

Cat's cradle and ice-nine

Literature



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Abraham Lincoln once said, “ Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man’s character, give him power. ” (source) In other words, a person can withstand challenges, but he only shows his true self when he is face to face with power. In Kurt Vonnegut’s novel, *Cat’s Cradle*, Frank, Angela and Newt get the opportunity to possess their father’s invention, ice-nine. Unfortunately they lose their control of it shortly after gaining it. They have made ice-nine into an open secret, available to all.

Power is an illusion because people want to have power, and they sacrifice themselves to get to the top. But in the end their wishes remain as dreams, and in the meantime reality has taken a different turn. Kurt Vonnegut’s writing career had a rocky beginning, when he started as a freelance writer in the 1950’s. At the beginning, his works were ignored by the general public. (why?) But the 1963 publication of *Cat’s Cradle* changed that. Vonnegut wrote *Cat’s Cradle* in a “ first person impressionistic segmented style” (source) that would later benefit him in writing *Slaughterhouse Five*, Vonnegut’s next best-seller.

Cat’s Cradle started off with an account of Felix, one of the fathers of the atomic bomb, and the action continued on an imaginary island in the Caribbean. *Cat’s Cradle* is an “ off-beat science versus religion story. ” It was written in a first person, impressionistic segmented style that would later benefit Vonnegut while writing *Slaughterhouse Five*. British novelist Graham Greene later called *Cat’s Cradle* “ one of the three best novels of the year by one of the most able living writers. (source A)

Kurt Vonnegut writes all of his novels with a fusion of science fiction, black humor and fantasy. He does this because pure sci-fi is “ serious to the point of boredom. ” (source B2) Vonnegut uses satire as a means of conveying a serious message through humor. (source B1) While it is believed that Cat's Cradle was the turning point of Kurt Vonnegut's writing career, it is more appropriately “ the first in a series of books that did the trick” of grabbing people's attention.

Cat's Cradle has been on the reading lists of high schools and colleges. As critics say, it may be “ the most widely read of Vonnegut's novels among young people. ” Initially, Felix Hoenikker created ice-nine to aid the military in passing through mud quickly, while traveling in the field. On contact ice-nine can freeze any liquid. It is categorized as a large step in science, and it's also an asset to the US military. As he created this substance, Hoenikker realized that ice-nine is capable of destroying a nation's water supply.

While he was able to hide it from the research company he worked for, he failed to realize that his three children, Frank, Newt, and Angela, would misuse ice-nine upon inheriting it following their father's death. Once they received ice-nine after their father's death, the three Hoenikker siblings were unable to keep it hidden from the public. People soon started to use them solely for the possession of this magical substance. In the book, the characters indirectly compete for the possession of ice-nine. The benefits of a power struggle are few – such as reform – but the drawbacks are many.

One problem of power is that the person in charge becomes the focus of the power hungry. In Cat's Cradle, when Newt, Angela and Frank inherited ice-

nine from their father, they became the primary focus of people around them, and even around the world. Zinka, Newt's temporary fiancée, was more interested in acquiring his share of ice-nine than actually loving him. He saw her at a dance, and she was able to capture his attention, with her stunning moves. Newt carelessly proposed to her, without looking into where else she may be involved. She gladly accepted his proposal.

At the same time, she was an Ukrainian spy. Zinka was engaged to Newt for as long as it took her to gain his trust and pilfer his share of ice-nine. Once she fulfilled her mission of stealing ice-nine from Newt, she quietly walked away. As a neglected, lonely young man, Newt was an easy target for such manipulation. Since she is relatively tall yet hideously ugly, no man in his right mind would marry Angela. She was able to convince Harrison Connors, who is doing top-secret weapons research with the US government, by trading her share of ice-nine with him for marriage.

He married Angela solely so that he could use her for her access to ice-nine, and that he could later supply it to the US government. When Frank, Felix's oldest son, wanted to be major general of San Lorenzo, he offered Papa Monzano his share of ice-nine. Had they kept it a secret like their father, they could have had full control over ice-nine. The Hoenikker siblings are a representation of humanity's common, simple needs. If modern technology had not placed a dangerous, destructive substance in their hands, these simple needs would not have become a threat to all life on earth.

Vonnegut later reveals that Zinka was a Soviet spy. She stole Newt's ice-nine and gave it to the Soviet government. Newt, as a neglected, lonely young

man was an easy target for such manipulation. Not having graduated high school, Frank, Felix's oldest son, is far from qualified to be the Major General of San Lorenzo. Frank was in-flight on luxury craft from Cuba. When he spotted the beautiful island of San Lorenzo, he was starving. Instantly he got off from the craft, hoping to start a new life there.

Once officials was proved that he had no passport, he was thrown behind bars. Upon hearing this, " Papa" Monzano, dictator of San Lorenzo, visited him in jail to ask him if Felix Hoenikker was his dad. When Frank said yes, Papa Monzano welcomed him with open arms. He arranged things to his personal satisfaction by buying himself a comfortable post as Major General on San Lorenzo with a substance that would end up killing most of life on planet earth. Originally Frank had planned to keep ice-nine for himself, but he was unable to resist his urge to use it as a form of bartering.

He approached the real world with the same vain, selfish, careless lack of concern that characterizes the absolute power a child wields over an imaginary model of the world -- or a bottle filled with insects. While power proves the Hoenikkers to be incompetent, the same form of power shows the corrupt side of human nature. Having ice-nine shows how corrupt Papa is. He dictates the island with an iron fist. In his palace is a hook to hang anyone who supports Bokonism. Zinka and Harrison are both driven by the desire of power.

This shows that for some, power means incompetence, and for others it means corruption and destruction to all mankind. Vonnegut uses satire to criticize science, the power struggle between US and Russia, and human

nature. Vonnegut's perspective on human nature in Cat's Cradle is that humans will do anything - moral or immoral - for power. This walk through of how Felix's three children abused ice nine conveys the underlying message better than a serious lecture, because people tend to get bored of hearing a lecture, where as they can listen to a humorous story from the beginning to end.