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**Musical Intertextuality in Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*:**

**“A Razor Song that Cuts Clean Through”**

**Treball de Fi de Grau**

**Grau en Estudis Anglesos**

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This work is dedicated to my missing angel, my mum high up in the skies.

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## Abstract

Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle* has received great scholarship, yet the representation of music in the novel has often been missed. For the most part, academics have focused their research on the literary intertextuality. Conversely, I will study the music intertextuality and point out the fact that Vonnegut's milestone novel is undoubtedly indebted to the ballad tradition. In order to proof this thesis statement, I will focus the bulk of my paper on examining the treatment given to music in *Cat's Cradle*.

Three main lines of study will deal with this question. The first one focuses on the *leitmotifs* Vonnegut used to write such a social satire, namely, love, death and destruction. By providing reliable secondary sources, the paper will show that those topics are also the main driving forces in the ballad texts. Secondly, the representation of music will be analyzed by dividing its study into two approaches, music *in* the text and music *off* the text. The former deals with the actual lyrics found in the novel as well as the Calypso music characterizing them. Music *off* the text, though, focuses on the narrative, both on its structure and its content. Thus, the way chapters are used in the novel, for instance, as well as its style, give a particular cadence to the text, a musicality that resembles that of the oral literary tradition. Moreover, the plot displays music through different channels, characters linked to instruments, or scenes with background music. Therefore, in-text instances of those features will be presented to show that the representation of music plays a key role in *Cat's Cradle* since it turns the novel into a dramatic and lyrical groundbreaking piece.

**Keywords:** Postmodernism, satire, intertextuality, balladry, Calypso.

## 1. Introduction

*Cat's Cradle* is a work of art, an anthropological fiction that belongs to the postmodern canon since its narrative is immersed in irony, sarcasm, and literary intertextuality, the bulk of which is connected to religious texts such as the Bible and several of its divine figures. It is a critical work which aims to unveil the evil sources of power that leads humanity into a dormant state. Thus, Vonnegut exposes those who worship science and religion in the real world by displaying a timeless story where humans let themselves be drawn into a cycle of doom by believing in science and religion blindly. Thus, in *Cat's Cradle* science is the cause for the early end of the world while religion is the cause for Sant Lorenzans to keep on with their deprived and miserable lives, even though religion is openly presented to them as a “pack of foma” made up by an ordinary man.

These ideas will be expanded in Chapter 2 while providing a brief overview of the context of the novel, namely, the postmodern literary period, as well as Vonnegut's background, particularly his journalistic style and his use of humor and satire as a way for both social criticism and activism. This study is not based on trite topics, but on new ideas that, much to my surprise, have been overlooked by scholars over the years.

Those ideas will be epitomized in Chapters 3 and 4, shaping the bulk of a paper that aims to shed light on the existent gap in *Cat's Cradle* research while conveying Vonnegut's masterpiece into a dimension that correlates the old literary oral tradition with postmodern literature. In this regard, Chapter 3 will deal with *Cat's Cradle's* oral literary heritage by focusing on the *leitmotifs* of the novel as well as the main ones of the ballad tradition.

Ultimately, Chapter 4 aims to prove that the narrative is displayed through drama and lyricism resulting in a piece bearing a highly melodic cadence. In this chapter, the treatment given to music will be examined through an in-depth study of, on

the one hand, the narrative and, on the other, the actual Calypso songs. Once the representation of music is taken into account, the novel takes on a different air, showing a throwback to the style, cadence and mysticism of folk literature.

In conclusion, this paper aims to provide a reasonable number of in-text instances that show several correlations between *Cat's Cradle* and the ballad tradition, maintaining that it could be read orally as a ballad or as a song due to the cadence and musicality of the text. This makes the novel highly memorable, which was Vonnegut's goal to begin with, namely, to have an impact on his audience.

## **2. Activism Through the Absurd in Postmodern Literature**

Postmodernism in the literary arena, defined by Edward Quinn as “a two-phase-period [1950's-60's and 1970's] that celebrates incoherence, discontinuity, parody, popular culture, and the principle of metafiction” (2006: 330), is an artistic movement that raises more questions than answers in both right and left-wing writers' work. Postmodernism was revolutionary, experimental as well as activist, in some cases, due to the spirit of denouncement that started growing in numerous writers after World War II and the Cold War.

Joseph Heller's *Catch 22* (1961), Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange* (1962) and Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle* (1963), are instances of postmodern novels that took an activist approach. While the former and the latter contributed to the post-World-War phenomena in literature, *A Clockwork Orange* could be pinned down as an anti-establishment novel. As Burgess points out, “when patterns of conformity are imposed by the state, then one has a right to be frightened” (“The Clockwork Condition”).

Their plots are based on the absurd and such notion is displayed throughout a narrative that plays with linguistic reinvention while following the postmodern canon,

that is, fictionalized settings and ground-breaking stylistic approaches, like the use of music devices, for instance. The term “absurd” has as a core meaning “ridiculous”. Yet, the connotations attributed to it are numerous and strongly linked to the characterization of the human life during the twentieth century and onwards. The term was first used by the French writer Albert Camus “to describe the futility of human existence” (Quinn, 2006: 2). After World War II, humanity realized that there was no way to stop such massive destruction. It resulted into “the renunciation of belief in the possibility of total transformation of society [and] the crisis of reason and of the notion of the subject” (Beverley, 1995: 193). Thus, the absurd appeared as a form of catharsis for the human soul, that is, as a new linguistic device to describe the disenchantment and despair of the period.

Kurt Vonnegut is considered to be one of the contemporary novelists of the absurd that “enjoys the largest general readership” (Harris, 1971: 51). He employs his best humour in *Cat’s Cradle*, a work of fiction that became –and continues to be– an anthropological work of study since the novel “served as his thesis when the University of Chicago awarded him a master’s degree in anthropology in 1971.” (Davis, 2006: 64) As Vonnegut said,

When I write I don’t want to write a story about a man, a love affair, or trial. I want to write about the whole damned planet, the whole society. I try to discuss our whole planet in human terms. [...] it is deliberately so unrealistic that people can’t really believe it. In a way, it makes our planet more important, more real. (qtd. in Shields, 2011: 162)

Vonnegut took an important role in the brouhaha that was part of the literary and social movement of the period. He became an extremely popular figure among young people namely (“Borrowed Times”, 1972: 9).

Being an ex-prisoner of war and having experienced the horrors of death and manslaughter when life amounted to nothing during World War II, he could make it back to America, a nation that he would start condemning openly. Thus, war became a



leitmotif in his writings. Not only was his voice heard throughout his numerous novels but he would also leave his footprint in many small press interviews and reviews by pointing out aspects such as the fact that “we [Americans] are in the midst of a government by people who detest us” (“Great Speckled Bird”, 1973: 11). Therefore, Vonnegut’s views became apparent in his work, where he would take the role of an activist.

His style resembles that of journalism. As he expressed on several occasions, he believed in the simplicity of language as the empowerment of the authorial projection, that is, simple language arrives and stays in the audience easily, such as Shakespeare’s “to be or not to be”. Major literary figures such as William Shakespeare or Ernest Hemingway were then inspirational to him (Vonnegut, “How to Write”, 66-67). However, Vonnegut would never depart from an elaborate sense of humor, which he developed early on and helped him to build his own persona as a writer. He discovered his skill in a quest for attention from his closest relatives—his father, mother and sister—who were much starry-eyed with their elder son and his scientific achievements. Vonnegut, after becoming aware of how appealing his humor was, used it in public events and, just as Charles Shields points out, he “gained his audience” (Shields, 2011: 31).

Moreover, he was depicted as “the finest black-humorist”. The novel is “an unforgettable ride” (*New York Times*) in which the reader can learn about Vonnegut’s best humor as well as his aversion towards science which probably, as hinted in his biography, originated when his brother started overshadowing him. *Cat’s Cradle* was published in 1963, almost two decades after the dropping of the atomic bomb over the Japanese cities of Nagasaki and Hiroshima. Vonnegut brings this topic to the novel by creating a character, Jonah, the narrator, whose aim is to write a factual book, “an account

of what Americans had done on the day when the first atomic bomb was dropped” (p. 1). The novel deals with the topics of war and science from an absurd angle, resulting in several far-fetched situations that are akin to the ones in the actual world. As mentioned above, such an absurd notion is taken in by the writer as well as by the audience as a cathartic experience.

The best instance appears right before the first page of the novel: “nothing in this book is true” (vii). Such a statement is not surprising when beginning a work of fiction. Yet, throughout the novel, the reader realizes that Vonnegut is constantly parodying the American way of life in the twentieth century by displaying what is called a historical metafiction. This term was first coined by American critic William Grass as “a fictional narrative which systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality” (qtd. in Yahya, 2013: 228). Thus, the statement that heads the book could be read as “nothing in this book is true, but that’s exactly how things are”, which was the title of a novel by Bob Frissell (1994). The resulting effect of the statement is a reinforced idea of how absurd the human condition is.

The novel came from Vonnegut’s need to pay the bills but also from his aim of “catch[ing] people before they become generals and Senators and Presidents” and “poison their minds with humanity” (qtd. in Woo, 2007). *Cat’s Cradle* was certainly not as easy as his second book, *The Sirens of Titan* (1959), where his numerous ideas would flow at ease on the paper. “Everything was put in the effect of reading the novel [...] brief chapters, rapid characterizations, and a disarmingly simple style”. (Shields, 2011: 169). Contrarily, *Cat’s Cradle* took him a great deal of time. Everything in the novel seems to have been articulated, actually, in the effect of understanding all the connections between the motifs Vonnegut used in order to convey his social critique. Even though the

novel is also made up of “short sentences, small paragraphs, tiny chapters and cartoon-like characters [...] the train of the events in the plot is deliberately improbable, the chapter titles are cryptic and not just the form but the fact of the story is symbolic” (Edwards, 1997: 99). Thus, the ideas shaping the book are complex and need to be deciphered throughout its reading.

To begin with, there is a recurrent presence of intertextuality in which the reader is compelled to make external connections. One of the most meaningful pastiches is the one that Vonnegut displays throughout the creation of the Bokonist religion. As Derek Miller states, “the Bokonon books [are] the bokonist equivalent of the Christian Bible” (2011: 1). For the most part, academics have focused their *Cat’s Cradle* research on literary intertextuality. Jesse Weiner, for instance, wrote a paper in which she argues that “the novel’s narrative is structured in part through the geography of Homer’s *Odyssey* and that Vonnegut offers a cautionary rereading of Homeric epic”. (2014: 116) Yet, *Cat’s Cradle* style and plot could be also interpreted as homage to the ballad tradition. Such research opens a new door of literary perception that gives way to the field of music intertextuality.

### **3. Oral Literature Heritage in *Cat’s Cradle***

After having put the novel and its author in context in the previous chapter, Chapter 3 will examine the *leitmotifs* of the novel and determine its popular legacy through the topics the novel revolves around.

To begin with, it is a postmodern novel that, on the one hand, parodies the way in which society is manipulated by power figures. His social critique is grasped through the main themes the novel deals with: science, religion and war. Simultaneously, those subject matters work as triggers of love, death and destruction that finish by affecting

adversely town and gown in the novel. Vonnegut deals with those three anthropological subjects which were also the main driving forces in popular literature (Abrams, 2005: 2882).

Thus, it could be said that Vonnegut is, somehow, holding onto the ballad tradition. Firstly, he warns about the power of science just as troubadours would caution about witchcraft and black magic. Furthermore, such matters are shown cyclically; every character winds up being immersed in a cycle of doom which is postulated as the only feasible motion of the soul due to human nature. As Lawrence Broer points out, “such is the spiral of lovelessness that reproduces itself in the Hoenikker family, or that of *ice-9* that assumes a deadly momentum toward global destruction [...] The sea of futility in which they drown is one they themselves have made” (1994: 60). Thus, destruction in the novel is a crystal-clear example of an entrapping spiral.

The book opens on the day the atomic bomb was dropped. Therefore, it starts from the assumption that there is awareness of the obliterating power that such weapon has; as the antithesis of a *Bildungsroman*, humanity does not learn the lesson. By alleging to scientific research as the only means to achieve knowledge and hence, happiness, comfort and social power, Man dallies with danger by using the *ice-nine* and prompts, for a second time, apocalyptic consequences for the world. This time though, the collateral effect is a sudden and early end of Earth. Those human beings who die because of the *ice-nine*, learn the lesson by means of death. Meanwhile, the survivors will be the only ones granted with a second chance for life and social redemption.

Jonah happens to be in the survivors group. “The ménage consisted of Frank, little Newt, and the Crosbys” (p. 275). He is the one that brings light onto the firstly foreseen failed *Bildungsroman* by stating eventually that he “knew what had gone wrong – where and how” (p. 271). As David Miles describes, “the *Bildungsroman* represents a

progression of connected events that lead up to a definite denouement [and] concentrates on actions, thoughts and reflections alone". (1976: 122)

Being that so, Jonah, who had firstly engaged in the story by taking a quest towards the truth of what happened in America on the day the atom bomb was dropped, is driven by the finger of fate towards a bigger quest: a quest for the meaning of his existence and the truth beneath "the human stupidity" (p. 187) in the world. Thus, the resulting acquisition of knowledge he has pursued throughout the whole novel ends up in a personal-growth. He, as "the *Bildungsheld* [is the] representative and exemplary member of society" (Miles, 122) through which the readership discovers the moral of the story.

Similar to the main character's experience in *The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner* (1798) by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Jonah regrets having taken "an albatross canapé from a passing tray" (p. 235). Such a feeling could be read as Jonah's regret towards having put nature, or in this case, humanity in jeopardy. In addition, he is compelled to embrace the role of a teacher likewise. In the narrative, his voice emulates the one of the troubadour. Thus, he gives a detailed account of the historical present by reciting, teaching and ultimately, redeeming the whole manhood from its sins. Therefore, he writes a story "to examine all strong hints as to what on Earth we, collectively, have been up to" (p. 5). Jonah's work is titled "*The Day the World Ended*" (p. 1). His writing is framed in tandem with Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*. As a result, the audience is presented with a novel within a novel. They both differ in title but share the same narrative.

Vonnegut, through Jonah's voice, describes with great detail the end of the world and the human race, making sure that one of the last things the reader is left with after reading the novel is a detailed image of death; a death brought by evil forces, that is, science and religion in modern times.

In that bowl were thousands upon thousands of dead. On the lips of each decedent was the blue-white frost of *ice-nine*" [...] 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 do now (pp. 272-273)

The notion of death in *Cat's Cradle* could be seen as analogous to that of the ballad tradition. Firstly, part of the imagery of the latter is found, to a certain extent, in the evil human side of a character that uses supernatural powers, that is, black magic to create natural catastrophes and bring death to the world. *Cruel Sister* presented in Child num.73 and *Lady Isabel and the Elf Knight* in Child num. 4, are examples of such an imagery within the English and Scottish corpus ballads from the Late Middle Ages. It was not until the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that popular ballads were collected and published. F. J. Child is one of the editors that gathered in his milestone ballad collection *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, multiple versions of those popular poems that had been mainly transmitted orally (Abrams, 2883). Thus, he, among other collectors, contributed to the preservation of the oral tradition by making them accessible to all those interested in the popular literary tradition. As Laurel Doucette points out, Child's ballads "might have been classified [in]: supernatural motifs or specific historical details". (1981: 9)

In *Cat's Cradle*, there are instances where science is postulated as a force from outer space, that is, a sort of postmodern black magic. Being that so, ordinary characters are presented as incapable of understanding what exactly the outcomes of scientific research are. On page 25, for instance, a lady named Sandra and a bartender engage in a conversation with Jonah about the latest scientific achievement. The newspapers present it as the discovery of "the secret of life". Such an achievement is assumed to be a positive outcome since they do not show any critical thinking over or against it. Moreover, they

do not really know or can explain either what it consists of. Consequently, they become supporters of such scientific outcome and, in effect, supporters of science, too.

The matter of supporting science from the individual's ignorance becomes obvious again in page 34. Miss Pefko, a worker of the Scientific Research Laboratory of Indianapolis, has only an answer for what happens daily in such premises: "I dunno, I dunno, I dunno". She ends up describing the whole thing as "magic" (p. 36) to which Dr. Breed, the director of the institution, answers: "I'm sorry to hear a member of the Laboratory family using that brackish, medieval word". The third instance is given through the performance of the girls of the Girl Pool which is "the typing bureau in the Laboratory's basement" (p. 38). Each Christmas they sing their repertoire to the workers and as Dr. Assa Breed testifies, "they serve science, too [...] even though they may not understand a word of it". (p. 38)

Vonnegut does not deal with mysticism as explicitly as some of the Corpus ballads did by presenting characters as witches performing black magic, for instance. However, the figure of the father of the atomic bomb in the novel, Felix Hoenikker, is described as "a force of nature no mortal could possibly control" (p.21), and the result of his scientific work, just as seen above, results in magic. Thus, there is a clear parallel between the pure form of magic given in the early popular literature and the form of magic Vonnegut presents in *Cat's Cradle*: a supernatural and eventually, evil force, in the late twentieth century called science.

Furthermore, there are other instances in the novel that help to reinforce the idea of Vonnegut trying to frame a modern novel from a popular literature heritage. Firstly, he inserts repeated terrible weather conditions that unleash some characters into harrowing experiences and determine the course of their lives. In the same way, the nineteenth

century ballad named “The Lady of Shallot” portrays a sequence of sea accidents that lead the characters involved to distressful destinies.

In *Cat’s Cradle*, Lionel Boyd Johnson, Bokonon, was commissioned in the field during the First World War, and from that moment onwards, each vessel he took, first as prisoner and later on as an ex-prisoner of war, was blown ashore by mechanical problems or bad weather just as if something was preventing him from returning home: “The *Scheherazade* was rammed in a fog in Bombay harbor, and only Johnson survived” (p. 106) and “he sought shelter from a hurricane in Port-au-Prince, Haiti” where he met his partner in crime, McCabe. “The two set sail for Miami. But a gale hounded the schooner onto the rocks of San Lorenzo” (p. 207), the island where they both decided to start with the big *foma*: Bokonism.

#### **4. Music Intertextuality**

This chapter discusses the treatment given to the representation of music in the novel. It is divided in three main sections. The first section studies Calypso, which is the music used to disclose the songs of Bokonon. The second section deals with the music *in* the text. This subchapter will look at the structure that Vonnegut used to compose the lyrics, their lines and metrics. The third section analyzes the music *off* the text, focusing on the implicit representation of music or, better yet, the lyricism in the narrative while excluding the treatment given to the actual songs in the book and the Calypso.

##### **4.1 Calypso Music**

The Bokonist religion is known by the reader throughout the narrative and mainly, its poems which are presented regularly by Jonah. The essence of this religion relies on the notion of the absurd since it openly acknowledges its nature as lies, “a pack of foma”



(p.189) made up by an ordinary man, Lionel Boyd Johnson—a parody of President Lyndon B. Johnson. Nonetheless, Bokonism works as a cathartic tool and helps the islanders sooth their rough existence in an island where misery abounds and “the people down there are poor enough and scared enough and ignorant enough to have some common sense!” (p. 89).

The reader learns about such a religion from the narrative but also through its gospel and accompanying music, the Calypso. The treatment given to the gospel of the sacred texts is well calculated since the irony in them is highly empowered by the Calypso music which, as Paula Morgan points out, “is associated with lower-strata Afro-Trinidadian cultural identity [that] functions as a platform for [...] incisive humor, cutting criticism and for simultaneously airing and masking fear and antipathy through verbal power play” (2005: 1).

Calypso is known to have articulated itself among slaves who were working on sugar plantations in Trinidad and Tobago during the mid of the nineteenth century. Slaves were not allowed to talk while working so they started singing to enable communication. Thus, the content of the songs was strongly marked by a spirit of denouncement and mockery towards their masters and the authoritarian colonial British culture. They did not have proper instruments and, hence, they used recycled fuel barrels which enabled them to preserve the percussion tradition of their African ancestors while creating a new musical genre which was influenced by Jazz. The American activist musician and actor Harry Belafonte, widely known as the King of Calypso, popularized this Caribbean music style in the fifties.

In an email to me, Dave Soldier, the composer that Vonnegut chose to set a piece with on *Cat's Cradle* songs (*Ice-9 Ballads*), said that Vonnegut told him the book “was based on Haiti, not Trinidad, so Calypso is not exactly right, though I don't think he was

too aware of it. Remember Belafonte was very popular then, and of course he wanted the lyrics to be in English” (Larson). Given Soldier’s assertion, it looks as if Vonnegut had chosen the Calypso rhythm only because of its popularity—widely spread by Belafonte, the king of Calypso—and because the lyrics had to be in English. Yet, the relation between the Calypso roots and the irony throughout the use of the absurd in the novel seems to fit perfectly and, ultimately, it does not look accidental or random. Thus, Calypso works as a powerful tool that helps to convey Vonnegut’s message through the use of irony, creating absurd situations that will give place to a catharsis for both the author and the audience.

Furthermore, the particular Calypso rhythm is described by the cultural critic Gordon Rohlehr as “a jarring, jamming Carnavalesque collusion and clashing counter point of rhythms (qtd in Morgan, 2). Thus, the music in *Cat’s Cradle* empowers the notion of the absurd by making the discovery of Bokonism laughable since the common musical treatment given to religious and hence sacred texts is often far less rhythmic. As it is widely known, religious songs are accompanied by harmonious melodies and ceremonious rhythms performed by the church organ mainly.

Resuming the discussion of the Calypso roots and the ironic treatment of its lyrics, the following Calypso passage illustrates what has been discussed so far:

When I was young,  
I was so gay and mean,  
And I drank and chased the girls  
Just like young St. Augustine.  
He got to be a saint.  
So, if I get to be one, also,  
Please, Mama, don’t you faint. (p. 104)

Firstly, although Saint Augustine is described as a lewd young man who did not seem to be enthusiastic about Christian dogmas, he ultimately embraced religion and became a Saint. Thus, Bokonon ridicules faith by conveying the idea that religions are made up by man. Similar to the earliest Calypso in Indio-Caribbean fiction *Gurudeva and other*

*Tales* (1943), by Seepersad Naipaul, the Calypso above is a snapshot that resembles metaphorically the one called “Rum and Coca Cola” which describes an Indian woman who is actually “working for the Yankee dollar.” (Morgan, 5). By comparison, Bokonon is also “working by the Yankee dollar”, or better, by the Yankee *foma* that aims to subdue islanders by employing “toxic sources of power that manipulate the original neutral difference between characters”. (Morgan, p. 4)

As discussed so far, the music is key to understanding the role of the ballad tradition in *Cat’s Cradle*. Nonetheless, this section could be extended into a much more complex dimension by dividing the treatment given to music in two parts, music *in* the text and music *off* the text. The former refers to the *Songs of Bokonon*, which go hand in hand with Calypso. The latter refers to the writing style: simple sentences, neologisms, ideas that are often linked by repetition or inferred by dialogues, insertion of idioms (p. 195), and other literary devices that give musicality to the text. They should be regarded as two different notions that work separately for a unified and common purpose that is, getting the audience trapped by the hook of the music while building a memorable story which will be easily remembered due to its easy reading and catchy melody.

## 4.2 Music *in* the Text

First, the music *in* the text is displayed by the actual lyrics together with the Calypso music. Numerous Calypsos have a regular meter. Vonnegut uses the most common stanza form for ballads which, as M.H. Abrams points out, is the “ballad stanza, a quatrain rhyming *abcb*” (2005: 2882).

A fish pitch up  
By the angry sea,  
I gasped on land,  
And I became me. (p. 107)

Other poems or songs are framed into stanzas that are often linked by repetition, just as it happens in the ballads where “the reader –originally, the hearer– is constantly made to pause by a repeated phrase or even nonsense syllables, which retard the action in a suspenseful way”. (Abrams, 2882)

We do, doodley do, doodley do, doodley do,  
What we must, muddily must, muddily must, muddily must;  
Muddily do, muddily do, muddily do, muddily do,  
Until we bust, bodily bust, bodily bust, bodily bust. (p. 267)

Other instances of Calypsos in which there is a recurrent use of repetition, can be found on pages 3, 102-103, 158, 182.

At first sight, the first Calypso, “Nice Nice Very Nice” (p. 3), seems to be an arbitrary text that leaves readers somewhat dumbfounded. Yet, as the Calypsos become regularly presented and their irony runs parallel to the lines of the narrative, readers can see that there is a proper liaison between the author and his audience. As Steve Newman states, “the ballad embodies what [he] calls the doubleness of lyric, its unusual blending of individual and communal language [...] as an object of elite consciousness” (2011: 3). Thus, Vonnegut could be taking part in the latter period of the folksong revivalism which as David Atkinson states, “grew out of the period of reconstruction following World War II” (1955: 370), by presenting a fiction that is both dramatic and lyric.

As Abrams points out, “during the 1960`s the American antiwar and civil rights movements inspired original ballads by performers like Bob Dylan. [...] Thus protesters at different periods of time have taken over the style and manner of this seemingly timeless poetry” (2005: 2883), as Vonnegut did through the use of Calypso in the narrative of *Cat's Cradle*, among other instances. Calypso can also be linked to the ballad tradition since it is considered to be “one facet of a diverse oral tradition [...] a deep rooted self-derision and contempt for the other through music and childhood rhyming songs” (Morgan, 2).

Jonah's work "*The Day the World Ended*" is prompted by crime; apocalyptic crime compels him to write his book. Such piece is both the oldest and the newest literary work on Earth, that is, the only one left together with its predecessor, *The Books of Bokonon*. This means that all poems captured in the paper together with the narrative framework, become, per se, a set of popular songs framed within a popular ballad, *Cat's Cradle*.

*The Books of Bokonon* are expanded by Jonah with historical details. He comes up with a new angle on Bokonism by displaying, on the one hand, a narrative of his own and, on the other, by preserving the Bokonon lyrics, all mingled up in a single book. As W.P Ker remarks, the ballad is "a poetical form [that] may take a story or a historical substance wholly into itself and make 'a new poetical thing' (qtd. in Gray, 2015: 88). Both pieces, the Bokonist one and Jonah's work, contain music in a narration that could be recited or sung due to its particular narrative. Being that so and taking Abrams' point which states that "oral tradition survives longest in regions remote from the border urbanizations and written culture" (2005: 2882), Jonah's novel and his aim of ransoming the human ethics will hopefully succeed within a culturally isolated island such as the one of San Lorenzo, for future generations.

#### 4.3 Music *off* the Text

The music *off* the text, that is, the way music is represented throughout the writing style of the narrative—excluding the songs of Bokonon—is comprised in simple sentences, neologisms, ideas that are often linked by repetition or inferred by dialogues, and other literary devices that give musicality to the text.

While the Calypsos have the 'authorial I' (Bokonon's voice) typical from the period of the ballad adaptation into songs, or better, courtly sonnets, the 'authorial I' in

the narrative is absent since the readership cannot spot Vonnegut's voice in *Cat's Cradle*. Therefore, the narrative of the text accomplishes the basics of the ballad tradition; as discussed before, the main narrative was not conveyed through the author's voice but shared in a communal voice.

Thus, Vonnegut's voice, that is, the 'lyric or authorial I' is spread through the voices of the characters that simultaneously have to confront other voices in the narrative. Vonnegut's voice is mainly found in Jonah and Bokonon. The former engages in a role which is equivalent to that of Vonnegut's, that is, the role of teaching new generations through historic writing, while the latter entails Vonnegut's black humor by being ironic. Moreover, just as the Vonnegut does, Bokonon and Jonah present a resentful attitude towards science, too (p. 234). This authorial voice distribution is called polyphony, which, among other meanings, is a "literary writing that managed to liberate the voice of its characters from under the domination of the authorial or narratorial voice" (Online Oxford Reference). Such a technique was hardly postmodern but romantic and modern. Authors such as Lord Byron in *Cain* (1821) and T.S. Eliot in his long poem *The Waste Land* (1922), for instance, used the same literary device; similarly, in the ballad tradition the authorial voice was not displayed in the texts.

Vonnegut achieves such authorial liberation by coming up with a narrative dominated by the use of dialogues mainly. As Abram describes, ballads "put the burden of narration on allusive monologue or dialogue, and avoid editorial comment. The force of the ballad often depends on what is *not* told directly, which must be inferred from dialogue and action" (2005: 2882). One of the dialogues that comprise this notion, as well as repetition and the regularized metrics of ballads, is seen in page 184:

"Something about your father?"  
"Something about *you*."  
"Something I've done?"  
"Something you're *going* to do."

The dialogue continues, yet Vonnegut inserts a musical aside in the middle of the dialogue between Franklin Hoenikker and Jonah. The latter hears “a door open, and xylophone music [...] from some chamber. The music was again “When Day is Done”. And then the door was closed, and [he] couldn’t hear the music anymore”. Then, the phone conversation is resumed:

“I’d appreciate it if you’d give me some small hint of what you expect me to do—so I can sort of get set.”

“*Zah-mah-ki-bo.*”

“What?”

“It’s a Bokonist word.”

As seen above, there is the inclusion of nonsense words also in the narrative of the text. Vonnegut makes use of a long list of neologisms that make up the linguistics of the Bokonist religion such as “*vin-dit*” (p. 69), “*wrang-wrang*” (p. 78), “*duprass*” (p. 86), etc. In addition, he also creates a particular dialect used by the inhabitants of Sant Lorenzo:

“*Dose, sore,*” he said, “*yeeera lo hoon-yearmora-toorz tut zamoo-cratz-ya.*”

“Those, sir,” he’d said in dialect, “are the Hundred Martyrs to Democracy.” (p. 149)

The resulting effect of such narrative tension together with the repetition technique creates in the reader “a foredoomed conclusion [which] is paradoxically made to seem more inevitable, more urgent” (Abrams, 2882). The repetition gives the dialogue a particular cadence that resembles rap pieces, in some instances, as it also happens in the ones presented on pages 152, 202 and 256. An instance of recursive repetition out of the dialogue form can be seen with all clarity on page 22, among others, where the utterance “we talked about” is repeated 13 times in the same paragraph.

Moreover, not only is the narrative strongly marked by repetition but it is usually displayed in three sets. Number three is a recurrent number for repeating sequences in the ballads as it can be seen in *The Three Ravens*:

There were three ravens sat on a tree,  
Down a down, hay down, hay down

There were three ravens sat on a tree,  
    *With a down*  
There were three ravens on a tree,  
They were as black as they might be,  
    *With a down, derry, derry, derry, down, down.*

In *Cat's Cradle* the repetition of three sets is shown recurrently as on page 1 with the name Jonah: "Call me Jonah [...] Jonah—John—if I had been a Sam, I would have been a Jonah still". It can also be seen, for instance, on pages 65, 176 and 252 with the repetition of the sequence "*busy, busy, busy*".

Number three is representative of the ballad texts not only because it is used for repetition but also because it is used for grouping characters. *The Wife of Usher's Well* in which the wife has "three stout and stalwart son" (Abrams, 2886), is a ballad in which this recurrent use of number three is clearly presented by grouping the characters involved in the narrative in groups of three. Similarly, in *Cat's Cradle*, the remaining members of the Hoenikker family are the three sons, Franklin, Angela and Newt.

Furthermore, there are other instances that contribute to the lyricism or musicality of the novel. Firstly, the insertion of music asides, as the one on page 184 that was briefly discussed earlier, is a recurrent aspect in *Cat's Cradle*. Instances of such music asides are presented as well on pages 12, 46-47. They help to reinforce the idea of reading a text which not only is dramatic but also lyrical. In addition, they happen to be inserted in the narrative in particular climax scenes, as if they worked as the preceding of evil. On page 12, for instance, Dr. Hoenikker starts singing for the first time to his child, Newt, on the day he will give the chips containing *Ice-nine* to his three children and then, die. On page 46, the chant of the girls of the Girl Pool interrupts the conversation between Dr. Breed and Jonah, where the former is trying to explain the power of the *Ice-nine* to Jonah.

Thus, as it has been shown, the music reaches the audience through numerous narrative channels and works as a powerful source for conveying meaning, as it is seen



on page 47 where Jonah, after listening to the girl of the choir singing, expresses: “I am not likely to forget very soon their interpretation of the line: “The hopes and fears of all years are here with us tonight”. He links the idea of learning about the *Ice-nine* with hopeful and fearful feelings.

Music is also presented through numerous characters. For instance, Angela Hoenikker “didn’t have any boy friends. She didn’t have any friends at all. She had only one hobby. She played the clarinet” (p. 16). Thus the music was her only companion and, as seen on page 178, it was also the only soother that could help her to ease her emotional pain.

Her mother, Emily Hoenikker, had been playing instruments since childhood since her father ran the Music Store in Ilium. She married Felix Hoenikker, whose twin brother, coincidentally, “was a music-box manufacturer” (189), stating that Felix’s “mind tuned to the biggest music there was, the music of stars.” (p. 69). Regardless of the fact that she “was dying for lack of love and understanding” (p.68), she had been trapped by his music.

In the same way, Sant Lorenzans are trapped by Calypso and “there’s only one aspect of progress that really excites them. [...] The electric guitar” (p. 234). Thus, music soothes their empty lives. In the same way, Mona, the erotic symbol of Sant Lorenzo, has music in her. She plays the xylophone just as Angela Hoenikker plays the clarinet. In page 217, Mona “tried to soothe ‘Papa’ with music” when he was dying in pain.

Just as it happens in *Hamlet* and *Othello* by Shakespeare, where “all female characters [...] suffered the consequences of male dominance and victimization” (Corbett, 2009: 2), female characters in *Cat’s Cradle* are forced into silence and gain voice also through music. Mona is a mere erotic symbol for those in Sant Lorenzo;

Angela is a girl that had to take care of her father and brothers as if she was the mother of them three; and Emily, Angela's mother, dies alone with no love to receive from her beloved behalf. Yet, they are presented together with the melody that comes out from their instruments and, ultimately, those female figures reach the readership's empathy.

Another music channel is displayed by some characters' actions and tropes that prompt music sounds out of snapping fingers, for instance (p. 66-67). On page 236 "‘Papa’ really did make a sound like a marimba". Another instance is presented on page 258 where Jonah states that he "could hear rockslides of all sizes in a conversation that was almost orchestral".

Finally, the last point to comment that contributes to the particular cadence of the novel is based on the chapters setting. Vonnegut divides the 287-page-story into 127 chapters. Such a distribution compels each plot chapter to narrate one scene with great compression just as it happened in the ballads. As Abrams informs, "the distinctive quality shared by most popular ballads is sparseness: the narrative style typically strips the story down to a few objective and dramatic scenes. Ballads are apt to deal only with the culminating incident or climax of a plot" (2005, 2882). Thus, each chapter in *Cat's Cradle* could be read as an independent climax scene. The outcome of such a particular chapter division is that the audience remembers the tune, the scene and the message in each chapter just by reading their headings. In addition, the fast transition between chapters contributes not only to the easy reading of the story and hence, its remembrance, but also to the creation of a specific narrative tempo that eventually contributes to the melopoeia of the novel, that is, the musicality and rhythm of the narrative.

## 5. Conclusions

The main findings of my research show that one of the key elements in *Cat's Cradle*, music, or better yet, its representation in the novel, has received little—if any—scholarly attention. This paper concludes that by studying the treatment that Vonnegut gives to music, this postmodern novel could be also read as a modern throwback to the beginnings of literature, that is, oral tradition and balladry.

The musical elements have been studied through two main channels, music *in* the text and music *off* the text, in order to facilitate the research approach and to come up with a clear, organized picture of the main findings. Thus, it can be said that music is not only displayed in the songs of Bokonon but also everywhere in the narrative. The music treatment given in both textual spheres, and channels, has been proved to be tantamount to the style and content of the oral tradition. In terms of content, the *leitmotifs* of love, death, and destruction used in the novel set the basis for reading *Cat's Cradle* as a novel with popular literary legacy.

Furthermore, the metrics used for the songs of Bokonon, the structure of their lines, among other features that have been discussed in this paper, such as the chapter division, are similar to those features used in the ballads. Finally, the author's goal was to teach humanism by warning against those social powers that can easily escape of individuals' control. Thus, Vonnegut could be seen as a troubadour in modern times.

Moreover, Vonnegut made a record out of the book and titled it *Ice-9 Ballads*. He wanted to have music that accompanied the book and make the experience deeper. Henceforth, he asked the American conductor Richard Auldson Clark if Dave Soldier, an American composer, wanted to set a piece with him. They both worked on the record which was eventually released in 2009. This makes the musicality of the text even more explicit, more apparent for the readership, or better yet, the listener. Even though there

is no direct answer to the question as to whether Vonnegut was really thinking of the ballad tradition or not when working on *Cat's Cradle*, the thesis of this paper is illustrated by several in-text instances that make that assumption legitimate regardless of the authorial *placet*.

The findings of this paper open a new line of study for Vonnegut's scholars and future academic research on the author's works. Moreover, a new line of research could be opened for the postmodern literary period by studying the extent into which postmodern writers held onto the popular tradition, that is, oral literature and its salient traits to give rise to the postmodern literary revolution. Postmodern singers such as Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen are popularly known to use balladry in their own songs—Dylan's "Ballad of Hollis Brown" (1963) being a good example. Therefore, after having found representative features of the ballad tradition in Vonnegut's fiction, the scope of future studies could be extended into a much larger research aiming to find postmodern literary works that entail not only drama but also lyricism.

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