut fears that when mankind does not restrain himself, the potential of an apocalypse is certain.

While the story of *Slaughterhouse-Five* follows the real experiences of Vonnegut, he creates a fictional character, Billy Pilgrim, as the main character of the novel. However, Vonnegut cannot help but insert himself in the novel—at times affirming what Billy sees and

then detailing what he means in the introduction and conclusion. Reed comments on this trend: “Vonnegut felt increasing freedom to write autobiographically in introductory pages, or to include intermittent interjections” (67). For example, when arriving in Dresden, the narrator states, “Somebody behind him in the boxcar said, ‘Oz.’ That was I. That was me. The only other city I’d ever seen was Indianapolis, Indiana” (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse* 148). The connection between the story of the text and Vonnegut’s past is emphasized by Vonnegut’s including himself in this detached memoir. Even without the confession, “That was me,” a reader may recognize Vonnegut’s presence with the mention of Indianapolis, Indiana—Vonnegut’s hometown. Susanne Vees-Gulani, author of “Diagnosing Billy Pilgrim: A Psychiatric Approach to Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five*,” explains the significance of Vonnegut’s appearances: “The story of Billy’s trauma is not the only one in the novel; it is framed by that of the narrator, who is a fictionalized version of Vonnegut himself ... At the same time, the narrator interrupts Billy’s story on several occasions to authenticate the events” (180). Because of Vonnegut’s presence and affirmations of the story, the truth of the novel is emphasized—it is more than a fiction. This was Vonnegut’s reality, making the apocalypse a reality to him as well.

The bombing of Dresden is described by Vonnegut in clear apocalyptic terms. Similar to *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, Vonnegut uses biblical images of the apocalypse to note the damage caused by the bombing in the form of a fire-storm: “There was a fire-storm out there. Dresden was one big flame. The one flame ate everything organic, everything that would burn” (*Slaughterhouse* 178). The fire is reminiscent of the cleansing fire and judgment of God on the earth; however, this “judgment” is made by man with the purpose of trying to end the war more quickly. As the consuming fire and its aftermath poisoned the air, Vonnegut writes that “[i]t

wasn't safe to come out of the shelter until noon the next day. When the Americans and their guards did come out, the sky was black with smoke. The sun was an angry little pinhead.

Dresden was like the moon now, nothing but minerals. The stones were hot. Everybody else in the neighborhood was dead" (178). The bombing of Dresden resulted in complete desolation; the image of Dresden being "like the moon now, nothing but minerals" speaks to the absolute lack of life. Such destruction of a city was not as common with a bombing, especially considering that the people of Dresden thought themselves to be "safe" since it was a civilian city.

After returning home from the war, Billy Pilgrim experiences an additional apocalypse in his own mind—he finds himself going insane. Ketter emphasizes this point, saying, "It is in *Slaughterhouse-Five* that the relationship of this component to Vonnegut's larger, apocalyptic design becomes apparent. In this novel, Vonnegut attempts to confront the psychic wound that tenses his artistic bow" (299). Despite establishing a new, successful life in America with a fiancée and pursuing an education to become an optometrist, Billy is unable to silence the apocalyptic image that he witnessed during the war: "Billy had committed himself in the middle of his final year at the Ilium School of Optometry. Nobody else suspected that he was going crazy....The doctors agreed: He *was* going crazy" (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse* 100). Billy holds within himself the damage caused by war, even if those around him are unable to see it as "[n]obody else suspected the he was going crazy." Even after receiving treatment, the doctors also could not have access to the apocalypse within his mind. Vonnegut writes that the doctors "didn't think it had anything to do with the war. They were sure Billy was going to pieces because his father had thrown him into the deep end of the Y.M.C.A. swimming pool when he

was a little boy, and had then taken him to the rim of the Grand Canyon” (100). However, Vonnegut reveals that the war is indeed at the center of Billy’s mental problem.

Others also demonstrate an apocalypse within oneself with mental illnesses and nervous breakdowns, and it is at this point of the novel that Vonnegut’s works intertwine with the appearance of Eliot Rosewater in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Eliot Rosewater, too, is in the mental institution with Billy. Vonnegut explains their connection: “[H]e and Billy were dealing with similar crises in similar ways. They had both found life meaningless, partly because of what they had seen in war. Rosewater, for instance, had shot a fourteen-year-old fireman, mistaking him for a German soldier. So it goes. And Billy had seen the greatest massacre in European history, which was the fire-bombing of Dresden. So it goes” (*Slaughterhouse* 101). Through an intertextual understanding of *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the reader is able to note the severity of Eliot Rosewater’s mental illness. Simpson also recognizes the intertextuality of Vonnegut’s literature: “Vonnegut’s novels build on each other and yield interesting—and sometimes surprising—results when each work is read as a part of a larger whole and not just for itself. In this case, the reader learns that Rosewater’s insanity, like Billy’s, is brought about by his reinvention of himself and his universe in 1948, three years after the end of World War II” (“This Promising”). While the war may not be entirely the root of Eliot’s mental problems, Vonnegut notes that it is “partly” due to “what they had seen in war” (*Slaughterhouse* 101), leaving Eliot and Billy emotionally shaken. Simpson affirms this, saying, “As a result of his horrid experiences in the war—in which he accidentally killed a group of volunteer firemen, one of them a fourteen-year-old boy—Rosewater is emotionally and mentally unbalanced” (“This Promising”). However, the doctors do not look at the most obviously scarring event in Billy’s life and so they are unable to help him. Instead of examining the impact

of the war on Billy's life, they are convinced that he has been damaged by his father throwing him into the deep end of the pool when he was a child. Vees-Gulani writes that "as mainstream American society does not provide an atmosphere conducive to recovery from the horrors of war, the psychiatric establishment also fails Billy" (179). The apocalyptic images that Billy and Eliot have been exposed to extend into a mental apocalypse that no one else from the outside can quite understand.

Billy Pilgrim's mental illness becomes more complex as it is unclear where Billy's disillusion ends and the truth in the text begins. Billy believes that he has been "unstuck in time" and that he has been abducted by aliens from the planet Tralfamadore. Simpson explains that "[t]hroughout the novel, it is unclear whether Billy was abducted by a flying saucer or whether he has lost his mind" ("This Promising"). It is very probable, though, that Billy Pilgrim was not abducted because he probably simply developed the idea from reading about the planet Tralfamadore from Kilgore Trout's science fiction novels. Instead of Tralfamadore being real, it is likely that Billy's mental scars from the war manifest themselves in the form of his belief that he can travel in time. Vees-Gulani attempts to get at the root of Billy Pilgrim's mental issues by explaining that "[b]eing 'spastic in time' thus is a metaphor for Billy's repeatedly re-experiencing the traumatic events he went through in the war, particularly as a POW during the Dresden bombings. Psychologically, Billy has never fully left World War II; instead, in Jerome Klinkowitz's words, he lives in a 'continual present'" (177). Billy believes that he is transported in time, often returning to moments during the war when something in the present triggers his memory. Because of this continual re-experiencing of the war, Veas-Gulani concludes Billy is experiencing posttraumatic stress disorder (176). As a result of the lack of psychiatry's effectiveness, Billy turns to a more unconventional coping mechanism. Tralfamadore becomes

Billy's way of dealing with his war experiences: "With the help of his Tralfamadorian fantasy and his idea of time travel, Billy conquers his trauma in a way that enables him to function. He controls his anxiety, so that nothing can surprise or scare him" (Vees-Gulani 180). The apocalypse of Dresden cannot be understood by those who did not witness it, so Billy is left on his own to deal with what he has seen. He can find a companion in Vonnegut the author, though, who also saw the bombing.

The apocalypses in *Slaughterhouse-Five* were very real to Vonnegut. Although he told his war story through the novel from the point of view of Billy Pilgrim, much of Billy's struggles were also Vonnegut's. In the beginning of the novel, Vonnegut recalls a time when he was discussing the war with a professor at a cocktail party. Vonnegut is unable to clearly communicate his thoughts on World War II as he states, "All I could say was, 'I know, I know, I know'" (*Slaughterhouse* 10), which demonstrates his inability to fully articulate what he means concerning the war. Vees-Gulani claims that writing *Slaughterhouse-Five* was Vonnegut's way of dealing with the complexities of the war. She states that the novel is an "acknowledgment of the difficulty and inability to talk or write about a topic that deeply affected one's psychology.... Consequently one needs to design one's own coping strategies and path of healing to deal with the horror of the Dresden air raids" (Vees-Gulani 181). The apocalyptic images of the Dresden air raids affect both Billy and Vonnegut, creating an intense mental apocalypse in reaction to the physical apocalypse of Dresden. After modern psychology fails them, they must find alternative ways to deal with the apocalypses—Billy does so by imagining that he is traveling in time, and Vonnegut is able to travel in time by writing a novel about the past. Vees-Gulani goes on to explain, "The text implies that because the horrible consequences of the bombing of Dresden truly happened but are too far removed from normal experience to be easily reported, they can

neither be completely fictionalized nor simply repeated through an eyewitness account. The novel thus becomes a mixture of autobiography and fiction” (180). The writing of *Slaughterhouse-Five* becomes Vonnegut’s way of finding his voice to tell his war story and working out his mental issues caused by the apocalypse he witnessed. Vonnegut affirms the notion of writing being therapy in an interview with *Playboy*: “Writers get a nice break in one way, at least: They can treat their mental illnesses every day” (286). Through Billy, Vonnegut detaches himself from his memoir, yet also works through his thoughts concerning the war.

Having experienced the pains of apocalypses, both with the bombing of Dresden and the pains of its aftermath, Vonnegut tells his story in hope of deterring mankind from its inherent destructive tendencies. Niose remarks that “Vonnegut, who fought in Europe in World War II and was a prisoner of war, refused to accept war as the norm. He saw humanism as a means for building a better world, a world beyond senseless divisions and beyond war” (22). No less important to him, economic justice, the topic of *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, also stands at the forefront of his interests as he witnessed the pains of enduring the Great Depression as a member of the lower class. Combating to end divisiveness and excessive religious influence, *Cat’s Cradle* brings attention to the corruption that can develop with religious power. As each novel arrives at multiple apocalypses, Vonnegut emphasizes the corruption inherent in man when boundaries are not placed on social power.

Chapter Four: The Hope That Remains

It seems that Vonnegut is at odds with himself; he is continually pointing out the flaws of mankind, but does so with humor and a sense of strong hope. Olderman explains that “[b]ecause of our pride and bad illusions—which are the dragons in Vonnegut’s fables—the quality of human life as he presents it is horrendous” (196). However, to simply see his negative critique of society would only provide an incomplete view of his works. Despite the many apocalypses in his novels, Vonnegut provides some hope of restoration. Jerome Klinkowitz states in “Vonnegut in America” that “[t]he key solution to human problems, Vonnegut kept insisting, is to find human dignity for all human beings—even those who seem to least deserve it” (31). As a Humanist, Vonnegut emphasizes that if people would simply love each other selflessly, then the problems of the world would surely be lessened. In spite of his harsh critique of society, Vonnegut gives mankind this hope through the same humor that he uses to critique society.

Vonnegut’s approach to writing has earned him many labels from critics, including Black Humorist, which Robert Scholes defines as “small manageable doses of poison neatly packaged and the comedy making it palatable that helps us to get through the terrible things in the world” (108). However, Vonnegut rejects this label as he states in an interview with Scholes that Black Humor is a new label which he finds it to be “mystifying” and that “it seems to be is a sales-promotion label” (qtd. in 96). He, on the other hand, takes a more practical view of the use of humor, saying, “I’d found in laughter an analgesic for the temporary relief of existential pain” (qtd. in Scholes 108). Humor becomes an important and crucial step in enduring the dangers of a fallen world so that mankind can find completion in goodness. Vonnegut applies this to his own life in the various apocalypses that he has encountered. Experiencing poverty during the Great Depression, and seeing it in the lives of others, Vonnegut relied on humor to continue through life: “The Depression did break people’s spirits. And the comedians who you got your little

dose of humor every day, and the people did cluster around radios to pick up an amount of encouragement, an amount of relief” (qtd. in Scholes 109). As the Great Depression created a sense of social and financial uncertainty and collapse, it resembled an apocalyptic time for many ordinary people—including Vonnegut’s family. Humor, though, eased the pain temporarily, allowing people continue on toward a resolution.

Vonnegut adamantly explains that he uses humor to channel his humanist worldview and its application to his literature. As a self-declared Humanist, Vonnegut rejects the notion that the world is simply a dark place without hope. He explains that yes, the world is dangerous, and yes, people cause great harm to themselves and others, but people are not all wholly evil. Instead of giving up hope, people should look within and seek to help one another. John R. May, author of *Toward a New Earth*, states that “Vonnegut belongs to a purer strain of apocalyptic writers, a tradition that imagines the worst because it believes in something better. Vonnegut’s apocalypse is humorous, yet nonetheless genuinely human and hopeful because his imagination clearly conceives of alternatives to catastrophes, however limited those alternatives may be” (192). While Vonnegut explores the weakness of human nature and its tendency toward extremes without self-control, this catastrophe can be avoided with the hope of goodness in mankind.

Because Vonnegut wants his message of hope to be heard, he intentionally structures his works to be accessible. He jokingly states in a question and answer session with Hickenlooper that adolescents enjoy his books simply because he does not use semi-colons. He also explains that this is why he sometimes is not taken seriously as an author (3). On a more serious note, Glenn Meeter comments on Vonnegut’s “natural voice,” which he says is comprised of “short sentences and short paragraphs, the ordinary phrase or even cliché rather than the metaphor, and causal direct address to the reader, it seems the voice of a man speaking to men, the voice of a

man recollecting emotion in tranquility” (205). Vonnegut’s books do have depth and layers, but his writing style is for the most part simple, accessible, and relatable. The chapters are often short, sometimes only a page long, which keeps the reader motivated to keep reading. And, obviously his humor maintains the reader’s interest. It is through these techniques that Vonnegut supplies the reader with his message of hope—Vonnegut’s true goal. Klinkowitz quotes Vonnegut as saying in 1973 that writers are “agents of change...a means of introducing new ideas into society, and also a means of responding to life” (23). Because Vonnegut wanted to change the problems that he saw in society, he had to be sure that society could understand his writing.

Vonnegut’s view of himself as a Humanist impacts both his life and his literature. Niose explains that “no tribute to Vonnegut would be complete without reference to his ranking as one of the great humanists of our time. ... Vonnegut was a proponent of humanism as a tool for building a better world” (22). Vonnegut’s application of his Humanist perspective earned him recognition at a high level, and was given the position of honorary president of the American Humanist Association. As a spokesman for Humanism, he defined it as the attempt to do good without looking for a reward (*A Man Without a Country* 79). In his last novel published two years before his death, *A Man Without a Country*, Vonnegut further explains what Humanism means to him: “We humanists try to behave as decently, as fairly, and as honorably as we can without any expectation of rewards or punishments in an afterlife” (79). Because of this focus, humanity becomes its own savior, and humanity saves the world from the approaching apocalypse on earth. This is quite different from what the Bible details in Revelation, which relies on Christ as a Savior to save humanity from apocalypse. Despite his denial of God’s role in the lives of man, Vonnegut, an atheist, does appreciate what he considers to be at the heart of

Christ's message. Vonnegut constantly returned to humanity's need to have mercy and pity. Further, he claims that all men have this capability.

Vonnegut's character Eliot Rosewater exemplifies the need for mercy and pity. Rosewater, with his compassion for those less fortunate, is able to defer the apocalypse—thus giving hope to mankind despite the novel's otherwise bleak outlook. Throughout the novel, he has invested both his money and emotions in impoverished people. This kindness, though, does come at a cost. Being exposed to the reality of poverty causes him to become deeply troubled. While traveling, he believes to see a fire storm similar to what Vonnegut describes of the bombing of Dresden. This causes him to collapse. When Eliot regains consciousness in the company of his father and lawyers, his father and the others explain that “women all over the county started claiming their children were [Eliot's]. At least half of them seem to believe it. There's one fifteen-year-old girl down there whose stepfather went to prison for getting her pregnant. Now she claims it was [Eliot]” (Vonnegut, *Rosewater* 271). While these claims are prosperous, they do need to be dealt with as the Rosewaters secure their financial future. However, Eliot has another plan. Just Eliot has been giving money to the poor people of Rosewater for years out of compassion, he finds a way to permanently provide for them by commanding his lawyer to draw up a document saying, “[I] legally acknowledge that every child in Rosewater County said to be mine *is* mine, regardless of blood type. Let them all have full rights of inheritance as my sons and daughters” (Vonnegut, *Rosewater* 274-275). With this act, Eliot is able to give to the people in way that he had not anticipated before: he would continue to give them money after his death. He acts as a compassionate father with unconditional love despite the fact that there is no way that all of the children could be his: “Let their names be Rosewater from this moment on. And tell them that their father loves them, no matter what they

may turn out to be” (Vonnegut, *Rosewater* 275). The novel ends with a commandment alluding to the biblical commandment that God gave to Adam and Eve in Genesis 8.17: “And tell them ... to be fruitful and multiply” (275). As a father-figure and metaphorically as a god-figure, Eliot provides for his adopted children, the people of Rosewater County, out of compassion. This is the repeated theme in the novel, and Eliot provides for the people by redistributing his wealth among them. At the same time, Eliot seems to be acting as a god figure by commanding that they reproduce. Vonnegut is able to bring together hope and humor through the absurdity of Eliot fathering all of the children of Rosewater. Further, there is hope that Eliot’s compassion will break the cycle of selfish concentration of wealth into a few hands. With this combination, Vonnegut allows Eliot to mend the broken county of Rosewater and gives hope despite the presence of apocalyptic themes.

The need for hope followed Vonnegut into the dangers of Dresden, contributing to *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Looking back on Dresden nearly forty years after the publication of *Slaughterhouse-Five* in 1969, Vonnegut notes his need for humor to provide hope during the bombing: “While we were being bombed in Dresden, sitting in a cellar with our arms over our heads in case the ceiling fell, one soldier said as though he were a duchess in a mansion on a cold and rainy night, ‘I wonder what the poor people are doing tonight.’ Nobody laughed, but we were still all glad he said it. At least we were still alive! He proved it” (*Country* 5). The soldier’s comment may seem inappropriate and did not receive the traditional response of acceptance to humor—laughter—yet Vonnegut claims that the soldier’s perhaps insensitive joke reminded the others that they were indeed alive, safe from the bombing and also alive in the respect that they could react to a joke with feeling.

Vonnegut recognizes the evil in the world as he reflects on his memories from the Second World War, his inspiration and purpose for writing *Slaughterhouse-Five*. He states in *Man Without A Country*, “I am a veteran of the Second World War and I have to say this is not the first time I have surrendered to a pitiless war machine. My last words? ‘Life is no way to treat an animal, not even a mouse’” (Vonnegut 88). Having witnessed the death and destruction that man can bring to each other, Vonnegut understands the dangerous capabilities of humans. He claims that Dresden was “pure nonsense, pointless destruction” (Vonnegut, *A Man Without a Country* 17). However, in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut makes a claim that can be traced throughout many of his novels: no one is entirely evil, leaving some room for the goodness that Vonnegut demands of humanity as a Humanist. Vonnegut writes that while studying anthropology, the professors at his college taught that “nobody was ridiculous or bad or disgusting,” and because he accepted this, other people noticed that it had affected his writing: “Shortly before my father died, he said to me, ‘You know—you never wrote a story with a villain in it.’ I told him that was one of the things I learned in college after the war” (*Slaughterhouse* 8). As noted by Vonnegut’s father, all of his characters, no matter how cruel they act, are not left as simply evil. Instead, Vonnegut provides details in their lives to demonstrate perhaps how they became cruel and also to illustrate desirable, kind traits. Because of this approach, he leaves behind traces of hope because some goodness remains in humanity.

The humanity of those who would be villains in *Cat’s Cradle* is also revealed. Bokonon, a misguiding religious leader who brings on the Apocalypse, does so with the best of intentions as he tries to give his followers a false hope. This idea can be traced back to Karl Marx, who said that “[r]eligion is the opium of the people” (qtd. in Vonnegut, *Country* 12). While this statement sounds harsh as it compares religion to drugs, Vonnegut defends Marx’s statement,

saying, “[Karl Marx] was grateful for the temporary relief [opium] had given him. He was simply noticing, and surely not condemning, the fact that religion could also be comforting to those in economic or social distress” (*Country* 12). So, Bokonon does not attempt to manipulate the people for his own advantage, but simply to ease their suffering in a cruel world. Similarly, McCabe takes a different approach in *Cat’s Cradle* by trying to mend the country through political reformation, yet his ideas fail miserably, damaging the people’s lives further. Neither of the men, however, are villains despite their flaws. They are kind and good at heart. It is simply their approaches that fail them. Focusing on the hope remaining in *Cat’s Cradle*, Olderman explains, “Vonnegut does offer two possibilities—we can learn to love each other, or we can each create our own illusion, some mythology that will help us learn to live together” (191). However, Vonnegut surely seems to favor the first option of learning to love each other since the mythology in *Cat’s Cradle* leads only to an apocalypse. This proposition of loving one another is based on Vonnegut’s Humanism.

The complexities of *Player Piano* leave the reader uncertain of what is to come, but the novel does not end on an entirely hopeless note: the hope is small, yet it is present. Segal explains that *Player Piano* holds “a fear of technological domination in the form of rule over the masses by a relative handful of technocrats and a myriad of sophisticated tools and machines—in the very name of universal happiness and progress” (169). Because of this original pure intention of bringing happiness and progress, the leaders do have goodness in them. They are not thoroughly evil, and so accessing this goodness could bring true progress opposed to the regression found with the excessive pursuit of technology. In addition to this, as the members of the Ghost Shirt Society have failed their overall operation, they have found some success in their own city, an admirable accomplishment. As the city burns, the people bond together to create

new lives. At their core, they cannot help but begin to invent new technology that would go without a purpose, the same tendency that enslaved them previously. Standing together, the novel ends with the command “Forward March!” (341). This statement provides a feeling of eeriness, yet not all is lost as the progress mentioned is vague. Mankind would presumably fall back into the same tendency, yet some hope remains that the “forward” could result in a more desirable situation of freedom and equality since the statement is not concrete, offering perhaps the slimmest amount of hope in the novels of Vonnegut. Reid affirms this idea of hope, saying, “There is indeed a feeling of regeneration and renewal in the final words of the novel: ‘Forward March!’” (51).

While Vonnegut does not see religion as the answer to life’s questions, he also avoids recognizing science and technology as an avenue to all truth. This stance may seem a bit surprising considering Vonnegut’s affection for technology and also his science fiction futuristic emphasis. In fact, his literature can resemble science fiction so closely at times that scholars argue over his literature’s classification as such. Simpson explains that “[w]hen asked his feelings about science fiction during a 1973 interview with Frank McLaughlin, Vonnegut responded: ‘I think it is dangerous to believe that there are enormous new truths, dangerous to imagine that we can stand outside the universe. So I argue for the ordinariness of love, the familiarity of love’” (74). Once again, Vonnegut does not rely on technology or religion, but falls back on his Humanist ideals, focusing on love. Scientific discoveries cannot reveal truth or bring peace, but instead relying on them to an extreme contributes to the apocalypse. Neither does Vonnegut find hope in religion. Vonnegut explains that people should pursue love to bring justice and peace, a familiar message of hope.

Vonnegut's apocalyptic novels concentrate on man's capabilities to harm himself, but Vonnegut does so noting that life does not have to unfold in the way that he details. He presents the horrors that could occur, hoping to deter man from atrocious fates. May speaks of Vonnegut's view of man, saying, "We must realize our infinite capacity for harming others, and so our approach to others must always be characterized by respect for their human dignity" (*Earth* 198-199). The Humanism that Vonnegut holds so dear and the "mercy" and "pity" that he finds in the message of Christianity stand as the hope that man possesses to save himself.

The aim of Vonnegut's works is to go beyond a cynical sketch of mankind's plight or the prediction of a depressing apocalypse covered with dark irony. Instead, Vonnegut affirms a statement made by a high school fan in a letter. This high school student explains that he has found a theme throughout Vonnegut's works: "Love may fail, but courtesy will prevail" (Simpson). Josh Simpson expands upon the thesis statement of Vonnegut's novels in "'This Promising of Great Secrets': Literature, Ideas, and the (Re)Invention of Reality in Kurt Vonnegut's *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and *Breakfast of Champions*." He claims that "Kurt Vonnegut is a writer setting out to discover the mysteries of the human condition. Using irony, satire, and black humor as his helmet, breastplate, and flaming sword for battling the existential malaise of the twentieth century, Vonnegut forces his readers to consider what it means to be human in a chaotic, often absurd, and irrational universe" (Simpson). These elements of irony, satire, and black humor can be found in each of Vonnegut's works, but Simpson does not mention the apocalypses that are often present as well. Niose explains that "[i]t was humanism that nourished Vonnegut's optimism, though his knowledge of history and his own personal experiences made that optimism cautious. Vonnegut's humanism was rooted in the idea that humans need to see themselves as what they are—brothers and sisters who share a

home, and who have little use for divisive creeds that were formulated in ancient times” (22).

Vonnegut’s critiques of society are not merely grumblings from a distant critic, but instead he lived through the problems that he points out.

Having witnessed the bombing of Dresden and also growing up during the Great Depression, Vonnegut was dedicated to exposing injustices because he believed that mankind could do better. For this purpose, Olderman explains that Vonnegut places his message before his literature: “he wants us to hear his message. For the sake of that message he sometimes sacrifices literary fullness—that is, he will tell us his point instead of showing us” (191).

Vonnegut believed that people could be fair and kind to one another to make the world a place of equal opportunity and hope. By exposing the dangers of ignoring boundaries, apocalypses become inevitable if the conditions are ignored and people are greedy with the power that they obtain. However, Vonnegut executed his project with elements of a dark yet humorous evaluation in order to give hope, setting him aside from the label of a Black Humorist. Marvin affirms this statement by exploring how Vonnegut deals with frustration: “In spite of its obvious limitations, the label ‘black humor’ does remind readers of a central truth embodied in Vonnegut’s fiction: ‘The biggest laughs are based on the biggest disappointments and the biggest fears’” (16). As Vonnegut once said to a group of writers in Iowa, “You catch people before they become generals and senators and presidents, and you poison their minds with humanity” (qtd. in Klinkowitz 23). And that is exactly what he aimed to do, thus setting him apart from other apocalyptic authors.

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