

The fulfillment of
one's desire does not
lead to happiness: a
central paradox of ...



What do people really want, and how far would they be willing to go to get that something? Is it always worth it – to get what one most desires, but not to be happy? These are the very questions that Kurt Vonnegut explores in his satirical novel *Cat's Cradle*. The author illustrates that the fulfillment of one's desire does not necessarily create happiness, through the characters of John, the narrator of the story; Felix Hoenikker, the creator of the first atomic bomb; and Felix's three children.

John is a perfect example of someone who has had his wishes granted but is still not satisfied. At the beginning of the novel, John fixates on one thing: finishing his book about the atomic bomb. However, as John acquires more information about Felix Hoenikker and the Hoenikker children's lives, he abandons the project. Although John gathers all the information he needs, he becomes discontented with his writing and decides to abandon his project, nevertheless remaining entwined in the history of the family. Later, when John sees an ad for San Lorenzo in the paper, he is initially eager to visit but when he arrives, is unimpressed when he realizes that San Lorenzo is nothing more than a crumbling dictatorship. Finally, John loves Mona from the second he first lays eyes on her, and wants nothing more than to keep her all for himself. However, after the Boku Maru ritual occurs and John declares to Mona that "as your husband, I'll want all your love for myself. (Vonnegut, 208)" she refuses to grant his selfish wish. While John gets what he wants, Mona, he remains unsatisfied with the conditions she establishes regarding the marriage. John remains unhappy even after all his desires are fulfilled.

Felix Hoenikker does not value family, friendship, books, or games like most other people but instead values science and technology. “ When asked what he did in his spare time he replied, ‘ Why should I bother with made-up games when there are so many real ones going on?’ (Vonnegut, 11).”, Felix is never satisfied with his inventions and is constantly pursuing new information. When he creates the atomic bomb with his fellow scientists, he sees it as a creation, one that could be endlessly improved, rather than as a deadly weapon. When Felix invents ice-nine, a substance which has the ability to wipe out the entire planet, he does not understand its significance and regards it as just another invention. Although Felix has what everyone desires: fame, money, children, intelligence, he is still not content. Despite his brilliance, Felix is unable to find happiness.

The Hoenikker children: Angela, Frank and Newt, all have desires of their own, but even after these are fulfilled, they remain unsatisfied. Angela Hoenikker, the eldest child of Felix Hoenikker, was displeased with the caretaker position she was forced to take after her mother died. In his letter to John, Newt described her as being, “ the real head of the family since she was sixteen, since Mother died, since I was born. (Vonnegut, 15)” Angela wants to be loved, and sets her eyes on an man by the name of Harrison Connors. Angela is ultimately unsatisfied in her relationship with Harrison who is a cheater and heavy drinker. Although Angela finds what she initially desires, she is still not happy. Frank, the middle child, wants nothing more than military status and power. His desires are fulfilled once he gets control of ice-nine and is able to use it to access a powerful military position.

However, despite Frank's newfound position and power in San Lorenzo, he is

not appeased and still wants more. Hoenikker's youngest child, Newt, is a four-foot-tall midget, tired of being cast aside his entire life. Desperate for love and attention Newt begins a relationship impulsively with a midget named Zinka, a Soviet spy. Zinka is more than willing to play her part as a loving girlfriend, fooling Newt and ultimately stealing his ice-nine. Although Newt's only desire was to be loved, the fulfillment of his desires does not make him happy. Each of the three Hoenikker children receive exactly what they most desire, whether it was love, affection or power, but none of them feel satisfied.

While the characters in Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle* aspire to fulfill their own needs, they each lack insight about the superficiality of their desires. John, Felix, and the Hoenikker children each have their desires fulfilled, yet none of them find contentment or happiness. Success does not lead to personal satisfaction and, as the novel repeatedly highlights, the fulfillment of one's desires does not lead to happiness.