Performance of the Postmodern:
Romanticism and Performance of Truth in Postmodern and Contemporary Fiction
using *Cat's Cradle*, *White Noise*, and *The Road*

by

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Abstract

During World War II on August 6 and 9, 1945, the United States dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Kurt Vonnegut coins the moment the bomb was dropped as a turning point in his life, marking an entrance into the future. Vonnegut has described himself as a man that believes in the truth and studies the truth, but when the bomb was dropped, that truth became too negative and threatening to ignore. To use his own words, Vonnegut once said, "but then truth was dropped on Hiroshima," and thus, his truth was transformed forever ("Kurt Vonnegut" 00:03:27-00:03:30).

The early stages of the postmodern period began with Vonnegut battling between realistic nihilism and a search for hope, and continued with writers leaning toward destruction and hopelessness, but still being pulled toward back a romantic wish for meaning and truth. A majority of postmodern writing is considered bleak and dark, but some of the works that would fall under this category are not as negative as they might appear. Using authors from the beginning, Kurt Vonnegut, middle, Don DeLillo, and tail end (into contemporary), Cormac McCarthy, it can be proven that the nihilistic texts of the postmodern period might not be so negative and hopeless after all.

Dedication

To Trip,

My heartbeat at my feet

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Introduction:

Emptiness vs. Nihilism and Truth vs. Hope

Many postmodern and contemporary works of American literature contain a theme of hopelessness, a cynical outlook, or lack of interest or enthusiasm from the characters. This tone in postmodern and contemporary writing results from the fact that nothing is constant or real in their world. Nihilism is defined as the rejection of moral principles or the belief that life is meaningless, so this cynicism in postmodern work can sometimes be classified as nihilistic. The characters have trouble finding happiness because they often do not believe that it can be attainable, so the content of the literature can appear nihilistic: "the discourse of postmodern thinking begins with a consciousness of deepening crisis, a consciousness that the nihilism which Nietzsche saw, in signs and symptoms, is now unmistakable, too pervasive to be ignored or interpreted away" (Levin 5). However, despite the pervasive sense of crisis, many of the characters in postmodern and contemporary fiction hold on to the thought of "something more."

Works of the postmodern period are "consciously ambiguous and give way to multiple interpretations. The individual or subject depicted in these works is often decentered, without a central meaning or goal in life, and dehumanized, often losing individual characteristics and becoming merely the representative of an age or civilization" (Mambrol). While the description provided by Mambrol does not specifically say cynical or nihilistic, the ideas of lack of meaning, dehumanization, and lack of individuality except to represent a hopeless civilization are ideas that insinuate a cynical or nihilistic outlook. It is also difficult to pinpoint the theme or message of a work when it is so ambiguous, something postmodern works do. The lack of certainty paired with the feeling of insignificance is sure to produce a sardonic tone in postmodern literature, something that could also be taken to the comedic level.

Vonnegut's black comedy *Cat's Cradle* was published in 1963, near the beginning of the postmodern period. The novel is about how carelessness with technology could end the world, yet there is a countercurrent of play and imagination that might prevent such "ice-nining." DeLillo's *White Noise*, written in the 80s, is not necessarily about the end of the world, but it is about how an "Airborne Toxic Event" has the potential to permanently damage an upper/middle class college town. A more recent novel that still carries the themes and tones of ending, dread, and destruction is McCarthy's *The Road*, published in 2006. While there is immediate dread considering the apocalyptic events prior to the setting of the novel, The Man and The Boy remain hopeful and find comfort in their relationship, giving them the strength and drive to continue living through the aftermath of a burned world. Through crisis looms in each, there is also a detectable undercurrent of joy, hope, and even optimism, one not usually discussed in postmodern texts.

What is interesting about these postmodern and contemporary novels is the underlying theme of romanticism in them. Romanticism and postmodernism are not styles that might often be paired together, especially since romanticism is by definition a focus on beauty, nature, and human emotions. Even when the text takes a cynical turn, such as when DeLillo's Jack Gladney becomes exposed to the "Airborne Toxic Event," there is a glimmer of beauty in nature and almost some shimmer of hope when, as a result of the event, the sunsets become longer and almost hypnotic. "Another postmodern sunset, rich in romantic imagery. Why try to describe it? It's enough to say that everything in our field of vision seemed to exist in order to gather the light of this event" is Jack's interpretation of the sunset(s) (DeLillo 216).

The primary purpose of this thesis is to examine how romanticism functions within postmodern and contemporary works, especially considering that most of the works from these

eras are thought to be negative and pessimistic or even indifferent: “Postmodernism begins when the nihilism of the modern world is seriously perceived, and when the vision of reason that brought this world into being is no longer permitted to rule unchallenged” (Levin 26). Nihilism is meant to challenge the reason of being, which leads to the negative and pessimistic mood of postmodern fiction. There is a possibility that the expectation to be gloomy and nonchalant leads to the characters’ tendency to perform, especially since it seems that some of these characters lean toward hope for a more meaningful and happy life that they just cannot seem to find. Their search for this balance between what they want and how they have been conditioned to function in society collides, leaving them longing for more meaning, more life, more happiness.

A secondary purpose is to examine instances of performativity in the contexts of this impending crisis of gloom. Each of the texts, I would argue, performs something like a postmodern tale, with a kind joy in their circumstances and despair for the future. They also feature characters who perform: as scientist, as chair of a university department, as kleptomaniac, when each is also many other roles. I believe that such performativity stems from romantics trying to blend into their surroundings, or possibly the idea that performativity stems from romantics living in such a bleak world, they do not even realize that they would be classified as such, but continue to attempt to thrive in a nihilistic setting.

Mostly I attempt to place the previously mentioned works (*Cat’s Cradle*, *White Noise*, and *The Road*) in the critical context of postmodernism and the criticism surrounding them. I also look at some particular historical contexts: 60s, 80s, 00s. What is going on during the time the writers produced these works that could have influenced their outlook? Why did romanticism seem an unacceptable option on the surface, yet these glimmers of hope are there? These are some of the questions I explore.

By taking a closer look at how performativity affects/gives rise to romanticism in a postmodern/contemporary work, I try to open a new dialogue on what postmodern and contemporary works are actually classified as. I have always been under the impression that postmodern and contemporary writing was often indifferent, apathetic, or even negative, but never thought to ask myself why. Once I noticed the hints of romanticism found in some of my favorite novels from those eras, I could not find much helpful information on why this shimmer of hope appears in such hopeless stories, so I attempt to expand on why those two moods occasionally coincide. This could help develop a new understanding of postmodern and contemporary work.

Chapter 1:

Challenging Postmodern Boundaries in Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*

For many people, postmodernism texts are misunderstood and described as unenjoyable to read or consume because of the tones of cynicism and nihilism woven into the writing. Oftentimes, people do not much appreciate reading genres perceived as upsetting or even hopeless, making postmodernism one of the most avoided literary periods in academia. Despite the disinterest in postmodernism, the period has produced many highly renowned authors, one of which being Kurt Vonnegut. It is possible that since Vonnegut's content covered very real events in a fictionalized manner while making these events relatable yet funny is how he became such a popular author despite his leaning toward postmodern tendencies.

Kurt Vonnegut is widely known for his black (dark) humor due to his sarcastic and off-beat insertions of comedy in his works containing bleak content. This is an interesting element to include in postmodern works, but Vonnegut is not the only author who does this. The postmodern period is known to contain much humor, possibly for the reasoning of the content being so grim. Apocalyptic settings are quite popular in postmodern literature, at least in the world of Vonnegut, leading him to use humor as somewhat of a distraction from the dismal content of his works. Vonnegut has said himself in an interview with Zoltan Abadi-Nagy that "[h]umor is a way of dealing with unhappiness" (31). I argue that not only does Vonnegut use humor in his work, but also imagination and a study in relationships to capture romanticism within postmodernism that has become established as so uniquely Vonnegut. *Cat's Cradle* is no stranger to these methods. From the humor to the science fiction themes to the characterization after doomsday, Vonnegut adds romanticism to his work and challenges the existing definition of postmodernism.

Romanticism is used here not specifically in the terms of the romantic period, rather the way of thinking in a romantic manner. Romanticizing situations that seem dismal or impossible to overcome is considered romantic thinking since there is a sense of hope or a possibility of good despite the already dark setting and conflict. It would be easy to argue that romanticism is just another word for delusions, but expecting the best out of a hopeless situation remains more hopeful than only accepting one's doom. Maybe romanticism is not logical, but that is exactly the point: Postmodernism is supposed to be filled with logic, which is one of the main reasons why it is so dark and nihilistic. An observation made in an article by David Goodman is that "there is almost always this sense of rejection of grand theory in favor of local and strategic knowledge." The previous quote specifies that postmodern work is meant to function under logic and knowledge, but there is romanticism in postmodern work that challenges these genre boundaries, especially in Vonnegut's work.

There are many examples within even the first few chapters of *Cat's Cradle* of comedy before the plot has even begun to be introduced. The question that needs more focus deals with whether comedy included as a way of dealing with unhappiness is meant to be black or bleak comedy. While those two categories of comedy might sound similar, there is a difference in the nature of these forms of humor: Black humor is specified as absurdist or even sometimes ironic, while bleak humor, on the other hand, is a realistic attempt at adding some light to what could be a dismal situation. Black humor is not taking the present situation the author creates for the characters too seriously, but rather confronting any misfortune or discomfort with humor that does not necessarily improve the situation, but intensifies how absurd the situation actually is. Bleak humor is used more to make the best out of a bad situation. Instead of amplifying the

conflict with humor about the specific plot, bleak humor lightens the issue presented, almost like a distraction from a depressing nature.

Cat's Cradle is often defined as a black humor novel, but it falls more under the category of bleak humor due to the narrator, Jonah's, outlook on the possibility of the end of the world, and how he endures once the world has actually ended. From the beginning, the narrator of the novel uses humor as a coping mechanism. Much of this humor does not actually have to do with the plot, which suggests that Jonah is in some form trying to avoid the hopelessness by which he finds himself surrounded. The first line of *Cat's Cradle* is, "Call me Jonah. My parents did, or nearly did. They called me John" (Vonnegut 1). This is a direct reference from Vonnegut to *Moby Dick*, where the first line is, "Call me Ishmael." This humor has nothing to do with the novel that Vonnegut is writing. The plots of *Moby Dick* and *Cat's Cradle* are not similar, the characters do not relate, and the solution is not comparable, yet Vonnegut felt this reference was necessary. He not only made a literary reference, but he also made a joke out of this reference, setting the tone of the novel as slightly dark but also comedic. Also, in this reference to *Moby Dick*, Vonnegut introduces how people see names and what they are called as something of importance, but really it is just a name. In *Cat's Cradle*, there is a religion, Bokononism, which is specifically a religion of lies. Even though it is known throughout the participants of this religion that it is based on lies, the people still believe in it. The name of Bokononism or even just the title of a religion means nothing, but there is somehow some hope to be found in the naming, just as Jonah has hope that at least his audience will eventually call him Jonah instead of John. It is just a name and it does not actually change who the character of Jonah/John is, but it is nevertheless of importance to him. The want for this name is empty, making it bleak that this is something Jonah focuses on so specifically.

If the previous quote about the name is analyzed in a certain way, the narrator is asking his readers to call him something he wishes to be called, but then immediately tells his readers that he did not get this satisfaction from his parents. When broken down, this is a very sad joke, but in the existence of the joke remains hope that Jonah might finally get what he wants. He has still held on to the want to be called a different name even after years of his parents not complying. The joke could also be viewed in quite a different context though, a more ambiguous one. Since it is never specified that Jonah asked his parents to call him that specific name, the audience does not know if he ever actually did broach this request, making Jonah an unreliable narrator. Not only does he present the option that this might not be his actual name, but he also continues to tell the readers that his parents did not call him this, suggesting that he is acting as someone else, giving his readers a false persona instead of a trustworthy narrator. Either of these options is humorous in a way. They instill in the reader's mind the laughable concept that this narrator is still searching for validation in his wants through his audience, or that he really does not trust himself, so maybe we should not trust him either, giving this novel a comedic tone from the first line.

(This thesis will refer to the narrator as Jonah instead of John. Most scholarly works do call the narrator John, but this is a sliver of hope that he has to finally have a chance to be called what he wishes to be called, and since this research is on the romanticism hidden in postmodern works, it would make sense to honor this romanticism, even if it is only in the form of wishing to be called a specific name, especially since it has been established that names mean nothing, but they still do mean something to Jonah because of his romantic tendencies.)

Intertextual references to other literary works are, of course, not the only instances of hilarity in *Cat's Cradle*, but this introduction of what is hopefulness gives a different sense of

postmodernism than many other works in this era. Religion, representative of hopefulness, is another factor, one that is the basis for Vonnegut's novel, which adds to the sense of something other than postmodernism, even stretching into romanticism. Of course, since this is Vonnegut, a humanist and once the president of the American Humanist Association, religion in *Cat's Cradle* is not presented in a serious manner. It is difficult to discern whether or not the narrator intends to make the prominent religion in *Cat's Cradle*, Bokononism, a laughing matter or not. The way Jonah describes Bokononism is tricky, especially since in his introduction to this religion he mentions, "Anyone unable to understand how a useful religion can be founded on lies will not understand this book either. So be it" (Vonnegut 5-6). Bokononism, as Jonah clearly informs his audience, is founded on lies. Most characters in postmodern writing are self-aware, or at least aware that their world is more than likely headed toward an undesirable ending that is out of their control. This acceptance of lies is common in postmodern writing since the tone is hopelessness, which is where the black humor is born in order to accept the current state of dread as opposed to doing anything to avoid it. When the topic of a religion being based on lies is mentioned, the postmodern style would leave the statement as is, leaving the meaning of a religion based on lies ambiguous to the audience or to articulate the character's desperation by presenting the mood of hopelessness.

Vonnegut adds something different to the idea of a religion formed on lies, though, when he writes that Jonah suggests that Bokononism is "useful" (5). Any information or belief being useful in postmodernism is a new perspective: "[Postmodernism] considers fragmentation and decentredness as the only possible way of existence, and does not try to escape from these conditions" (Mambrol para. 6). The most important part of this quote from Mambrol is "does not try to escape from these conditions." Trying not to escape or rationalize situations of distress is a

trait of postmodernism, but Vonnegut defies these boundaries when he decides to write that Jonah believes that this religion, which he knows to be unreliable or even false, is useful to his current condition. Jonah is aware that the religion of Bokononism is not truthful, but since the satisfaction of believing in something is giving him some sliver of hope in the world after it has already ended, he sees this lying religion as "useful." This is romantic, especially since the setting from which Jonah is writing is after the world has already been "frozen" by "Ice-Nine."

In *Cat's Cradle*, lies provide for Jonah what he needs to keep going in the aftermath of the destruction. There is comfort in something even if that something is a contributing factor to the end of the world. While he does not trust himself, nor does his audience trust him, the security and comfort that Jonah finds in lies is what makes him so hopeful. *Cat's Cradle* is literally a Bokononist bible as realized by Schatt when he writes, "The book is written as a *Book of Bokonon*, a Bokononist Bible. Jo[nah] learns that Bokonon placed a warning at the beginning of his *Books of Bokonon* that 'nothing in this book is true,' and this is precisely the statement that Vonnegut places at the beginning of *Cat's Cradle*" (Schatt 56). Since the book *Cat's Cradle* is supposed to be a *Book of Bokonon*, this is hopeful and positive in nature. Books of religion are meant to be uplifting, and even if they are negative from the stories included, there is a positive ending available to the members of the select religion being advocated for. Bokononism and its existence is what is positive in itself.

Immediately, on the second page of the novel, Jonah introduces the concept of *karass* in the religion of Bokononism:

> 'Man created the checkerboard; God created the *karass*.' By that he means that a *karass* ignores national, institutional, familial, and class boundaries. …Bokonon invites us to sing along with him:

…

Nice, nice, very nice—

So many different people

In the same device. (Vonnegut 2-3)

Karass is another way of defining fate. It is the concept that things somehow come together and fall into place. Fate does not always have to be interpreted as positive, but when someone goes searching after his/her fate, just as Jonah does, it is usually for a meaningful purpose. Jonah says himself, "About my *karass*, then. It surely includes the three children of Dr. Felix Hoenikker, one of the so-called 'Fathers' of the first atomic bomb. Dr. Hoenikker himself was no doubt a member of my *karass*," to introduce that he felt a pull to the Hoenikker family, giving the readers the feel of magnetic attraction between people who quite possibly have absolutely no connections other than fate. Jonah's discovery of Bokononism was born from him being so drawn to the Hoenikker family, as the plot of the novel eventually reveals when one of the Hoenikker children is leader of an island where Bokononism is outlawed, yet still remains the most practiced religion in that location. A more profound way to look at this discovery and connection would view Jonah's discovery of Bokononism as driven by his *karass*.

The idea of fate is one that postmodernism usually rejects, unless, of course, fate is destruction or lack of meaning, but Vonnegut includes this concept in his postmodern work for a reason. There is a need for hope and meaningfulness even when it is clearly stated that there is no hope to be found. Any form of positivity in postmodern works is profound even if the characters themselves must create it, which is what Jonah is attempting to do with his dedication to Bokononism. In *Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.*, Schatt argues that Jonah "finds it increasingly difficult to determine what is real and what is illusory," but that is not what the primary text would suggest

(56). Jonah has literally created a connection to a positive fate by becoming so dedicated to Bokononism, but he knows that it is a book inspired by lies as indicated by Jonah in the novel: "The first sentence in *The Books of Bokonon* is this: 'All of the true things I am about to tell you are shameless lies'" (Vonnegut 5). This quote shows that Jonah is fully aware that his newfound religion of choice is one that was created from lies. Jonah accepts that the religion of Bokononism is fully based on lies, which does not show that he struggles "to determine what is real and what is illusory," but instead suggests that he has decided to believe in what may be considered the "illusory" because it gives him some sense of purpose and hope. This is a man who is fully aware of the world he is living in, a trait that postmodern characters usually possess, not a man who struggles to see the difference between the true and the false. Jonah has decided to ignore what is "real" and what is "illusory" because those things do not give him any happiness. What gives him happiness is choosing to ignore the true and false in order to make his own happiness and follow a religion that he knows is unreliable.

Schatt does, however, make a redeeming statement when he writes, "Frank Hoenikker tells Jo[nah] that man is the only thing sacred to the Bokononist, for what their religion tries to do is to reconcile the Humanistic view of man as sacred with the harsh reality of men's actions" (64). This fits perfectly with what was just established about Jonah dealing with his discarding both the real and fictional to make his own truth or to at least *find* his own truth. What Bokononism is attempting to establish is a middle ground between men's good and bad sides by creating that desired middle ground. Absolute evil and absolute good are nonexistent to Vonnegut and Bokonon, which means that there is no halfway point between the two absolutes. Bokononism is doing the same thing that Jonah is doing when Bokonon decides to create an entire religion where there are no absolutes. Jonah is avoiding the "real" and "illusory" while

Bokonon is avoiding the possibility of good or evil. They instead decide to create their own meaning outside of the restrictive concepts before them.

The new meaning that Jonah finds is in man itself. "In an absurd world where God's existence is suspect and where there is no assurance of Heaven or Hell, the death of man is the death of the entire world," is quite a nihilistic way to view things, so Jonah finds this "God" in Bokonon, and therefore in man. After all, Bokonon is a man that Jonah has met before he begins the narration of *Cat's Cradle*, and he still considers himself a devout Bokononist. Very soon before Jonah actually meets Bokonon, he despises the religion. He says things such as, "'What a cynic!'" and "'Such a depressing religion'" (Vonnegut 273, 284) once the world has officially ended and Bokononism is the only thing that many of the people still alive can ponder. Jonah was completely disgusted with such a religion, but then once he meets Bokonon at the very end of the book, there is an implied change in his views since he writes the book as a devout Bokononist.

"The time for the final sentence has come," says Bokonon when Jonah asks him what he is thinking. "'Any luck?' He shrugged and handed me a piece of paper" is an interesting detail to include. The shrug could be either uncertainness or apathy toward the situation, possibly even both. When what is written on the piece of paper is revealed, it gives the shrug and Jonah's dedication to Bokononism a different spin:

> If I were a younger man, I would write a history of human stupidity; and I would climb to the top of Mount McCabe and lie down on my back with my history for a pillow; and I would take from the ground some of the blue-white poison that makes statues of men; and I would make a statue of myself, lying on my back, grinning horribly, and thumbing my nose at You Know Who. (Vonnegut 287)

This scenario is purely speculative. Bokonon has written what he *would* do if he was a younger man and understood the absurdness of the world, but we as readers are expected to assume that this is what Bokonon actually does. A large part of postmodernism is leaving the ending ambiguous, and this is something that Vonnegut does seamlessly in *Cat's Cradle.* Normally, however, these ambiguous endings are quite negative or at least have the impending sense of doom. What is different about *Cat's Cradle* is that the doom has already arrived and the ending takes place in the aftermath.

Kurt Vonnegut lived to see the bombing of Dresden and Hiroshima, something he said was life changing for him (Biblioklept). It was an eye-opener and shaped many of his ideas for the science fiction themes he included in his writing. Something like an atom bomb being invented could be comparable to *ice-nine*. Both of these weapons are capable of mass damage and death, but there was life after tragedy struck in the case of Hiroshima as well as in the case of *Cat's Cradle*. The fact that one can find inspiration taken from these destructive events is hopeful because humans still remain on the earth. There is always a way for survival, even if that survival is not a happy place. The bombing of Hiroshima was not something very easily forgotten. It affected mass amounts of people, so when Vonnegut channels this energy into *ice-nine,* he takes it a step further and romanticizes this end of the world setting. "New order of destruction," is how Vonnegut refers to the atom bomb, and that is exactly what *ice-nine* should be described as, too (Biblioklept). In a sense, this was not Vonnegut's imagination that conjured up the idea of the world ended in the blink of an eye, but it was, however, his imagination that thought up the aftermath of an event as large as *ice-nine.* An atom bomb did not destroy the entire world, but *ice-nine* did, except for the few survivors. Vonnegut's interpretation of how

people would survive the ending of life as they know it is romanticized and very creatively explained.

The setting and events that revolve around the religion of Bokononism transition into another way Vonnegut challenges the definition of postmodernism with his imaginative themes. Not only is Vonnegut imaginative in his ability to create and write, but his imagination also bleeds into his characters and their thoughts and personalities. In *Cat's Cradle*, the setting itself is imaginative and gives a sense of positivity and romanticism since normally once the world ends everything is over, but many of the characters in *Cat's Cradle* are still alive and thriving. For example, "the living became very easy indeed. It was not without a certain Walt Disney charm" (276). This is a description used after the world has actually ended. The term "Walt Disney charm" is a peculiar way to describe the aftermath of doomsday, but this is the way that Jonah sees it. Romanticism is present here in this interpretation of surviving doomdsay, even if the inspiration for this romanticism is the need to escape such a negative reality. Jonah does not leave the positivity at the "Walt Disney Charm," but rather goes on to provide examples of how this new world after death is quite blissful to live in: "But *ice-nine* preserved pigs and cows and little deer and the windrows of birds and berries until we were ready to thaw and cook them…. Food was no problem, and neither were clothing or shelter….Our health was monotonously good. Apparently all the germs were dead, too" (Vonnegut 277). This is the most positive outlook on surviving the day the world ended, especially considering that this positivity is located in a work of postmodernism. Even if everything is bland and dead, there is an easy way for Jonah to find this romanticism. They have all the food, clothing, shelter, and health that they need after the world has been dominated by *ice-nine*, so to Jonah there is too much positivity to focus on when his surroundings are obviously suggesting otherwise.

Even the other people who survived are not so romantic about their situation, which is especially noticeable when Mona, Jonah's love interest, mentions, "'It would be very sad to have a little baby now. Don't you agree?'" (266). Jonah's response to Mona's question is, "'Yes,' I agreed murkily" (266). While Jonah knows that this is a negative and hopeless situation he has found himself in, he still has trouble accepting that this is a sad world that he is now living in. His response could be due to the possible lack of sex from Mona once she establishes that she does not want any babies in this dismal world, or it could be that Jonah is not open to accepting that the world he is trying to see as a happy new beginning is actually, in Mona's words, sad.

When someone else's view of the world after *ice-nine* is revealed, it becomes almost suspicious that Jonah is surviving in this new abandoned world so happily and easily. Thriving in an empty world would take a certain amount of romanticizing and possibly some denial. Not all aspects of romanticism are positive. Since postmodernism is focused on knowledge and logic and romanticism is looking for hope and meaning, there is room for romanticism to lack logic and therefore become almost dangerous. The term "romanticize" (not specifically referring to romanticism) is often used in a negative context because it is meant to show that thinking of only the good can be an inaccurate way to experience life. Jonah is guilty of romanticizing the end of the world. The end usually signifies a new beginning, but this new beginning that Jonah and Mona are living through is not one that should be viewed this positively. Jonah's dedication to making everything humorous and hopeful affects the relationships he has.

Another significant relationship that Jonah struggles with is his relationship with Bokononism and eventually Bokonon himself. Since the story of *Cat's Cradle* is told in past tense, Jonah is looking back on how his relationship with Bokononism used to be compared to what it is when writing the story. There are many instances where Jonah reacts to Bokononism in

a negative way and expresses his inability to understand why this religion makes any sense to any of its followers: “I called Bokonon a j*gaboo bastard…” or exclamations such as “‘Such a *depressing* religion’” are some examples of Jonah’s discontent with the religion of Bokononism (Vonnegut 284-285). Finally, once Jonah has seen Bokonon and listened to him speak about the final books of Bokonon, he suddenly becomes a supporter of the religion. This sudden switch seems strange, but if Bokonon’s message at the end of the story was interpreted correctly, Jonah should have heard Bokonon say, “screw God (or whatever higher power exists),” just in more modest words. “‘I would make a statue of myself, lying on my back, grinning horribly, and thumbing my nose at You Know Who’” is the last line written by Bokonon, but also the last line in the book. It is assumed that this quote from Bokonon helped alter Jonah’s view of Bokononism, even to the point of considering himself a Bokononist.

Jonah’s evolving relationship brings my argument full circle. There is much humor about the prominent religion in the text from the very beginning of the book; there is an imaginative effort linked to science fiction that is also connected to this religion of lies, and there is a true established relationship between the author and the religion itself. All of these ways of approaching Bokononism and the end of the world are romantic. Nihilism, cynicism, and essentially the end of the world are met with Vonnegut’s humorous and optimistic twists on such hopeless themes and events. The romanticizing of the result of a nihilistic world is an interesting approach to postmodernism since postmodernism is mostly about the gaining of knowledge that makes living so dismal. Vonnegut challenges this definition of postmodernism in his focus on the romantic whims of his character Jonah in *Cat’s Cradle*.

Chapter 2:

"I've got Death Inside of Me. It's Just a Question of Whether or Not I Can Outlive it": Romanticism in DeLillo's *White Noise*

By the 1980s, the fear of an approach of doom had not died down among the American people. If anything, the panic about the end of the world had only increased. Nuclear dread, the main influence for the nihilism present in the 60s, continued into the 80s, added to fears of chemical spills and the pervasive influence of technology, but in a much more selfish and egotistical manner. The threat of any doomsday scenario was projected on to members of a less privileged setting, as so simply stated in *White Noise*: "'These things happen to poor people who live in exposed areas. Society is set up in such a way that it's the poor and the uneducated who suffer the main impact of natural and man-made disasters'" (DeLillo 112). Jack Gladney, the privileged main character and narrator of Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, is a Hitler scholar who is obsessed with the fear of dying. This is not only unfortunate for the obvious reason that death is inevitable, but also for the reasons that follow scientific advances in chemical warfare. Whether it is an "Airborne Toxic Event" or a gunshot wound, Jack Gladney is sure to relate any and all negative events in his life to the promise that he will one day die. With this obsessive need to avoid death comes optimism, though, because of the need to cling so tightly to life. *White Noise* presents itself as a novel that tackles postmodern panic in a bleak manner, but the novel is actually more romantic and optimistic as shown by Jack's need to excel in the Department of Hitler Studies, his constant focus on the everyday sublime, and his unavoidable dread of dying, which indicates his true optimism to keep living and to do so successfully.

Don DeLillo's novel has been described by Laura Barrett as "nostalgic and parodic" (100). She compares images in the book to that of the Wild West, connecting *White Noise* to a

more “puritan” style: “As one of the few peculiarly American genres, the western, like Puritanism, mythologizes past and future, origin and destiny, qualities painfully missing in postmodern society” (100-101). Barrett argues that DeLillo gives the novel the qualities of the old timey western converted to fit the setting of a postmodern town. In doing so, DeLillo has created a character that is nostalgic for the older western and puritan ways, but cannot find them because of his surroundings. She describes Jack Gladney by writing, “The loss of self and spirituality is sorely felt by Jack, a character who attempts, often parodically, to infuse his mundane and superficial life with some grander meaning” (101). Jack is also described as more of a modernist than a postmodernist by Barrett, because he wishes for death to be more “poetic and biological” rather than “numerical and technical” (105). However, I argue that Jack Gladney is a romantic character looking for some meaning in a postmodern world where most meaning has been weeded out. This search for a more hopeful discovery begins at the start of the novel with DeLillo’s introduction to Jack’s line of work.

As the chair and creator of the Hitler studies department, Jack is a fraud. He cannot speak German, which makes him inadequate compared to his colleagues and other department heads, yet even with this feeling of insufficiency, Jack strives to make himself appear on the exalted level he should appear to other department heads. Any opportunity to improve his standing as a Hitler scholar is something Jack immediately attempts to accomplish. The chancellor at the College-on-the-Hill has advised Jack that he should “do something about my name and appearance if I wanted to be taken seriously as a Hitler innovator . . . We finally agreed that I should invent an extra initial and call myself J. A. K. Gladney, a tag I wore like a borrowed suit” (DeLillo 16). It does not matter to Jack or to the chancellor that Jack came up with the idea for a Hitler department himself because the name “Jack Gladney” is not interesting enough. Still, Jack

is horrified of being unsuccessful in his field of study, especially since he is hiding his lack of knowledge of the German language, enough that he is willing to change his name at the College-on-the-Hill to something more demanding. Not only does Jack Gladney change his name for Hitler and the chancellor, he also alters his physical appearance: "He strongly suggested I gain weight. He wanted me to 'grow out' into Hitler . . . If I could become more ugly, he seemed to be suggesting, it would help my career enormously" (DeLillo 17). In Jack's attempt to become uglier he adapts to wear "glasses with thick black heavy frames and dark lenses" and successfully puts on weight to make himself seem like a more demanding presence (DeLillo 17). These actions of physically fitting into a job are something that only someone fully dedicated to becoming a specific persona would attempt. While the concern of being a fraud is a main inspiration to pursue these drastic measures, Jack still fills the roles that he is expected to fill. The Hitler scholar knows that he should be able to speak German, but instead of addressing this, he puts on the front of being the big, ugly, demanding Hitler scholar to perform the simulation that he can become more like Hitler himself.

Putting on a different persona relates to Baudrillard's simulations and simulacra, which suggests that the one true self is suffocated by endless simulations and copies: "The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory—precession of simulacra—that engenders the territory" (Felluga). This metaphor for the simulacra suggests that since our world relies so heavily on maps and models that we have given too much focus to those maps and models, thus forgetting the actual world to which those maps and models were referring. Felluga describes the three levels of the progression from authenticity to simulacra, and the third level, where Baudrillard describes the postmodern age, is when we can no longer tell the difference between the real and its representation. Physical and

nonphysical things have been replicated and mass-produced to the point that there is no real thing underneath all of the repetitions. Another writer put things in a slightly different way: "In this world common to both Baudrillard and DeLillo, images, signs, and codes engulf objective reality; signs become more real than reality and stand in for the world they erase" (Wilcox 346-347). This is what is happening to Jack in DeLillo's work; he is skewed by the knowledge that he is not experiencing anything real, but he does not accept that there is no actual real anymore. He just assumes that it is hidden underneath all of the consumerism and commodities, therefore contributing to his anxiety about the realness of things even to the depth of the realness of themselves. With so many simulations and simulacra, it may be easy to question the authenticity of the existence of the self, which is what Jack often finds himself avoiding.

Jack's refusal to accept that there is no "real" is romantic, especially since he wants to consider himself intelligent and cognizant of the postmodern setting in which he and his family reside. Hitler studies is not the real and original copy, but Jack considers it very real to the point that he must strive to meet the standards in order to fit the simulation more fully. Even if Jack learns German and somehow manages to become a demanding and intimidating professor in the department, there will still be no satisfaction since it will not be real, but Jack's determination to reach this higher sense of achievement is romantic and hopeful even if the reality is not so hopeful itself. Jack is holding on to the possibility that there is something to gain from meeting these standards that are presented to him, an academic nirvana, but since Jack is living in a postmodern world, he can only be nostalgic for the chance at reaching a higher understanding and appreciation of his efforts. Even if he could speak German and was an intimidating, masculine figure, there would be nothing to gain since he is a nostalgic romantic stuck in a postmodern town.

The need to fit in to the role of a Hitler scholar was not only brought on by the chancellor's judgment and advice; it was a deep-seated issue with Jack from the time he had his son, Heinrich. The name is obviously of German influence, but Jack tells his stepdaughter, Denise, a more extensive reason behind the name. Jack says, "He was born shortly after I started the department and I guess I wanted to acknowledge my good fortune," before continuing to defend his choice of the name by mentioning, "I wanted to do something German. I felt a gesture was called for" (DeLillo 63). Denise then says Heinrich's entire name aloud, as if to convey the ridiculousness of the choice, which inspires Jack to defend himself further: "I thought it was forceful and impressive . . . I wanted to shield him, make him unafraid" (DeLillo 63). While the name is undeniably German and demanding to the point of absurdity, the reasoning behind it makes sense, especially when considering that Jack needs to feel secure with his work with Hitler. It is also thoughtful. Jack wants his son to be "shield[ed]" and powerful, something Jack does not identify with in his position. Perhaps Jack's fear of death also came into play when naming his son something strong and demanding. He did not want Heinrich to face the issues of having a weak name like Jack has had to face (J. A. K. Gladney).

Along with this dedication to Hitler comes an identity crisis, one that Jack mentions twice one after the other: "a tag I wore like a borrowed suit" and "I am the false character that follows the name around" are thoughts Jack expresses to the audience on the matter of fitting his role. The words "borrowed" and "false" show the readers that the persona of J. A. K. Gladney is not something with which Jack actually identifies. Even though Jack is aware that he is not actually J. A. K. Gladney, this character, this performance, gives him the motivation he needs to actually become this scholar. In the disappointment of not being a respected, intimidating, and German-speaking authority, Jack seeks out help on his own time (partly from embarrassment) to learn

German from a man who gives private lessons: “Because I’d achieved a high professional standing . . . because I wore an academic gown and dark glasses day and night whenever I was on campus, because I carried two hundred and thirty pounds on a six-foot three-inch frame and had big hands and feet, I knew my German lessons would have to be secret” (DeLillo 32). While Jack expresses to the audience that he does not quite fit the shoes of the dominating Hitler scholar he wears, his interest in hiding these German lessons has to do more with his appearance among his colleagues than his actual self-confidence. It is also mentioned that the reason he is finally starting the German lessons after so many years of fooling the masses is because of an upcoming conference. Murray, a colleague of Jack’s, asks Jack “why now?” to which Jack responds, “There was a Hitler conference scheduled for next spring at the College-on-the-Hill . . . Hitler scholars from seventeen states and nine foreign countries. Actual Germans would be in attendance” (DeLillo 33). The concern that Jack has with how others see him is his main motivating factor. Hosting a conference at the college where Hitler studies blossomed in America was not enough to make Jack pick up the language, but the attendance of actual Germans at this conference is what makes him determined not to devalue the department of Hitler studies at the College-on-the-Hill.

Jack Gladney is a positive thinker by nature since he is privileged and at the top of his career and because he sees the everyday appearances and results of consumerism as “sublime.” In her article titled “Gone Fission: The Holocaustic Wit of Don DeLillo,” critic Toby Zinman writes that “DeLillo is a writer of serious mysticism whose vision is informed by awe, who shows us . . . that life is, finally, beyond rational comprehension. In doing so, he denies the primacy of science, and suggests that not only is science not the solution, it may well be the problem” (76). Since DeLillo is presenting to his audience in *White Noise* that science may not

be the solution, he is using Jack as a vessel to show his readers that blindly following scientific advances can have a very negative effect.

While Jack appreciates the science that has assisted his upper-middle class way of life, other scientific advances, such as the "Airborne Toxic Event," threaten him and other characters. A well-known scene that is used to critique consumerism takes place in the supermarket, a center of consumerism and commodification. Jack runs into his colleague, Murray Jay Siskind, who is in a cheerful mood because of all of the opportunities he gets to learn in his new location in the town of Blacksmith: "'I'm happy to be here . . . in Blacksmith, in the supermarket, in the rooming house, on the hill. I feel like I'm learning important things every day. Death, disease, afterlife, outer space. It's all much clearer here. I can think and see'" (DeLillo 36). Murray is one of the first characters to express his bewilderment with the simple parts of life that most humans consider mundane. His fascination is a romantic admiration of the nature of things in Blacksmith and the College-on-the-Hill, which is an upper-middle class area. The awe that Murray has with the simple and the plain is actually admiration of the privileged way of life. Self-awareness is something Murray prides himself on, especially since he chooses to live in a rooming house when he could easily afford a much nicer and more private home. DeLillo also is sure to include the detail of Murray selecting items from the "generic food" section of the store, which shows Murray's fascination in attempting self-awareness and escaping the system and simulacra (36).

Murray is often the catalyst for Jack's abrupt decisions. He has much influence over Jack and it is possible that he uses this power to his advantage. John Duvall argues that Murray is actually the villain of *White Noise* and focuses this argument on the postmodern ways of Murray compared to the romantic ways of Jack. Unlike Jack, Murray is all for the "numerical and technical" observations, while Jack attempts to focus on the "poetic and biological": "These

mirrored spaces of consumption, the television and the supermarket, are brought into sharper relief by Murray's explicit commentary; his interpretations are Baudrillardian, yet the very elements of simulation that make Baudrillard sad make Murray glad" (Duvall 139). In this observation of Murray and his fascinations and tendencies, Duvall also compares him to Jack, concluding that Murray is who Jack would be if he understood and accepted the postmodern surroundings he cannot escape. Duvall writes, "Siskind is the true villain of *White Noise*. Seductive and smart, he nevertheless encourages and fosters the worst in Jack. Murray is the man who would be Jack" (139). While Jack has trouble accepting the nature of technology and consumerism in Blacksmith, Murray thrives in it, thus convincing Jack to do so as well.

What sparks Jack's fascination with the technology and consumerism of not only the supermarket, but the world surrounding him, is Murray's observation:

> 'This place recharges us spiritually, it prepares us, it's a gateway or pathway. Look how bright. It's full of psychic data.' My wife smiled at him. 'Everything is concealed in symbolism, hidden by veils of mystery and layers of cultural material. But it is psychic data, absolutely. The large doors slide open, they close unbidden. Energy waves, incident radiation. All letters and numbers are here, all the colors of the spectrum, all the voices and sounds, all the code words and ceremonial phrases. It is just a question of deciphering, rearranging, peeling off the layers of unspeakability.' (DeLillo 37-38)

Murray is enthralled by the technological advancements that America has made, so much so that he has deciphered the existence of such progress as more than "white noise," something that surrounds everyone everywhere at all times. Doors open like some Tibetan monastery. The packages contain meanings. Normally, this thought of being in the middle of something so much larger and uncontrollable might be overwhelming, but to Murray such a position leads to a

positive and fascinating discovery. Jack, easily influenced by Murray, ends up adopting this theory of an all-encompassing system, which is both profound and disturbing. When visiting an automated teller machine, Jack states, "The system had blessed my life. I felt its support and approval . . . I sensed that something of deep personal value, but not money, not that at all, had been authenticated and confirmed . . . The system was invisible, which made it all the more impressive, all the more disquieting to deal with" (DeLillo 46). Such a positive yet concerning reaction is elicited from Jack after his experience at the bank that he walks away from it feeling "authenticated and confirmed" while also "disquieting." This is a system that Jack thrives in with some convincing from Murray, and he therefore trusts it while also recognizing the anxiety-inducing nature. There is a submission from Jack in which he accepts what is thrust at him even if he feels he should question it.

During the "Airborne Toxic Event," Gladney explores this connection with consumerism and commodification when he hears his daughter muttering something in her sleep: "[Steffie] uttered two clear and audible words, familiar and elusive at the same time, words that seemed to have a ritual meaning, part of a verbal spell or ecstatic chant. *Toyota Celica*" (DeLillo 154-155). The way that Jack describes this obsession with commercialism is almost as if he is having a religious experience just listening to it. "Elusive," "ritual," "spell," and "chant" are all words to describe spiritual experiences, and that is exactly what Jack is experiencing. Jack continues to say that "the utterance struck me with the impact of a moment of splendid transcendence" (155). An article called "The Romantic Metaphysics of Don DeLillo" describes this moment as hopeful of a "cultural regeneration":

> The passage is typical of DeLillo's tendency to seek out transcendent moments in our postmodern lives that hint at possibilities for cultural regeneration. Clearly, the principal

> point of the passage is not that "Toyota Celica" is the signifier of a commodity (and as such has only illusory significance as a visionary utterance), but that *as a name* it has a mystical resonance and potency . . . (Maltby 261)

It is not in the consumerism, but in the language that Jack feels authenticated and transcendent. The spoken language and the religious/spiritual sounds of it are what fascinate Jack, not the reliance of products being advertised and commercialized. Murray, on the other hand, only focuses on the postmodern as opposed to romantic elements of consumerism and commercialism.

Another event that takes place during the "Airborne Toxic Event" is Jack's slight brush with death. When he is exposed to the threatening toxic air during the evacuation of his upper-middle class community, Jack's obsession with death is strongly articulated. "Who will die first?" Jack asks his wife, Babette, far before the "Airborne Toxic Event" (DeLillo 15). This unanswerable question is the first instance when Jack's fear of death is brought to light, but Jack immediately informs the readers that "[t]his question comes up from time to time, like where are the car keys. It ends in a sentence, prolongs a glance between us" (15). Jack and Babette often wonder about who will die first, which indicates a deeper fear and obsession with the inevitability of death that they both struggle to face. When Jack says "It ends in a sentence," he is referring to the question of "Who will die first?" being more of a statement than a question (15). This description of the question instead being a statement is a way of showing that it is not even a question that can be answered, rather an obsession that is always following Jack and Babette. When Jack is exposed to the damaging air, the statement of "Who will die first?" becomes more of a question again. The possibility of death is more prominent now after Jack's exposure, so the obsession with death turns into more of a threat as opposed to a quizzical fixation.

Freud's "Instinct of Destruction" is mentioned in an article about *White Noise*, claiming that "[t]hroughout [DeLillo's] novel, especially in the second part of the novel calamities are perceived by the characters as events that give them the awareness that life is real and intense and not monotonous and useless, as it is presented in the first part of the novel" (Grigore 52). The "Instinct of Destruction" is essentially the opposing instinct of human survival, an instinct that leads toward death (Freud VI). In the beginning of the novel, Jack acts as though the disasters can never touch him, making life "monotonous" and predictable, but always in his favor. By the second and third sections of the book, Jack has been forced to change his view to a more realistic one, which therefore becomes a view that is threatening and unfamiliar. In this realistic new outlook on life, Jack only becomes more anxious and obsessed with the possibility of dying and how to stop this inevitability. Dying is exactly that: inevitable. Before when Jack was curious about death, he was more focused on how to avoid it, but since his exposure to the "Airborne Toxic Event," he is now more focused on staving it off. The exposure to the toxic air has ensured his death, consequently exhibiting Jack's true romantic nature.

Not only Jack, but some colleagues of his notice the intense sunsets since the "Airborne Toxic Event." Directly after the section on the "Airborne Toxic Event" ends, Jack mentions these sunsets:

> Ever since the airborne toxic event, the sunsets had become almost unbearably beautiful. Not that there was a measurable connection. If the special character of Nyodene Derivative (added to the everyday drift of effluents, pollutants, contaminants and deliriants) had caused this aesthetic leap from already brilliant sunsets to broad towering ruddled visionary skyscapes, tinged with dread, no one had been able to prove it. (DeLillo 162)

The quote is not the only instance in which the sunsets are mentioned. They even become an event toward the ending of the novel. Jack mentions how it becomes a family event with many other people gathered at an overpass to watch the sunsets daily, appreciating the beauty in silence (308). Not only for Jack, but for the people of Blacksmith, the sunsets are an unmistakable romantic image. The odd part about this romantic imagery, however, is that these sunsets were more than likely heightened by the "Airborne Toxic Event." Duvall argues that the "Airborne Toxic Event" can only be validated through the medium of a television because the disaster was a manmade one; therefore, the disaster has to "register a romantic sublime" in person, how Jack and his family experienced it (131). While this argument is interesting and supported by theory, the sunsets are also a product of a manmade event, and they are not unable to be appreciated unless through the medium of technology and manmade vessels. Wiese even suggests, "Thus unable to cope with the inexplicability of his impending death (whether it be unpredictable or augured by medical computers), Jack finds solace in the narrative symbolism of the humanly-altered natural phenomenon before him, one that is most often associated with happy endings" (20). The observation by Weise is more supported than the assumption made by Duvall, since Jack is fully capable to appreciate what the manmade disaster has done for him as well as what it has taken from him. Still finding appreciation in the beauty of the sunsets that result from the "Airborne Toxic Event" that brings Jack closer to death does not stem from a postmodern attitude, similar to the fascination that Jonah has with how simple it is to live in a frozen world. Jack finds himself drawn much more toward the romantic and meaningful outcomes of the very postmodern occurrences in Blacksmith.

The most surreal interaction that Jack has in which he questions his beliefs and attitude toward death is with Sister Herman Marie at a German Catholic hospital after he has suffered a

gunshot wound. Once Jack arrives at the hospital and is being treated, he begins questioning Sister Herman Marie about religion. "'What does the Church say about heaven today?'" Jack asks (302). "'Is it still the old heaven, like that, in the sky?'" (302). The questions that Jack asks Sister Herman Marie are almost patronizing. Jack feels that since he is not religious, he is above people in the world who are. It is as if he thinks he has discovered a secret that people who are religious will never have access to. In a romantic way, the prospect of having no religion at all is somehow comforting to Jack. The idea of a possibility of an unknown afterlife contributes to his crippling fear of death, but the thought that his belief in no religion is more advanced is something in which Jack finds comfort. It is as if he is always thinking on the "bright side" even when there are no solid grounds for him to form these beliefs.

When Jack begins to poke fun at Sister Herman Marie and questions her about her Catholicism, she tells Jack that the truth is a godless one, which disturbs him since he previously viewed himself as superior to members of religion: "'Nuns believe these things. When we see a nun, it cheers us up, it's cute and amusing, being reminded that someone still believes in angels, in saints, all those traditional things'" (DeLillo 303). Jack finds comfort in being socially excluded from people who do believe a greater truth, but Sister Herman Marie shows him that he does not deserve to be exclusive when she says, "'The nonbelievers need the believers. They are desperate to have someone believe,'" and, "'There must always be believers. Fools, idiots, those who hear voices, those who speak in tongues. We are your lunatics. We surrender our lives to make your nonbelief possible'" (304). Sister Herman Marie recognizes that the truth is not a hopeful one and makes Jack see that his previous beliefs are not so hopeful after all. There is no room for religion, just eventual death, but her job is to make people like Jack Gladney's truth accurate for them, which completely discredits what they previously believed to be a truth. A

nun in a Catholic hospital is a doubter and a skeptic, which already is shocking for Jack to see, but she shares the same views as he does while also being above him in self-awareness by categorizing herself as a believer for the non-believers. Even in the presence of a German nun, he feels superior since he thinks that his views on religion are correct, but Jack is challenged when Sister Herman Marie informs him that she also thinks what he does; Sister Herman Marie is even arguably more self-aware than Jack is in the moment that she tells him, "The non-believers need the believers" (DeLillo 304). Sister Herman Marie has chosen to serve the non-believers in order to keep the peace and to keep them happy. Jack's view of religion, and nuns in particular, is romantic since he thinks that he should be held in higher esteem than anyone who actually believes in the "old heaven" in the sky. It is not postmodern by definition for Jack to accept what he believes as the only truth since postmodernism questions everything and aims for self-awareness; therefore, Jack's beliefs put him in a much more optimistic and romantic category far from postmodernist.

Even though Jack was made a fool by a nun, he was previously very optimistic about the topic of religion and fate. He is so privileged that it is difficult for him to understand how his ideas are not the only ideas that exist. In Jack's disconnection from society, he paradoxically feels more connected. It is as if he thinks he understands the system in which they live under more than the average American might understand it. The feeling of being above average gives Jack an increased sense of confidence, one that he does not hold in the Department of Hitler Studies. Barrett writes, "Jack has passed from blind faith, in which old German nuns accept the burden of mock belief, to an acceptance of mystery" (109). Barrett is saying that Jack has surpassed the shock of German nuns not actually being religious, which would also mean that Jack has accepted the fact that his previous beliefs that people with no religion should be held in

higher esteem is a false belief. The romantic in Jack was disappointed that the nuns were not actually servants of god, rather servants of the nonbelievers, but in order to remain hopeful and move toward an acceptance of an eventual death, Jack forces himself to understand and believe Sister Herman Marie.

Though DeLillo leaves all of the storylines in *White Noise* unfinished, it is safe to assume that Jack, after his brush with death and his conversation with Sister Herman Marie, is working toward accepting his romantic beliefs. He will more than likely continue to attempt to move up in the Hitler studies department and he will continue to rely on consumerism and capitalism, but in the experiences that Jack endured in *White Noise*, these habits of Jack are now seen in a varied perspective that acknowledges that he is a romantic residing in a postmodern world.

Chapter 3

"Carrying the Fire": Hope and Truth in McCarthy's *The Road*

Both Kurt Vonnegut and Don DeLillo approached doom and apocalyptic situations from the stance of before and after, but Cormac McCarthy goes straight to the aftermath in *The Road*. Leaving the readers with no direct explanation of why the world has burned, McCarthy thrusts his readers straight into what his version of life after mass destruction would look like. The world is burned, few plants or animals have survived except for humans, and the people who are still living cannot be trusted. The setting of *The Road* is obviously a bleak one, but the nature of the story is really more romantic than hopeless and nihilistic. It is a love story between a father and his son, the characters referred to as The Man and The Boy, as they navigate through their burned world and make their way through the mountains toward the coast. Much more blatantly romantic than *Cat's Cradle* and *White Noise*, *The Road* shows The Boy's journey from wishing he was no longer alive to finding and "carrying the fire." McCarthy approaches an end of the world scenario quite differently than most contemporary fiction, for instead of focusing on humor or fear of death (or life after death), he focuses on personal relationships. The Man and The Boy are fighting for their survival the entire novel, but The Boy questions if this struggle is actually worth the risk or not. Cormac McCarthy makes *The Road* romantic because of the focus he puts on the father/son relationship, the presence of a questioning child figure who is finding his way toward a more hopeful outlook on their situation, and the focus on the "fire."

When *The Road* was first published, *The New York Times* wrote, "'The Road' would be pure misery if not for its stunning, savage beauty" (Maslin). In the review, Janet Maslin references the subtle beauty in the novel, but still classifies it as a "dark" and "bleak" book. She mostly focuses on the physical setting of the book and glosses over The Man and The Boy's

relationship. Another scholar, Ashley Kunsa, has called McCarthy's writing nihilistic: "Vereen M. Bell lays out the view of McCarthy as nihilist, identifying in the author's first six novels little by way of plot, theme or character self-consciousness and motivation. For Bell, these missing elements amount to 'McCarthy's metaphysic summarized: none, in effect—no first principles, no foundational truth'" (Kunsa 58). *The Road* fits into this description, especially since there is certainly little plot, little self-consciousness, and little motivation, especially in the character of The Boy, but The Man challenges this description in his motivation to stay alive in the company of his son. Jonah from *Cat's Cradle* and Jack Gladney from *White Noise* are characters who pride themselves on their self-awareness (even if they are wrong in their beliefs), but The Man is only outwardly self-aware of one thing: "the fire" that he carries. The Boy fits into Bell's descriptions much more than The Man, and eventually, The Boy becomes the main character instead of The Man, and McCarthy shows his readers the transformation that The Boy must endure to break free of this previously described nihilism.

At first, when the world burned in *The Road*, the main characters were surviving with a mother, as well. It is soon revealed that she took her own life in hopes of not having to suffer in the burned and violent world they have found themselves in. In a flashback, she says:

> I should have done it a long time ago. When there were three bullets in the gun instead of two. I was stupid. We've been over all of this. I didnt bring myself to this. I was brought. And now I'm done. I thought about not even telling you. That would probably have been best. You have two bullets and then what? You cant protect us. You say you would die for us but what good is that? I'd take him with me if it werent for you. You know I would. It's the right thing to do . . . Sooner or later they will catch us and they will kill us.

They will rape me. They'll rape him. They are going to rape us and kill us and eat us and you wont face it. You'd rather wait for it to happen. But I cant. I cant. (McCarthy 57-58)

She makes it quite clear that she and The Man do not see eye to eye on the matters of death, which has caused tension in not only the relationship, but in The Man's plan for survival. When she says "You can't protect us. You say you would die for us but what good is that?" she is suggesting that dying for each other is a meaningless act and she would, therefore, rather die for herself. Eventually she does take her own life, leaving a lasting effect on The Boy, but also on The Man. After that specific scene where the mother expresses her wish to die, McCarthy writes, "She was gone and the coldness of it was her final gift" (60). The Boy does not say anything except "She's gone isn't she?" to which The Man answers, "Yes she is" (60).

Since the mother is gone, having only two main characters in a setting where there are not many other people to be trusted showcases the struggles and love between the two characters. While the point of view in the book is slightly difficult to get used to, The Man is usually the one whose thoughts are shared while The Boy's only contribution to the text is what he says out loud. The different point of view in *The Road* thrusts McCarthy's readers into a strange new setting, just as The Man and The Boy have been forced to endure their new surroundings, thus connecting the readers slightly more to the situation of the main characters. McCarthy does not use quotation marks for dialogue, nor does he specify who the narrator is. The exclusion of the proper punctuation and the specificity of a narrator is done in order to disorient the readers, just as The Man and The Boy have been so disoriented through the apocalyptic event they have endured and through the loss of a family member.

The Road opens with a description of what The Man does in order to ensure his son's safety: "When he woke in the woods in the dark and the cold of the night he'd reach out to touch

the child sleeping beside him . . . his hand rose and fell softly with each precious breath" (McCarthy 1). The language that McCarthy uses is calm and relaxing when the situation that The Man and The Boy are in is anything but sweet and slow. "Softly" and "precious" are words used to describe The Boy and the small, yet important, act of breathing, but this is the first introduction to The Man and The Boy's relationship. The first interaction in the story of the main characters is The Man's concern for The Boy's safety and the "soft" and "precious" description of The Boy. The night is "dark" and "cold," but the boy is a comfort to The Man in the setting of those negative descriptors.

Once the boy wakes, he says, "Hi, Papa," and The Man answers, "I'm right here" (McCarthy 3). The Boy was not looking for his papa as indicated by his first words since he knew his father was with him, but The Man's response is immediately comforting even though The Boy did not need to be comforted. Throughout the story, it is revealed that everything The Man does is for The Boy's benefit. Yes, this is a common conception of parents and the relationship that they have with their children, but in Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle* and DeLillo's *White Noise*, the children are not always the main concern. Newt from *Cat's Cradle* describes his father as never being around and while Jack Gladney from *White Noise* is often interacting with his children, he is selfish in only being concerned about himself and his possibility of death. The Man does not follow this pattern. There is nobody around to impress and no social standards to follow, so The Man's focus is solely on the comfort and safety of his son. The Man takes this concern to the extreme when it is revealed that he has a plan for The Boy to shoot himself if trouble were to come: "Dont be afraid, he said. If they find you you are going to have to do it. Do you understand? Shh. No crying. Do you hear me? You know how to do it. You put it in your mouth and point it up. Do it quick and hard. Do you understand? Stop crying. Do you

understand?" (McCarthy 119). They not only have the pistol for defense, but also for a quick way out of a situation that, for The Man and The Boy, could be a worse fate than death.

The inclusion of the plan to take one's own life is solely survivalist, ironically enough. The Man has convinced The Boy that he should kill himself if there is a chance that he could be kidnapped by the cannibals, but The Man cannot convince himself of this. In his undying love for his son, he finds himself worrying about the possibility of the gun misfiring and him having to kill his own son after already having lost his wife. The scene where The Man is contemplating this is jarring and one of the moments in the book where that speaks directly to the horrid conditions of The Man and The Boy's life, yet they keep on living together and caring for each other. The Man gives The Boy the pistol and begins his anxious thoughts:

> Can you do it? When the time comes? When the time comes there will be no time. Now is the time. Curse God and die. What if it doesnt fire? It has to fire. What if it doesnt fire? Could you crush that beloved skull with a rock? Is there such a being within you of which you know nothing? Can there be? Hold him in your arms. Just so. The soul is quick. Pull him toward you. Kiss him. Quickly. (McCarthy 120)

The above quote showcases The Man's love for The Boy, so much love that he may not even be able to do what he has previously determined to be the best option for The Boy and his lack of suffering. Love and care are taking over The Man in this scene, opening the possibility for him to not be able to give his son a painless and quick death. The Man loves the boy so much that it is potentially damaging.

The Boy struggles to understand why his father is so harsh sometimes and why he is being forced to keep living in a burned and barren world. Unlike The Man, The Boy does not care if he dies, as he states many times within the story. The Man asks, "You mean you wish you

were dead?" to which The Boy responds, "Yes" (McCarthy 55). This response from The Boy is not something that The Man wants him to think, especially because of the loss of his wife. Soon after, McCarthy has the wife question where the will to survive comes from: "We're not survivors. We're the walking dead in a horror film . . . I don't care if you cry. It doesn't mean anything to me" (McCarthy 55). The Man's wife has decided that surviving is not worth the trouble, but The Man does not share this sentiment, which has caused some discord in the relationship since his son does not know which parent is correct in his/her choices.

McCarthy focuses the novel on The Man and The Boy's search and hope for the truth or their fate and his "fiction contains . . . a preoccupation with determinism and fate," along with some tension between the father and son because of the Boy's questioning of fate and the need for survival (Clarke 55). Near the beginning of the novel, The Boy expresses his wish for death, and The Man tells him, "You musnt say that . . . Don't say it. It's a bad thing to say" (56). This interaction between the father and son shows their different views on the need for survival. The Boy wishes he were dead because the life he is living of survival is more painful than rewarding, but The Man will not let him think this way. The choice between life and death in desperate times is presented by The Man as a chance to keep living even in misery, but to The Boy, this choice is more pulling toward an escape from the present nihilistic world that they are forced to live in. The Boy's views approach nihilism. It is difficult for him to see any positives in the world he resides in other than keeping his father happy. In a way, The Man is selfish for expecting The Boy to act exactly as he wishes him to, always having the energy to fight for survival, but The Boy has trouble pleasing his father and staying hopeful.

With this need to stay hopeful, The Boy notices that searching for this fate his father has is nearly impossible, and he therefore sees this "truth" that he seeks to be one that is difficult to

handle, leading him farther and farther away from what The Man hopes for him to find. As stated by Matthew Mullins, "[b]eginning perhaps with Nietzsche, what has come to be widely accepted as postmodernism has always viewed any notion of a transcendent order or truth as dangerous or oppressive," meaning that the fate that The Man and The Boy seek is one that is dangerous or impossible to interpret (79). The Boy has a nihilistic, postmodern view, avoiding any chances of transcendence, not because he sees this possibility as dangerous, but because he interprets this transcendence as death instead of life. The Man, on the other hand, is more romantic, remaining hopeful and fighting for life, finding all of his truth and fate in his son. Despite The Boy's apparent nihilism, he is still drawn to people who are in need or may be able to help them. This contrast from his lack of will to live to his empathy and concern for all other living things they encounter is a profound one. In an article on empathy in *The Road*, Christopher White writes, "The central miracle of the novel, and the spark that gives light to its heart-rendingly dark tale, is the boy's irrepressible inclination to feel with other people in spite of the extreme vulnerability and threatened state of his and his father's existence" (532). What is problematic about this relationship is that in order to reach an understanding, one has to bend to the other's views.

In order to survive and protect his son, The Man is always harsh, to people they encounter and sometimes to his son, but The Boy does not let this harshness affect his ability to show empathy. This is one way in which The Man bends to The Boy's will. Every time they encounter a person, The Man is on guard and The Boy wants his father to be nicer. When another man steals their belongings, The Man finds the thief and spares his life, but still leaves him with nothing. "Papa please dont kill the man," The Boy pleads, and The Man listens, though he leaves the thief "[s]tanding there raw and naked, filthy and starving. Covering himself with his hand. He was already shivering" (274-275). Even though The Man does not kill the thief, The Boy is still

showing incredible empathy for someone who stole all of their belongings, leaving them for death. McCarthy shows his readers just how empathetic The Boy is when he writes, "And they set out along the road south with the boy crying and looking back at the nude and slatlike creature standing there in the road shivering and hugging himself. Oh Papa, he sobbed" (276). The Boy continues to focus on the thief, asking The Man, "Just help him, Papa. Just help him . . . He was just hungry, Papa. He's going to die . . . Hes so scared, Papa" (277). They reach an agreement where they return the thief's clothes, though he cannot be found. The man would have never been so kind to the thief had it not been for The Boy's empathy.

Before The Man decides to attempt to return the thief's clothing, he tells The Boy, "You're not the one who has to worry about everything," to which The Boy responds, "Yes I am . . . I am the one" (278). There have been hints of The Boy being a god figure to The Man throughout the entire story, but it is in this moment McCarthy cinches the idea that he and his goodness may act as some higher power. Religion is mentioned, mostly when The Man is stressed and he curses god, but the book introduces The Boy to the readers with The Man's thought, "If he is not the word of God God never spoke" (2). This could be interpreted in a way that suggests that the existence of The Boy is a gift to The Man from God, but The Boy could also act as a god figure for The Man. In the world they live in, God is not present except through The Boy, making him a spokesperson or even the speaker. Not only is The Boy a religious figure, but The Man's carrying of "the fire" hints at more than just hopefulness. Kunsa writes about religion in *The Road*, mentioning, "[T]he pair's journey acquires an explicitly religious quality, a sense of divine mission reinforced by the antonomastic refrain of 'good guys'—that is, the substituting of this phrase for their proper names—and the repetition of 'carrying the fire,' phrases that become incantatory in the manner of a litany or a prayer" (59). Kunsa suggests the

presence of a religion based around The Man and The Boy and their intentions of always remaining "good" and not straying from the beliefs they harbored before the apocalyptic event. The presence of "the fire" in The Man, and eventually The Boy, suggests that they are capable of providing their own religion, which keeps them safe and alive.

"The fire" is mentioned throughout the story, though it is never explicitly stated what "the fire" actually is, which fits into the tone of McCarthy's writing in *The Road,* where not even the apocalyptic event that left the world dead and burned is explained. When The Man is wounded and dying, he explains to The Boy that he must now carry "the fire" since he will not be around much longer to do it. The interaction is heartbreaking, but it suggests that "the fire" is the will to live:

> You have to carry the fire.
>
> I don't know how to.
>
> Yes you do.
>
> Is it real? The fire?
>
> Yes it is.
>
> Where is it? I don't know where it is.
>
> Yes you do. It's inside you. It was always there. I can see it. (McCarthy 298)

While The Boy at the beginning of the book wanted to be with his mother in death, he now has the responsibility to carry "the fire." For The Man, "the fire" was the strong leadership and the ability to protect his god, but for The Boy, "the fire" is the ability to help and continue surviving. As important as the many tools are that The Man makes use of, even more important is this metaphorical "fire." The truth of The Boy and The Man are different, but they are both based on

survival and how to properly carry out that task. Through The Man's death, The Boy discovers that he gains "the fire," or maybe he had it all along.

Conclusion

Postmodern and contemporary texts often have the label of being bleak, depressing, or nihilistic, and while those descriptions may apply to most texts, some postmodern and contemporary works have an underlying presence of romanticism and optimism under all of the negativity. From the mid-1900s, following World War II (more specifically Hiroshima), Vonnegut has difficulty focusing on anything but what he considers to be "the truth" ("Kurt Vonnegut" 00:03:20-00:03:45). He states, "Truth was dropped on Hiroshima," which is a statement that shaped his writing and style until his death in 2007 ("Kurt Vonnegut" 00:03:27-00:03:30). As a man who considered himself interested in truth, scientific truth, Vonnegut had to realize that this truth was perhaps not always used for progression and positivity, therefore molding his artistry of writing into a purposely bleak and nihilistic fashion. Still, in his writing, especially in *Cat's Cradle*, there is positivity and optimism even in the darkest of times. The world has frozen and Jonah still remains very functional and content despite the surrounding emptiness of the earth. *Cat's Cradle* was one of the first novels of the postmodern period that hinted at optimism underneath the blatant negativity and nihilism, but other authors followed suit.

In the 1980s, Don DeLillo wrote *White Noise*, another novel about a man obsessed with his own truth. This time, the scientific threat to Jack Gladney's upper-class society is an "Airborne Toxic Event" that leaves him questioning his privilege as head of the department of Hitler studies, though he cannot even speak German. Jack pretends to outwardly fit into who he longs to be, but the threat of the "Airborne Toxic Event" begins him questioning his actual purpose. Though the circumstances seem based in realism and nihilism, Jack does not actually fit into the description of a postmodern man; he instead is described much more as a modern and

romantic character. Some of his obliviousness to the realistic ways of life that do not apply to him have roots in positivity, but his optimism is challenged when he must come to terms with his crippling fear of death because of his exposure to the "Airborne Toxic Event." Following the theme of life-threatening disasters, McCarthy's *The Road* takes place after an apocalyptic event that was more than likely caused by man. Arguably, this novel is the most romantic of the three addressed in this thesis, especially because of the contrast of the bleak and burned setting and The Man and The Boy's ability to still have empathy for each other and some occasional passersby. This suggests that McCarthy had a more optimistic message in mind as opposed to a bleak conclusion.

The ways that Jonah, Jack Gladney, and The Man and The Boy all introduce romanticism or religion in their nihilistic settings are rooted in all of these characters looking for a truth. However unattainable this truth is, the characters in postmodern and contemporary works are in search for one. In the case of Jonah, he discovers truth in "ice-nine" and its ability to freeze the earth. While this outcome is a negative ending, Vonnegut chooses not to end the novel there, showing how well Jonah functions with the truth that he has experienced, letting his readers see how romantic and optimistic Jonah chooses to be after one of the most nihilistic events has occurred. Jack Gladney from *White Noise* is on a search to confirm his romantic truth that he is actually who he wishes to be, but in the event of the "Airborne Toxic Event," he must question these truths he is striving to believe and find new truths that are even more hopeful than the previous belief. The Man from *The Road* had his own truth all along, almost in a religion based around his and his son's relationship, but his purpose is to pass this truth on to his son who is quite skeptical of "the fire." In the event of The Man's death, The Boy is able to discover "the fire" (his truth) and remain hopeful and motivated for life. While the truths in these three novels

are different, they all face some sort of test or challenge, resulting in the characters' search for their more optimistic and romantic ending.

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