

To find a purpose, to
find foma



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See the Cat? See the Cradle? These two all-important lines ring throughout the book, constantly confusing both the characters in the book and the reader themselves. It is used in comparison to Angela's marriage and religion as a whole, although the title of the book itself hints at a larger meaning to the general themes and issues the book is attempting to satirize. Dr. Hoenikker, a major player in the scheme of Cat's Cradle, states that he doesn't need to bother with made-up games with all the "real games" going on, but seems oddly fascinated with Cat's Cradle, "the closest [Newt] ever saw [his] father come to playing what anybody else would call a game." (9) The importance of the empty and hollow game of Cat's Cradle is a key aspect of the book to discover, especially in relation to the intriguingly complex character of Dr. Hoenikker.

A social recluse, Dr. Hoenikker is a paradox – he has the brilliant mind of a genius and advances technology by great strides, but he has the social mindset of a child, putting his needs above everyone else's by ignoring his wife and callously pulling his own daughter out of school in order to serve his needs when his wife passed away. Despite his brilliant scientific brain, he ultimately did not understand the harm he was doing to not only the people around him, but the people of the world by creating such horrible inventions. Painted in a childlike light, he had the motivations and drive a normal, undeveloped, and immature child would possess – he sought only to distract himself and amuse himself with games – in this case, the so-called "real games" that he mentioned in the interview with the magazine. Equating building the bomb with experimenting with turtles, he had no regard for the ramifications of his creations – he only saw them as games in a selfishly

childlike attitude. In fact, he created ice-nine carelessly, not documenting his actions, and didn't even reconsider his choice when he gave them to his children. Dr. Hoenikker died an immature child with the scientific genius of Einstein – he was selfish, thought only of his own needs, and only sought to amuse himself with game after game each day, not considering the effects of his creations on the world. But why would the simplest and most meaningless of all games, Cat's Cradle, intrigue and entertain his childlike mind so greatly? Vonnegut has a statement to make about Hoenikker's mind and the world around him.

In essence, the game of Cat's Cradle is all pretend. Newt repeatedly stresses that there's no cat and no cradle – and yet, Hoenikker and so many children are fascinated with the game. The reason Hoenikker is so intrigued with this game is that it relates to what Bokonon and, by extension, Vonnegut, believes is man's most basic and primal instinct, gleaned from this poem:

“ Tiger got to hunt,

Bird got to fly;

Man got to sit and wonder, “ Why, why, why?”

Tiger got to sleep,

Bird got to land;

Man got to tell himself he understand.” (106)

Man's endless effort to convince himself that he understands his existence and life is paralleled in the game of Cat's Cradle – there is no cat, nor cradle,

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and yet children yearn to find a meaning behind nothingness. Hoenikker, having the immature mind of a child, also seeks to find meaning in this simple game, relating to his basic instincts as a man. In a larger scheme, it tells of an endless quest to find meaning where there is none, to discover purpose where none is to be found. This endless and ultimately fruitless quest for duty is hinted at throughout the book, from the central tenet of Bokononism (Bokonon's own cosmogony is a "Pack of Foma!" (111)) to the final ending of the world itself due to a careless accident, where mankind is left still knowing nothing about themselves. The essence of both the game and the novel is that man's search to find purpose and knowledge of their existence is all foma – meaningless lies. And just like creating ice-nine, the nuke, and turtle experiments, the game of Cat's Cradle is another of Hoenikker's amusements to pass his time – and yet, ironically, Hoenikker's childlike tendencies to not make him innocent – in fact, he is the person to blame for the world's suffering and eventually, the world's end. His naivety and failure to comprehend the consequences of his deeds does not make him innocent and free of blame. In fact, it makes him even more guilty.

The meaningless and empty game of Cat's Cradle echoes Vonnegut's views of man's most primal instinct – the drive to find a meaning behind everything, to find purpose in life where there is none. The child's naive mind is the prime channel of this drive – a child seeks to discover a cause to explain all things, especially the outstanding meaninglessness of Cat's Cradle. By showing Hoenikker's fascination with the game, Vonnegut displays a selfish character, driven by his own needs and wants, unaware of the world around him and the potential consequences of his actions. With

the contradictory mind of a socially unaware child and a man with genius-level intellect, Hoenikker represents a facet of mankind as a whole - we strive, like children, to find meaningless purpose, endlessly educating ourselves and expanding our knowledge but failing to expand beyond a childlike state of emotional mindset. Vonnegut's novel and the character of Dr. Hoenikker himself echoes the uselessness of man's ambitions, goals, and sacrifices - and when the world ends, we will find ourselves knowing just as much as we knew the day we began living.