

INTERNATIONAL BACCALAUREATE EXTENDED ESSAY

Research Question: How does *Cat's Cradle* by Kurt Vonnegut convey the theme of existentialism through the characters Newt Hoenikker and Julian Castle?

Subject: English B HL Category 3 Literature

Word count: 3663

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I. Introduction

Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle* was written and published during the Cold War. The novel serves as an ironic exploration of people's need to find meaning in life. The novel is told from the point of view of the character John, or Jonah, who is trying to write a book about the day the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima. His research leads him to the Hoenikker children. Their father, Dr. Felix Hoenikker, was one of the creators of the bomb and the inventor of the deadly substance known as "ice-nine", which is a material that can freeze all water on Earth. John's search for truth leads him to the poor Caribbean Island of San Lorenzo where he encounters a society that practices the religion of Bokonoism which is comforting but misleading. Vonnegut presents a world that is shaped by irresponsible use of science and blind faith through dark humour and absurdity. He shows how people still try to find some kind of order in all this chaos.

I aim to focus on the research question: "How does *Cat's Cradle* by Kurt Vonnegut convey the theme of existentialism through the characters Newt Hoenikker and Julian Castle?". I chose this question because even though these two characters live in the same world, they have different ways of dealing with it. It is interesting to see how they both reflect different sides of existentialism when they come face to face with the same problems, like the end of the world. Even when the novel presents the world as hopeless, it can be seen that these characters are still trying to find a reason to keep going. Vonnegut uses irony to dig into these existentialist ideas. The use of irony can be seen in the difference between the things people believe and how much responsibility they take for their beliefs. In the end, the way Newt and Julian react to uncertainty shows how people have to build their own logic for a world that seems absurd.

Their contrasting views reflect one of the central ideas of the novel, that meaning is not something that exists on its own, but something that each person need to create for themselves.

II. What is Existentialism?

Existentialism is the belief that a person's life does not have a purpose that was decided before. A person's life is not a path that is already laid out and ready follow, it is up to each person to define who they are through their actions. This means humans exist first, and only after that they start building an identity based on their own thoughts and experiences (Sartre).

Even though the world can feel indifferent, this philosophy argues that a lack of natural meaning is actually a good thing. It gives individuals the freedom to choose their own values while also taking responsibility for those choices.

II.i Bokononism as a form of Existentialism

In Cat's Cradle, Kurt Vonnegut introduces the fictional religion Bokononism to explore existentialist ideas. Unlike most religions that claim to have the "absolute truth", Bokononism is honest about the fact that it is built on "foma" or harmless lies. This is important to note because the religion is not pretending to offer real and objective meaning and it admits right off the bat that its teachings are made up, which makes it a good example of existentialism. That is because it does not hide behind the idea that the universe is meaningful. Instead, it creates stories to help people cope with a cold and indifferent reality. Through this, Vonnegut explains that even if life is meaningless at its core, humans still need these belief systems to survive.

In the novel, the religion Bokononism originates from the island of San Lorenzo, where the people suffer from poor living conditions.

Since the island's living conditions are harsh, the people of the island are not interested in concepts such as justice, they are more concerned with their own well-being. So the people practice the religion of Bokononism which does not promise things that will get better, but it does offer comfort and stability to the already suffering people. It tells that people have to build their own meaning to avoid suffering since meaning is not found naturally in the world.

Bokonon, the founder of Bokononism, says his religion is a lie, but he justifies it with the fact that those lies are needed for humans to be happy. Existentialism generally values being honest and accepting responsibility, but it also acknowledges that confronting a world that seems meaningless can be stressful.

In Bokononism that are a few key concepts that are linked to this path of thinking, like the idea of karass. In the novel, karass is defined as "a group of people who are unknowingly working together to do God's will." So, in its core, karass is a group of people who are linked to a shared purpose, even if they are not aware of it. It reflects how much humans do not want to be alone in a world that is full of uncertainties and their attempt to create a pattern.

The sacred texts of Bokonon are full of contradictions, which shows that a belief system does not have to have logic to work. Vonnegut shows how belief is more about performance than reality, like it is an act. People usually care more about feeling better than they are about learning the truth.

Bokononism also mirrors the symbol of the cat's cradle. Similarly, to how the string game makes a pattern that is not exactly a "cat" or a "cradle", it just looks as if it is made.

The religion makes up stories to give a sense of relevance. It shows the way people react when they realize that there is no “*no damn cat, no damn cradle*”. (Vonnegut, 165) Bokononism is just one way of people favoring illusions that comfort them over giving up.

However, Vonnegut does not pretend that this is an easy way of fixing it. Although Bokononism is consoling for people, they might worry about the shortcomings of living in a falsehood. This raises the question of whether it is better to accept a wrong meaning in order to survive or to confront the sense of emptiness. In the middle of this struggle, Bokonism notes that lying to yourself on purpose may be necessary if a person wants to survive.

This is evident when the characters Julian Castle and Newt Hoenikker are studied. Although they have different ways of approaching Bokononism, they both use it to cope with the meaningless aspect of their lives.

III. Julian Castle

Julian Castle is a key character for exploring existentialist ideas in *Cat's Cradle*. He is a wealthy American who gave up everything to run a free hospital called House of Hope and Mercy. His aim is to help the poor people of San Lorenzo. Even though this action makes him seem like a hero, it is not the whole story. He despises humanity and believes life is meaningless, but still dedicates his life to helping people. This contradiction between the things he believes and what he chooses to do makes him an interesting existentialist figure in the novel.

The view he represents highlights a core issue of existentialism, which is that even in an absurd world, individuals are still responsible for other people.

A powerful example of this is when Philip Castle, son of Julian Castle, describes the time he worked with his father during a period when many people were dying, and said *"we were finding dead people in bed after bed after bed...and Father started giggling. He couldn't stop. He walked out into the night with his flashlight. He was still giggling. He was making the flashlight beam dance over all the dead people stacked outside. He put his hand on my head, and do you know what that marvelous man said to me? "Son, someday this will all be yours."* (Vonnegut, 161) In this scene, Vonnegut is making a point through Julian that he sees life as a cycle that never improves. Every generation inherits the same problems that the last one had.

Things do not improve, they just get passed down. In a way, this is the legacy that he is leaving to his son. From Julian's giggling, it is clear to him that this situation is not tragic in a way that needs fixing. It simply is and probably will continue to exist in which he eventually just accepts. This kind of situation puts Julian in contrast to the characters in the novel who believe humans are making progress like in the areas of science and technology. These elements are pushing the world forward and are making things to get better. But Julian does not buy that since he has seen too much death to believe that things are improving in San Lorenzo. The hospital that he runs is also an existential symbol. It is poorly equipped, filthy and sits in the middle of a devastated island surrounded by disease and poverty. Almost everything that Julian accomplishes is temporary since death and suffering continue to exist. Even though Julian believes suffering never ends, he still runs the hospital and takes care of the people anyway. He accepts the hopelessness of the situation but shows up nonetheless. However, while Julian chooses to take responsibility in this world, the authenticity of that choice can be questioned.

This question of authenticity becomes more complicated after he is compared to a man named “Albert Schweitzer”; a Western philosopher and missionary. He traveled to Africa to help the locals, but still carried the assumptions and appearance of a European outsider. In contrast, Julian outwardly rejects Schweitzer and says he is not his hero. Although he rejects this comparison, Julian does something very similar. He puts his wealth and comfortable Western life into the past and sets up the hospital, but he still looks and carries himself like a Westerner. The “typical garb” shows that he never really stops being an outsider. He brings his own traditions with him. This connects his character to a core idea in existentialism which is to live authentically and to make choices that are purely on your own. It can be concluded that we should not follow a role or identity that society has already laid out for us. Vonnegut does not make it clear whether Julian has really achieved this or not. He leaves an open question whether his selflessness is a genuine personal choice or just the role of the noble Western helper.

This uncertain point of view can be questioned more when John meets Julian. He realizes that Julian is a misanthrope, which means that he dislikes humankind entirely. Even with this realization, John still writes an article about Julian’s charitable deeds and completely ignores his real philosophy, simply because this is what the public wants to read. In a way, Julian’s whole image and reputation as a saint is an illusion. The public sees a hero because they want to, not because it is the truth.

Julian's actions and beliefs do not always line up and this becomes clear when he sees Newt's painting. After John explains the symbolism of the cat's cradle, Julian responds by saying, "*So this is a picture of the meaninglessness of it all! I couldn't agree more*" (Vonnegut, 168).

He then goes further by stating that "*Man is vile, and man makes nothing worth making, knows nothing worth knowing*" (Vonnegut, 169). To emphasize his point, he takes the painting off the easel and throws it off the terrace, calling it "*garbage, like everything else*" (Vonnegut, 169). This act is his way of showing that the painting bothers him not because it is wrong, but because it just sits there doing nothing. He cannot bring himself not to give a reaction.

Julian is also suspicious of any system that claims to provide a person with comfort or truth. Unlike Bokonon, who saw people as ridiculous but still wanted to provide them with meaning and comfort through Bokononism, Julian's hatred for humanity is a definite character trait of his. He is colder than Bokonon. He never fully becomes a Bokononist, but he understands why people need "harmless lies" to survive. When John asks how anyone can make sense of life, Julian replies with "*Don't try. Just pretend you understand.*" (Vonnegut, 180). He does not believe in comforting illusions, but he accepts that pretending is how most people get through life. Rather than just believing or not believing, Julian has a skeptical point of view. Unlike the characters who retreat into Bokononism as an escape, he refuses to rely on illusions. He believes nothing matters and yet he does not act like it.

IV. Newt Hoenikker

Newt Hoenikker is an important character in the novel as he is an example of the novel's existential themes. He is the youngest child of Dr. Hoenikker, the scientist who is behind the invention of ice-nine. Through Newt's perspective on life and art, Vonnegut shows how a person who has realized that the world has no particular purpose, may end up relying on temporary meanings to cope with reality.

This pushes Newt to become withdrawn as he recognizes the absence of meaning in the world.

One of the most important moments that conveys the theme of existentialism is with Newt's description of the cat's cradle game in which he played with his father when he was a child. He recalls, "But he went down on his knees on the carpet next to me, and he showed me his teeth, and he waved that tangle of string in my face. *"See? See? See?" he asked. 'Cat's cradle. See the cat's cradle? See where the nice pussycat sleeps? Meow. Meow.'*" (Vonnegut, 21) Although the string figure is presented as something comforting and meaningful, for Newt the game is a lie and he quickly realizes that there is no actual cat and cradle. The game becomes a symbol for the way humans put meaning into empty structures.

Behind this game, Newt understands the truth about science and Bokomonism. He realizes that humans are desperate to try to find patterns in everything, even when those patterns do not exist or do not have a logical meaning.

Newt's "No damn cat, no damn cradle" makes his view on meaning clear. The things that people find meaningful such as religion, social structures and scientific progress, are often just patterns that society has agreed to believe in even when those patterns have no real meaning to base themselves on. Cat's cradle is just a tangle of string, it is the people who choose to give meaning to it because of their need to see something. Newt refuses to do this. He looks at the string and only sees the string. His black paintings work the same way. Rather than creating something that comforts or makes the person who looks at the painting feel better, they expose the emptiness underneath. Newt uses art to show that the void is there while others use belief and illusion to fill the void. His paintings do not offer meaning. On the contrary, they reflect the absence of it.

Alienation is a defining feature of Newt's life. He was raised in a household where human connections were pushed into the background in favor of scientific research, as the son of Dr. Felix Hoenikker. Newt is consistently disregarded because of his tiny size, yet he carries the burden of his father's games and the consequences of his actions. Newt is emotionally detached and faces a universe that does not seem to care whether he lives or dies. His relationship with the Soviet spy Zinka is an example of his isolation. He gives up his ice-nine to her just because she pretended to love him. This action shows how desperate he is to find a human connection. His loneliness makes him an easy target for people who do not genuinely care about him. He is the victim of a body and a family history that he did not choose to have, both of which are the reasons of his isolation.

Newt's bitterness toward any form of organized meaning is most visible when he interrupts while Angela is playing her clarinet. As Julian quotes the Bokkonist poem "*Man got to tell himself he understand*", Newt shouts "*Religion*" (Vonnegut, 181) and makes the cat's cradle sign with his hands. To Newt, religion is just another foma. However, seeing through these illusions does not offer him any peace. Instead, it deepens the isolation he feels. He refuses to be comforted by a lie, which leaves him with nothing to hold onto in an indifferent world.

After the ice-nine apocalypse, he survives alongside John and Castles. His response to the end of the world is to just keep painting. He is found a quarter mile from the cave, painting a blasted landscape. The world has ended and his response is to depict it as the way he sees it. This reaction is consistent with his character as he was always an observer rather than someone who took action. In a sense, he becomes the true son of Felix Hoenikker. As a child, he watched his father play with a cat's cradle without understanding it. As an adult, he watches the real consequences of the game his father played with ice-nine and still chooses not to act upon it.

Through Newt, Vonnegut shows a quieter and more passive existentialist response. Newt sees the void clearly and understands it better than almost anyone, but chooses to remain within it. His paintings are his only response to meaninglessness. He does not try to fix what his father had started or comfort others or comfort himself. He just keeps making images of empty things until there is nothing left to paint.

V. Conclusion

In summary, with Julian Castle and Newt Hoenikker, Kurt Vonnegut shows that there is no specific way to respond to life when you realize that the world has no built-in meaning. In the novel, there is a variety of human behavior and every person has to decide for themselves on how to live once the illusions that they had grown comfortable with begin to fade away. Both characters understand the cat's cradle as a metaphor as a hollow pattern that humans make up to feel safe, but what separates them is that they still choose to do it with understanding. Newt chooses not to change while Julian chooses to keep working.

Newt is sharper than almost everyone else in the novel at seeing the void, but his awareness never translates into action, it stays as a thought in his head. Growing up in a household that had absent parents and a father who is successful leaves him with a burden of his legacy, which ends up stranding him in the role of an observer. In a sense, he is a tragic figure since he is honest about nothingness, but too tired to build up something from that point on. Even when the world ends, he continues to do the only thing that he knows how to do, which is to paint. He does not do anything different and does not become someone different even after an event as big as the apocalypse.

Julian presents an alternative viewpoint to Newt's. He considers the same "vile" and uncaring society and comes to the conclusion that there are still many things to care about, like helping others. In this situation, his hospital serves as a way of showing his concerns about the struggling people of San Lorenzo. He does not seem to need the approval of a universe that does not care or show mercy. Without waiting for approval from a government or religious leader that his work is important, he finds his own meaning in the work he does himself. Julian is one of the characters in the novel who is the closest example of what existentialism looks like when someone lives it rather than just understands it.

It is evident how their different behaviors and opinions seem to get in the way of living. When problems seem too big to handle, Newt represents the part of us that just wants to give up and return to our shells. Julian represents the part that keeps going regardless of whether it makes a difference. This is precisely what existentialism is about, the idea that there is no right or wrong way to respond to a meaningless world, only the choices a person makes within it. Vonnegut also does not present both of these views as right or wrong, they are just two normal reactions from two different human beings. In the end, both characters are just playing with a tangle of string while searching for something to hold onto in a world that offers nothing in return. What separates them is what they choose to do with that string.

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