Cat's Cradle by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.

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Chapter One

The Day the World Ended

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Call me Jonah. My parents did, or nearly did. They called me John.

Jonah – John – if I had been a Sam, I would have been a Jonah still – not because I have been unlucky for others, but because somebody or something has compelled me to be certain places at certain times without fail. Conveyances and motives, both conventional and bizarre, have been provided. And, according to plan, at each appointed second, at each appointed place this Jonah was there.

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I first read *Slaughterhouse-Five* in the mid-1970s. I was a huge science fiction fan at the time, and expecting a traditional work of science fiction, I was underwhelmed. By my 30s, my ability to appreciate literature had improved markedly. I had even reread *Moby-Dick* and felt I had developed some level of understanding of Melville's flawed masterpiece. (I had no hope of understanding it when I read it in high school.) Around the same time and largely by chance, I picked up Vonnegut's earlier novel *Cat's Cradle* (1963) and was blown away from the very first chapter. And from the very first words, I came to appreciate the evocative power of allusion and how art in general and literature in particular are best viewed in the light of how works inform, redefine, and enrich each other.

I was prepared for the novel to be satiric and sardonic, but the sheer chutzpah of usurping the most famous opening line in American literature took me by surprise. The revelation of the narrator's actual name in the third sentence took the opening beyond bravado. In the names Jonah and John, Old and New Testaments are juxtaposed, as they are in *Moby-Dick*, specifically after Ishmael listens to Father Mapple's sermon on Jonah and then rejects the importance of the Second Commandment in favor of Christ's injunction to love one another in the next chapter "A Bosom Friend." When the names are repeated in the second paragraph with the addition of Sam, authorial intent becomes largely moot as the reader takes over the act of making connections. (*E.g.* Is Sam chosen for its ordinariness, its biblical origins, in reference to Uncle Sam, or for all of these reasons? Is there a connection to Samuel in the Bible being considered the first Hebrew prophet? Is there significance to the similarity of the story of Samuel's mother, Hannah, and the

story of Hagar, Ishmael's mother? And so it goes.) The title of chapter four, "A Tentative Tangling of Tendrils," is apropos to the whole novel.

Of course, this opening is no mere flash, and Vonnegut creates connections throughout the novel. (Perhaps most notably when we learn the main subject of his book, Felix Hoenikker, was the progenitor of both the atomic bomb and a substance called ice-nine. Robert Frost immediately leaps to mind.) Such connections are thematically integral to the work as well, symbolized by its central image, the cat's cradle. ("No damn cat. No damn cradle.") They are also an effective tool to cover a lot of ground quickly. This short novel examines the roles science, religion, art, and politics play in our lives.

Since reading *Cat's Cradle*, allusion has become a mainstay in my writing arsenal, particularly when it comes to poetry. I'll use it most frequently as a type of shorthand to embrace the complexity of an idea by evoking another writer's deep exploration of the same topic. For example, in a short poem (14 lines) I wrote early this summer, I allude to the following in this order:

- Exodus 3:14
- "Nature" by Emerson
- Nicola Tesla
- "I Sing the Body Electric" by Whitman
- *Apocalypse Now*
- *Volpone* by Jonson
- "Humpty Dumpty"
- *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*
- "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" by Eliot
- *Othello* by Shakespeare

Allusion is a great way to say a lot while saying a little. Of course, one runs the risk of readers without the requisite background knowledge becoming lost, but as a reader myself I prefer my own confusion to being spoon-fed ideas. Besides, "Sometimes you have to lose yourself before you can find anything." ☺