

**Title:**A World Worth Laughing At: *Catch-22* and the Humor of Black Humor

Author(s): Daniel Green

Publication Details: Studies in the Novel 27.2 (Summer 1995): p186-195.

Source: *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Ed. Jeffrey W. Hunter. Vol. 196. Detroit: Gale, 2005. From *Literature Resource Center*.

Document Type: Critical essay

[(essay date summer 1995) *In the following essay, Green examines the lighter aspects of Heller's Catch-22, contending that because critics frequently focus on darker themes in black humor fiction, the comic aspects of these works are often neglected.*]

One can't help but note that in the commentary about the fiction conventionally identified with the mode of "black humor" there is much discussion of what makes such fiction black, but little of its humor. The most famous expression of this tendency occurs in probably the most frequently cited book on black humor, Max Schulz's *Black Humor Fiction of the Sixties*. "I have shied away from the humor in Black Humor," writes Schulz. Choosing instead to focus on what he calls the "cosmic labyrinth," Schulz claims that "to give equal value to humor in any consideration of this literature is possibly to let oneself be trapped by a term that came into being somewhat capriciously and may not accurately describe that literature."<sup>1</sup> While it may be true that several of the novels labeled as black humor at one time or another are not "humorous" in a narrow sense, or that the term itself was adapted somewhat arbitrarily, Schulz's reluctance to deal at length with books such as *Catch-22* or Stanley Elkin's *A Bad Man*, clearly *funny* books by any measure, evidences a common scholarly preference for the "cosmic" at the expense of the comic.

It might reasonably be assumed that criticism of individual novels would confront more directly the vital role of comedy in their aesthetic and rhetorical operations. Such attention would seem to be in order especially for *Catch-22*, which relies so systematically on what Frederick Karl has catalogued as "puns, high jinks, slapstick, [and] witty dialogue."<sup>2</sup> However, by far most writing about *Catch-22* has focused like Schulz on more portentous issues of politics, philosophy, economics, and even theology. In fact, to the extent that aesthetic or expressly literary issues are raised seriously at all, they tend to be restricted to relatively traditional studies of sources and precursors, or broadly thematic discussions of Heller's sense of what critics have chosen to term "the absurd." While the novel clearly has affinities with absurdism, these affinities have generally been used to *distance* *Catch-22* from the kind of comedy associated with the devices Heller exploits for absurdist effect.<sup>3</sup> While not everyone who has written about the novel has dismissed its plain comedic qualities, it is not unfair to cite the following statement by Leon F. Seltzer as typical of the general thrust of opinion about the role of comedy in *Catch-22*: "the novel's absurdities--comic and otherwise--operate almost always to expose the alarming inhumanities which pollute our political, social, and economic systems."<sup>4</sup>

My intention is not to deny that *Catch-22* does expose such inhumanities (clearly it does just that for many readers), nor even for that matter to criticize the substance of previous commentary on the novel, but to point out the implicit dichotomy between the "comic" and the "serious" created by this commentary. Precisely because *Catch-22* seems to most readers a fundamentally serious work, I would argue, a reflexive critical assumption comes into play whereby comedy and humor are seen as necessarily in service of something ostensibly more worthwhile, more identifiably meaningful. In short, the logical inference to draw from the kinds of statements I have quoted is that the comic cannot itself be serious.

An exception to the approach taken by the bulk of those in the first wave of *Catch-22* criticism is Morton Gurewitch in his book *Comedy: The Irrational Vision*. Gurewitch sees *Catch-22* as above all a "mad farce" so unrelenting as to effectively overwhelm any narrower didactic or satiric impulses. "The satire," writes Gurewitch, "is devoured ... by omnivorous nonsense."<sup>5</sup> In some ways this view could seem reminiscent of early responses to the novel which deemed it unworthy of sustained attention. However, Gurewitch intends his assertion to be taken as a laudatory judgement, and as such it is welcome recognition that the "merely funny" pervades *Catch-22*, to the extent that analysis focusing on world view or ideology are at the very least problematic. At the same time, Gurewitch's use of the word "nonsense" risks propping up the same opposition between the comic and the serious I have described. It

implies a comedy defined by the absence of any positive content (although it must be said that Gurewitch celebrates comedy for what he calls its "irrational freedom").<sup>6</sup> Opposing "sense" with "nonsense" does not finally overcome what seems to be an inherent devaluation--embedded in critical discourse itself--of the comedic impulse.

Despite the foregrounding of more solemn issues by critics such as Schulz and Seltzer, *Catch-22* provides ample opportunity to explore this impulse. In fact, in my analysis *Catch-22* is first and foremost a comic novel whose primary structural principle is the *joke* and whose design and execution are most appropriately construed as the vehicles of mirth. This description is also intended to underscore the book's accomplishment, but without divorcing its comedy from its overall seriousness of purpose. In my attempt to establish the inherent respectability of comedy as a mode creating its own kind of meaning, I will draw on Jerry Palmer's analysis in his *The Logic of the Absurd*,<sup>7</sup> which develops a convincing account of both the internal mechanism of the joke and the effect successful jokes have on our reception of the texts which employ them. Although Palmer's book focuses on film and television comedy, the burden of much of the discussion that follows is precisely that *Catch-22* shares essential characteristics with these forms. (As does, moreover, an entire strain of contemporary American fiction, encompassing loosely American "postmodern" writers and including Joseph Heller, which not only uses comedy extensively but relies on strategies and conventions derived as much from popular sources such as film and vaudeville as from purely literary traditions.)

Few novels in fact offer comedy as pure as that in *Catch-22*. No situation, not even the bloodiest or most fearful, is insulated from the further indignity of the joke, or exempt from the comedic *reductio ad absurdum*; no character, not even the apparent protagonist, escapes the ravages of mockery and ridicule. While such thoroughgoing comedy is familiar to us in film--particularly the American comic film descended from Mack Sennett--it is undoubtedly disconcerting to find it in a purportedly "serious" work of literature depicting a subject as forbidding as war and its consequences. Nevertheless, this brand of comedy distinguishes *Catch-22* from the primary line of twentieth-century comic fiction which uses comedy as a strategy to clearly satirical or otherwise discursive ends, and it is here that Palmer's view of the comic process is most illuminating.

Palmer argues for the necessity of a theory of comedy which values it for its own sake: "by reducing comedy to the play of serious values (attacking A, promoting B) the nature of the process, the pleasure which is specific to comedy and humour [sic], is lost."<sup>8</sup> Palmer contends that comedy has a pull of its own which inevitably muddies the thematic waters a text might otherwise seem to be navigating. His book's thesis, he writes, is that "ambiguities are built into the reception of comedy and humour, and this for reasons that are fundamental to their nature" (p. 18). He goes on to analyze in impressive and compelling detail the operations inherent in comedy's fundamental nature, constructing a model which provides a basis for understanding the way jokes and gags unfold, and which also explains their success or failure. On one level, Palmer's account seems remarkably simple, as he divides the comic event into two distinct moments, one during which occurs a disruption of narrative or contextual expectations, and a second which leads to a laugh-producing contradiction: that the cause of the disruption--either a verbal remark or visual image--is implausible yet at the same time contains a kind of plausibility after all (p. 43). The clarity provided by this formulation, however, as well as its potential relevance in a wide range of contexts and across generic boundaries, make it an effective tool for gauging the reach and depth of the comic impulse. It is particularly provocative when applied to a text like *Catch-22*, where this impulse has struck so many as being at best in conflict with other, more overarching forces.

That *Catch-22* engages in broad comedy is readily apparent from its first chapter, indeed its very first sentence. But the reader attentive to comic structure and pattern, not simply as adjunct to thematics but as source of intrinsic narrative and aesthetic pleasure, will not fail to appreciate a passage such as the following:

The colonel dwelt in a vortex of specialists who were still specializing in trying to determine what was troubling him. They hurled lights in his eyes to see if he could see, rammed needles into nerves to hear if he could feel. There was a urologist for his urine, a lymphologist for his lymph, an endocrinologist for his endocrines, a psychologist for his psyche, a dermatologist for his derma; there was a pathologist for his pathos, a cystologist for his cysts, and a

bald and pedantic cetologist from the zoology department at Harvard who had been shanghaied ruthlessly into the Medical Corps by an faulty anode in an I.B.M. machine and spent his sessions with the dying colonel trying to discuss *Moby-Dick* with him.<sup>9</sup>

One almost waits for the rimshots at the end of such a performance (it has the feel in particular of a more verbally playful Woody Allen joke). Although the ultimate effect of humor such as this may be to contribute to the novel's overall sense of absurdity, it should be emphasized that the immediate effect is laughter, and that the novel's knitting together of such moments is its primary narrative strategy.

While "jokes" in the most conventional sense do not necessarily dominate the pages of *Catch-22*--they are nevertheless plentiful--the spirit and substance of comedy like the above does inform much of the novel's exposition, as well as many of its character exchanges. Chapter II, "Clevinger," for example, opens to a brief dialogue between the title character and Yossarian, echoed in subsequent dialogue, which embodies and ultimately comments on this spirit:

Clevinger had stared at him with apoplectic rage and indignation and, clawing the table with both hands, had shouted, "You're crazy!" "Clevinger, what do you want from people?" Dunbar had replied wearily above the noises of the officers' club. "I'm not joking," Clevinger persisted. "They're trying to kill me," Yossarian told him calmly. "No one's trying to kill you," Clevinger cried. "Then why are they shooting at me?" Yossarian asked. "They're shooting at everyone," Clevinger answered. "They're trying to kill everyone." "And what difference does that make?" (pp. 11-12)

The tone of this interchange is suggestive of nothing so much as the patter of a vaudeville team, and the humor evoked by such a passage clearly relies on the basic strategies of comedy, surprise and incongruity. In replying "what difference does that make?" to Clevinger's declaration, Yossarian is clearly disrupting the logical case Clevinger is trying to make for Yossarian's "craziness." At first we find Yossarian's defense quite implausible (and therefore are perhaps inclined to agree with Clevinger) but on second thought it makes its own kind of sense. What difference *does* it make to Yossarian if he is in fact killed that everyone else is a target? The ambiguity ensuing from these disparate responses provokes our laughter. It is this instinctive, largely subconscious reaction which is prompted by what Palmer terms the "logic of the absurd" (p. 44).

Moreover, Clevinger's disclaimer--"I'm not joking!"--ultimately works to highlight his position as the butt of the joke being set up at his expense, both by Yossarian and by the shape of the scene's own comic trajectory. Ironically, by the end of Chapter II Yossarian finds the tables turned as he himself becomes the butt of the joke whose absurd but ruthless logic provides the novel its title and controlling metaphor: *Catch-22*. Doc Daneeka informs him that the required number of missions has been raised (from 44 to 50 at this point), and throughout the rest of the book Yossarian struggles against the inescapable force of *Catch-22*, sometimes resisting actively and at others more passively cutting his losses in his effort to somehow get the last laugh on the system it represents. Doc Daneeka's explanation of the principle of *Catch-22* suggests further the relevance of Palmer's schema; indeed, what is most disturbing about the whole idea of *Catch-22* is explicable through its terms. We--and the airmen on Pianosa--are surprised by the obvious manipulation and injustice embodied in this unofficial law. Its main tenet--that anyone who would continue to fly missions after what Yossarian, Orr, and the others have been through would be crazy, but that "anyone who wants to get out of combat duty isn't really crazy" (p. 41)--seems a perversely implausible distortion of logic, but at the same time has a certain monstrous plausibility as well. Even Yossarian is moved to admire such a catch, and Doc Daneeka pronounces it "the best there is" (p. 41). If the world of *Catch-22* is indeed "crazy," it is largely because it is so thoroughly informed by the rigorous logic of comedy.

Not only is Yossarian repeatedly taken aback by the ubiquity of this logic, but readers of *Catch-22* must also be surprised by the unremitting manifestations of its all-encompassing joke in an incongruous setting of bloody air war and inhuman exploitation where fear and misery are translated into comic pratfalls. A large part of the book's artistic interest, I would argue, lies precisely in the way in which Heller sustains his comic routines over the course of nearly 500 pages, as well as the way in which he joins these routines into a compelling, albeit highly fragmented,

narrative. Heller succeeds both in creating consistently startling comic moments and in tying these moments together in a way which reflects and reinforces the fundamental nature of the joke itself. Palmer describes two kinds of narrative which incorporate gags and jokes. The first gathers such gags into an essentially self-sufficient sequence, while the second subordinates the gags to an otherwise non-comic story. In the former case, comedy is presumed to be capable of producing its own kind of satisfaction; in the latter, the comedy is employed as a supplement to the story's non-comic core (pp. 141-42). While Palmer is perhaps correct to contend that narratives of the first kind are rarely found in practice (especially in literature), *Catch-22* comes as close to this kind of narrative as any text in modern fiction. Further, while such a strategy might seem a threat to narrative unity, in *Catch-22* it can actually be seen to provide a kind of unity that has previously been overlooked. What has appeared to be an excessively fragmented narrative (or at least a too randomly fragmented one) can be read as a mammoth orchestration of individual comic bits and routines into a kaleidoscopic comedy revue, the cumulative effect of which is to situate Yossarian ever more irretrievably in the world defined by *Catch-22*. The chronological fluidity of the story is partly induced by the logic of an absurdity as over-whelming as this, and is partly an opportunity for the reader to reflect on the logic of the absurd itself as played out under this text's conditions: that a world so irrational, where distinctions between past, present, and future collapse, could actually exist seems implausible in the extreme, yet when judged by the terms of its governing framework, the confusions of such a world seem plausible indeed.

Thus does one of the most basic of comedic devices--the joke--serve both as the foundation of individual scenes and episodes and as a central organizing principle of the novel as a whole, with consequent ramifications not only vis-à-vis its aesthetic framework but also for any philosophical or political positions it may be presumed to be advancing. Even more examples of scenes and situations in *Catch-22* explicable in terms of jokes and related kinds of "low" humor could be adduced here--the "atheist" scene between the chaplain and Colonel Cathcart, for example, in which the Colonel "plays dumb" (although he isn't really playing) in his astonishment that atheism is legal, that the enlisted men pray to the same God as the officers, etc. But while many readers might reluctantly acknowledge the book's reliance on such humor, it is the marginal status of this kind of comedy that provokes even admirers to attribute supplemental value to its use in order to "raise" the text to a more respectable and more suitably meaningful level of discourse.

Again, examining the mechanism of the joke can help to explain why this happens. The balance between the plausible and the implausible in a given joke is often delicate, and can itself determine the impact of that joke. Palmer argues, for example, that contemporary audiences may see only the implausible in silent film comedies, and therefore judge them to be merely silly. Some audiences at the time, however, attended mostly to the plausible--that is, currently relevant--features and thus, notably, "found them excessively 'black,' too abrasive to be funny" (p. 57). Substituting "serious" or "disturbing" for "abrasive" in this statement, we can perhaps begin to see how contemporary literary critics avoid or overlook the humor of black humor.

Implicit in Palmer's account of the operation of comedy is a kind of self-consciousness which if not expressed directly *through* the text is potentially induced on the reader's side *by* the text. Thus while comic fiction is not necessarily self-reflexive in the mode of more strictly defined metafiction (e.g., John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse* or Robert Coover's *Universal Baseball Association*), that which, like *Catch-22*, unleashes the logic of the absurd does encourage an awareness of textuality in those moments when the very mechanism of this logic compels the reader to note the disruption of textual continuity. When the joke opens an especially wide gap--that is, when the imbalance between the plausible and the implausible seems, initially at least, very pronounced--the degree of such awareness can only increase. Here is perhaps the source of both the primary effect of humor--laughter--*and* the temptation to devalue mere laughter among "serious" readers, an apparent paradox that can be illustrated by looking at a scene skeptical readers could well point to as fundamentally non-comic.

The scene inside Yossarian's airplane after it has been hit and his fellow airman Snowden wounded is probably one of the most memorable episodes in *Catch-22*. Although portions of this scene are replayed throughout the novel, its full impact is registered near the end in a final flashback. Yossarian's memory does indeed for the most part unfold with appropriate sobriety:

Yossarian bent forward to peer and saw a strange colored stain seeping through the coveralls just above the armhole of Snowden's flak suit. Yossarian felt his heart stop, then pound so violently he found it difficult to breathe. Snowden was wounded inside his flak suit. (p. 457)

But even here the solemnity and outright horror of the situation can easily be interrupted by a joke:

A chunk of flak more than three inches big had shot into his other side just underneath the arm and blasted all the way through, drawing whole mottled quarts of Snowden along with it through the gigantic hole in his ribs it made as it blasted out ... Here was God's plenty, all right [Yossarian] thought bitterly as he stared--liver, lungs, kidneys, ribs, stomach, and bits of the stewed tomatoes Snowden had eaten that day for lunch. Yossarian hated stewed tomatoes and turned away dizzily and began to vomit, clutching his burning throat. (p. 457)

No doubt such a moment can, and has, been interpreted differently. Some might find it merely tasteless; most probably assume it has some comprehensible relationship to the scene's--and the book's--aesthetic or thematic design, and look to subordinate it to that design--thus the joke serves to heighten the horror, reinforce the anti-war message, etc. While I would not deny that it does either or both of these things, what gets overlooked in such an interpretation is the sheer disruptiveness of the joke, the way it actually takes our attention away from the grossness of "God's plenty" to contemplate the implausibility of the joke itself entering the narrative space otherwise occupied by Snowden's internal organs. As Palmer has it, "any gag works by contradicting discursively defined expectations" (p. 155), and the starkness of the contradiction involved here makes for a particularly strong sense of implausibility--so much so that Heller might seem to risk alienating readers for whom such a situation "deserve[s] only serious treatment or behavior" (p. 206). Yet reflection does indeed suggest it is plausible after all that Yossarian, continuously immersed as he is in death and mayhem, would be sickened only at the sight of the less familiar stewed tomatoes.

In a scene like this, the comedic element is so unsettling that one's awareness of the discordant note introduced can produce either the sense that Yossarian's squeamishness is mordantly funny or that its origin in the repulsiveness of war makes its comic quality secondary. Readers whose response is the latter are likely to find that perceptual gap created by the logic of the absurd to be an abyss into which received notions of literary significance could disappear. But those whose immediate response is laughter are acknowledging the integrity and the vitality of comedy, although it would not be accurate to say such readers thus ignore the potentially provocative insinuations of context--in fact, a definition of "black humor" would have to emphasize the obvious way in which this particular brand of levity *depends* on a corresponding contextual gravity.

Certainly not all scenes in *Catch-22* are comic in the way I have described. Yossarian's descent into the underworld on the streets of Rome, for example, seems clearly meant to convey a sobering picture of the human predicament (although even here his obvious helplessness finally only reinforces an overall view of him as a comic figure). Furthermore, comedy as absolute as *Catch-22* at its most extreme does almost unavoidably provoke consideration of its implications, formal and thematic. It is finally only testimony to the impact of comedy, its capacity to be meaningful in a variety of contexts, that the novel has drawn the weighty interpretations I adduced previously. Misunderstanding and distortion result when the hermeneutic operations involved in forming such interpretations are insufficiently distinguished from the operations of comedy proper, or these latter operations are disregarded entirely. In effect, humor is erased as a significant element of the text, becoming merely an incidental effect. Certainly joking in a context perceived as especially serious or disturbing could elicit laughter resonant with questions (not only "Why am I laughing?" but undoubtedly following from that immediate response), but the joke itself remains separate from such questions, its structure independent of context. The force of a given joke may indeed be related to its context, of course; the blackness of black humor, while often overemphasized, cannot be ignored and is obviously meaningless except through reference to context. The term "black humor," then, is perhaps most appropriately defined as an unapologetic, unalloyed use of comedy in extreme situations which implicitly raise very large, even profound, questions. Black humor of the sort found in *Catch-22* neither trivializes such questions nor foregrounds them, but rather broadens the range of experience to which comedy is relevant.

The conclusion to *Catch-22* has struck many readers as a particularly extreme situation, or at least one with important implications for the novel's ostensible thematic emphasis. Many who see *Catch-22* as a satire or a philosophical treatise find the ending a cop-out. Why does Yossarian choose to run away, they implicitly ask, rather than stay and work to change the system? (Although such criticism overlooks the fact that the chaplain proposes to do just that.) Should one conclude that the book is insufficiently serious from the outset, the ending could conceivably seem a transparent attempt to graft on an explicitly antiwar message. A more accurate assessment would conclude that the ending does leave a message, but also point out that it is a message entirely consistent with the novel's preponderant use of comedy. If the world depicted on Pianosa could be changed, surely by the end of this long novel a sign of such a change would reveal itself. Yet Yossarian's lived-world remains essentially the same at the end as it was when we first experienced it in the hospital ward. Nor are we as readers likely to feel that the conditions of that lived-world have been neutralized, much less altered, by the extended comic treatment of them. Instead, the comedy of *Catch-22* is ultimately nonregenerative: its relentless, frequently black humor does not finally call attention to situations, issues, or problems that could be improved, resolved, or eliminated through increased human effort. The blackness of the humor, in fact, may be a function of this final despair. In the face of a world so wholly irredeemable, Yossarian's only alternative is to abandon it in a gesture of personal survival. He may have managed to get the last laugh, but it is a feeble one, and his apparent optimism about the possibilities of "Sweden" make this reader feel the joke is still on him.

Palmer ultimately addresses what he calls the "effectivity" of comedy. He concludes that humor "is neither essentially liberatory nor conservative, for its nature is such that it always refuses to make any commitment to any 'opinion' about anything (except of course the opinion that levity is appropriate under these circumstances)" (p. 213). Possibly what has driven scholars to neglect the role of comedy in *Catch-22* is the sense that under the circumstances portrayed by this novel--war, death, systemic oppression--"levity" does *not* seem appropriate. Perhaps there are situations, attitudes, and beliefs that are off limits to comic treatment, but surely comic art can be served only by those who reject taboos of decorum and give free rein to the logic of comedy; the unrestrained play of this logic once unleashed achieves the *only* truly serious purpose of comedy, which is finally to expose the potentially ridiculous even if what is exposed proves disturbing or offensive. Joseph Heller does so unleash the inherent force and energy of the comic impulse, and this more than its concern with the "alarming inhumanities" of the system makes *Catch-22* a sobering work of literature. Thus, while "black humor fiction" may do little to enhance our knowledge of the "cosmic labyrinth," it does greatly enhance our understanding of the legitimate reach of comedy: even the most grave or the most exalted of subjects can be subjected to the logic of the absurd. *Catch-22* will not tell you how to live or what to think or even what's worth thinking about. It will tell you what's worth laughing at.

## Notes

1. Max Schulz, *Black Humor Fiction of the Sixties* (Athens: Ohio Univ. Press, 1973), p. x.
2. Frederick R. Karl, "Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*: Only Fools Walk in Darkness," *A "Catch-22" Casebook*, ed. Frederick Kiley and Walter McDonald (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1973), pp. 159-65.
3. Robert Brustein's early assertion that *Catch-22* "penetrates the surface of the merely funny" ("The Logic of Survival in a Lunatic World," Kiley and McDonald, pp. 6-11) has been echoed by many subsequent critics and scholars: "*Catch-22* goes beyond just capturing the form of absurdity, it moves toward a metaphysical statement about reality and truth in the contemporary world" (Howard Stark, "The Anatomy of *Catch-22*," Kiley and McDonald, pp. 145-58); "The *Catch-22* joke is not even very funny the first time, and in fact ... it is no joke" (Vance Ramsey, "From Here to Absurdity: Heller's *Catch-22*," Kiley and McDonald, pp. 221-36); "[I]he comic anarchy which provokes it is only the surface of *Catch-22*, not its sustaining structure" (Clinton S. Burhans Jr., "Spindrift and the Sea: Structural Patterns and Unifying Elements in *Catch-22*," Nagel, pp. 40-51.

4. Leon F. Seltzer, "Milo's 'Culpable Innocence': Absurdity as Moral Insanity in *Catch-22*," *Critical Essays on Joseph Heller*, ed. James Nagel (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1984), pp. 74-92.
5. Morton Gurewitch, *Comedy: The Irrational Vision* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1975), p. 126.
6. Gurewitch, p. 223.
7. Jerry Palmer, *The Logic of the Absurd* (London: BFI Publishing, 1987).
8. *Ibid.*, p. 14. Much of Palmer's analysis is directed toward identifying and preserving humor's specificity. Although Palmer insists that his book is not a critique of Freud's view of jokes in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* and that he is pursuing "latent implications of Freud's theory" (p. 219), he nevertheless argues that Freud failed to discriminate sufficiently between the impact of jokes and other verbal phenomena on psychic processes. Palmer strongly believes that jokes, and humor generally, have a discernible structure and signifying capacity independent of any role in the signifying system of the unconscious as a whole.
9. Joseph Heller, *Catch-22* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1961), pp. 9-10.

**Source Citation** (MLA 7<sup>th</sup> Edition)

Green, Daniel. "A World Worth Laughing At: *Catch-22* and the Humor of Black Humor." *Studies in the Novel* 27.2 (Summer 1995): 186-195. Rpt. in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Ed. Jeffrey W. Hunter. Vol. 196. Detroit: Gale, 2005. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 23 Mar. 2014.

**Title:**The Structure and Meaning of 'Catch-22'

Author(s): Robert Merrill

Publication Details: Studies in American Fiction 14.2 (Autumn 1986): p139-152.

Source: *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Ed. Roger Matuz and Cathy Falk. Vol. 63. Detroit: Gale Research, 1991. From *Literature Resource Center*.

Document Type: Critical essay

The critical reputation of Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961) is a curiosity. The book is often praised, even celebrated, yet most critics are still puzzled by such basic matters as the structure of the novel. Friends and foes alike tend to agree that the novel is hilarious but also that it is repetitious and essentially formless. Norman Mailer [see excerpt above] speaks for all those who share this view when he says "like yard goods, one could cut it anywhere. One could take a hundred pages from the middle of *Catch-22* and not even the author could be certain they were gone." As it happens, the author is rather certain that he *would* notice. Heller has said that *Catch-22* "is not to my mind a formless novel. If anything, it was constructed almost meticulously, and with a meticulous concern to give the appearance of a formless novel." Heller's remarks may seem defensive or at least exaggerated, but a close examination of *Catch-22* confirms that the book is as meticulously structured as Heller claims. Indeed, the book's more puzzling features—its bewildering chronology, its repetitiveness, its protagonist's belated change of heart—all fit together to advance Heller's radical protest against the modern social order. What appears to be formless chaos is in fact a brilliant strategy to expose not only the worst excesses of the modern bureaucracy but also the complacent acceptance of this system on the part of everyone involved, including Heller's readers. The structural complexity of *Catch-22* thus embodies Heller's meaning more thoroughly than even his admirers have been willing to suggest.

Reconsideration of the structure of *Catch-22* might well begin with the most "obvious" example of Heller's formlessness: the utterly confusing chronology. Heller presents his story in such a way that at certain points it is literally impossible to determine the order of events. By the time Yossarian enters the hospital in chapter 1, all of the important missions have already been flown: Ferrara, Orvieto, Bologna, and Avignon. This means that Yossarian has already flown over the bridge at Ferrara twice; that Milo Minderbinder has already established M & M Enterprises; that Snowden has already died over Avignon and subsequently been buried; that Yossarian has already stood naked in formation to receive a medal for his "heroism" at Ferrara. As most of the crucial events have already occurred by the time the novel opens, Heller resorts to a series of flashbacks in order to introduce these materials. In itself this is not a "difficult" technique, but as practiced here it makes it very difficult to establish something so basic as the chronology of events. There are several reasons for this, each of which points to what is distinctive about the structure.

First, there is the peculiar nature of Heller's flashbacks. Indeed, to use the term "flashback" is a bit misleading, for the word usually implies an episode rendered dramatically and at some length. In *Catch-22* there are a number of such episodes, but Heller presents much of the relevant material in oblique references, radically truncated scenes, and passing remarks in the dialogue. The death of Snowden is rendered in all of these ways, first as the subject of casual comments (where it is not even clear that Snowden has died), then as the occasion for brief, inconclusive "scenes," finally as the novel's most powerfully dramatized episode (chapter 41). The early references are naturally confusing because they allude to a scene not yet fully rendered; such references hardly help establish the chronological relationships among the several episodes. Second, the sheer number of the flashbacks frustrates any effort to piece together the chronological puzzle. If the passing references are counted, there must be hundreds of flashbacks in *Catch-22*. The novel might well be described as a pastiche of such flashbacks, the number of which goes far to explain what Heller meant when he said that *Catch-22* was meticulously constructed to give the appearance of a formless novel. Third, these flashbacks include few time references that place them within the novel as a whole. Heller never says that the mission to Avignon follows the Great Big Siege of Bologna, for example, but this must be the case because Yossarian rushes to Rome after the mission to Bologna and Snowden is in Rome at that time. Such "clues" are invariably obscure, however, perhaps sufficient for the inquiring scholar to use in his quest for Heller's chronology but unlikely to strike the common reader as very meaningful. (pp. 139-40)



By creating the curiously “timeless” world of *Catch-22*, where the temporal relationships are so difficult to grasp that almost all readers abandon the effort, Heller fashions a fictional world in which he can introduce a great many repetitions without undue awkwardness. Most narratives could absorb any one of Heller's repetitions; any of his recurring motifs would be easily defined, temporally speaking, against the central sequence of events. But surely the central plot line in most books would be destroyed if there were forty such motifs. According to many of Heller's critics, *Catch-22* is such a book, marred, if not destroyed, by the sheer mass of its repetitions. Yet Heller makes way for his repetitions by destroying any sense of a traditional time sequence. In effect he creates a large canvas which is hospitable to repetitions no one will be tempted to place within such a conventional sequence.

This of course leads to the question of why Heller would want to structure his book around these repetitions. Here David Richter's analysis is invaluable. Like other critics, Richter notes that the tone darkens radically toward the end of *Catch-22*. Unlike his peers, however, Richter is able to explain the unusual method whereby this “darkening” is achieved: “Instead of going from incident to new incident, with each successive event darker in tone than the last (the essential technique in, say, Mordecai Richler's *Cocksure*), incidents and situations are repeated, frequently with few factual changes, but with detail added to bring out the grotesque horror that underlies their absurd comedy.” *Catch-22* darkens as it goes along, but the later, “darker” episodes are the same as the earlier, “lighter” ones. Presumably Heller wants the repeated episodes and situations to be reevaluated; indeed, his repetitive technique virtually insists on this reevaluation. A close look at several examples should suggest what Heller achieves by this technique.

One of Heller's most important repetitions involves the soldier in white. The soldier in white appears three times, in chapters 1, 17, and 34. While chapters 1 and 17 describe the same day that the soldier in white dies, the first rendering is far less disturbing. Here a brief account of the soldier in white's death is surrounded by a good deal of comic “business,” including Yossarian's infatuation with the chaplain, the Texan's political theories, and the fire in the kitchen the firemen abandon to return to the air field. Later, when the soldier in white dies again in chapter 17, the episode is not enclosed by these comic scenes and leads to a semi-serious discussion of why the men in the hospital have gone to war. Later still, when the soldier in white reappears in chapter 34, there are no comic touches whatsoever. Convinced that “there's no one inside,” Dunbar creates such a disturbance he is “disappeared” by the hospital authorities. Indeed, Dunbar will never be seen again.

The term “repetition” is used rather freely here. After all, the scene in chapter 34 is not literally the same as that of chapters 1 and 17. In part this is why Yossarian and Dunbar are so frightened: the soldier in white is supposed to be dead. Nonetheless, the three scenes *seem* to be one. Because place and circumstance are almost identical in all three scenes, chapter 34 appears to be a true repetition. In point of fact, many of Heller's “repetitions” are slightly different in nature. Sometimes the repetition is exact (the deaths of the soldier in white and Snowden). Sometimes the repeated scene involves a virtually identical situation but different characters (the interrogations of Clevinger and the chaplain, the deaths of Mudd and Kraft). Sometimes the repetition involves an identical situation represented quite differently at different times (Rome as seen early and late in the novel). Heller thus creates a sense of constant repetition without literally repeating himself at all points. The *sense* of repetition is overwhelming, however. To distinguish among the several forms of repetition is less important than one might think. In each case the darker implications of an episode are finally revealed as precisely what all too many people would like to ignore.

An especially good example is Heller's treatment of Clevinger, a minor character whom Yossarian finally numbers among his missing “pals.” By the end of the book Clevinger's disappearance in a cloud is taken quite seriously, but early references to it are such that most readers do not even realize that Clevinger is dead. The first such reference occurs when Heller describes the tents surrounding Yossarian's: “On the other side of Havermeyer stood the tent McWatt no longer shared with Clevinger, who had still not returned when Yossarian came out of the hospital.” A few pages later Yossarian asks Doc Daneeka “then why don't you ground me? I'm crazy. Ask Clevinger.” Doc Daneeka replies, “Clevinger? Where *is* Clevinger? You find Clevinger and I'll ask him.” Both passages allude to the mission on which Clevinger disappeared, a mission not yet described in the book. Lacking the background to understand Heller's allusion, most readers will naturally “fail” to respond. Elsewhere Clevinger's death receives

equally casual treatment. The single line devoted to it in chapter 9 is completely neutral in tone, and chapter 10 opens with one of Heller's many jokes: "Clevinger was dead. That was the basic flaw in his philosophy." By this point many of the characters are dead. Yossarian will finally call the roll: Dunbar, Nately, Clevinger, Dobbs, Kid Sampson, McWatt, Hungry Joe. He will leave out Mudd, Kraft, Chief White Halfoat, and Snowden. These men are dying throughout the novel, but no one is encouraged to reflect upon the grim implications of this fact. Toward the end, when Yossarian finally grasps the true meaning of Clevinger's disappearance, the reader should realize that for most of the book he too has evaded what really happened to Clevinger. (pp. 141-43)

Perhaps the two most important repetitions in *Catch-22* concern "catch-22" itself and the death of Snowden. Like everything else in Heller's novel, "catch-22" is variously defined. This ubiquitous regulation is introduced on the second page: "Catch-22 required that each censored letter bear the censoring officer's name." This seems harmless enough; in fact, it seems more or less rational. Ensuing definitions have the same look of sweet reasonableness. "Catch-22" specifies that "a concern for one's own safety in the face of dangers that were real and immediate was the process of a rational mind;" "Catch-22" says that "you've always got to do what your commanding officer tells you to;" "Catch-22" insists that Group approve the actions of its subordinates. But of course the rationality of these variants is pure bluff. Because concern for one's own safety in the face of real dangers is the process of a rational mind, Orr must continue to fly the missions forever (until he is killed). One must obey one's commanding officer, even if one's commanding officer is Lieutenant/Colonel/General Scheisskopf. Group must approve all actions, even though it is ex-P.F.C. Wintergreen who makes the crucial decisions. It is easy to see through these early definitions, but their implicit horror is not *felt* until Heller finally offers the old woman's unanswerable definition: "Catch-22 says they have a right to do anything we can't stop them from doing." It is this simple, and this terrible. Catch-22 means whatever "they" want it to mean. It has no real content—Yossarian doubts that it even exists—and is therefore open to any "necessary" revisions. There is only one catch, as Heller remarks, but this particular catch is more than sufficient.

These variations on the theme of "Catch-22" illustrate inexact repetition, for each definition is occasioned by a different context. Heller's treatment of Snowden is closer to the technique of the soldier in white sequence. Snowden is introduced on the same comic note which sounds throughout the early chapters, as Yossarian cries out at an "educational" session, "where are the Snowdens of yesteryear?" Thereafter, as Richter remarks, the death of Snowden is repeatedly invoked with greater and greater portentousness, although the scene of his death is never rendered in sufficient detail to bring home its ultimate horror. The allusions to this scene become more and more explicit until Yossarian finally discovers the real meaning of Snowden's death. This meaning is captured in the late passage which reveals Snowden's "secret":

Yossarian was cold, too, and shivering uncontrollably. He felt goose pimples clacking all over him as he gazed down despondently at the grim secret Snowden had spilled all over the messy floor. It was easy to read the message in his entrails. Man was matter, that was Snowden's secret. Drop him out a window and he'll fall. Set fire to him and he'll burn. Bury him and he'll rot like other kinds of garbage. The spirit gone, man is garbage. That was Snowden's secret. Ripeness was all.

The effect here is cumulative, for this passage climaxes Heller's many references to the event (Snowden truly dies throughout *Catch-22*, as Heller once said) and therefore seems to sum up what the whole novel is about.

Heller's repetitions are of a piece, despite their varying degrees of exactness. Each is structured as a kind of trap, for the reader is encouraged to laugh at characters and events which ultimately seem quite serious. This was precisely what Heller intended: "I tried consciously for a comic effect juxtaposed with the catastrophic. I wanted people to laugh and then look back with horror at what they were laughing at." This statement suggests that the novel's repetitive structure is as calculated as the effect of chaotic formlessness; indeed, it suggests that the very meaning of the novel depends on this peculiar strategy which requires that the later episodes be the same as the earlier ones. The novel's meaning must be defined more precisely. First, however, there is the question of whether the many repetitions have been woven into a coherent narrative. (pp. 144-45)

It is true, of course, that the first 300 pages do seem to wander back and forth across the novel's "action." The repetitions seem to occur randomly and in varying number; although Snowden's death recurs nine or ten times, many of the repetitions occur only once. Certainly there is no obvious pattern here. Nonetheless, Heller has rightly spoken of the novel's "recurring and cyclical structure," a structure which involves blocks of narrative as well as individual sequences. Each of the soldier in white scenes marks the emergence of a new narrative movement or section. This is obviously the case in chapter 1 but much less clear with the later scenes. Chapters 17 and 34 are not abrupt, clear-cut transitions.... [The] book's "darkest" movement begins with the bombing of the undefended village in chapter 30, not the return of the soldier in white in chapter 34. Yet it remains an odd coincidence that the soldier in white scenes occur in chapters 1, 17, and 34. Such symmetry is not definitive, but it does point to the modulation of effect that occurs every 150 pages in the novel.

Heller has in fact divided *Catch-22* into three parts. In the first third of the book (chapters 1-16), he manages to introduce most of the important episodes prior to Yossarian's final insurrection. Without exception these events are treated as comic or absurd; even Aarfy's complacency and Snowden's death (however briefly) are rendered as humorous. During the second section (chapters 17-33), signalled by the return of the soldier in white, the action of the novel hardly moves forward at all. Although time technically passes and Cathcart requires more missions, no major event occurs for almost 200 pages. Instead, Heller goes back over the same materials, repeating (more or less often) the major episodes. Richter and Burhans see no structural difference between this section and the first sixteen chapters because the early comic mood still prevails. As in the second soldier in white scene, however, this section modulates into a more serious tone. The senior officers are made to seem more brutal (especially in their treatment of the chaplain, whose plight is rendered much more realistically); Milo emerges as a still-comic but rather more troubling influence, as Heller provides richer accounts of Milo's dealings with Germany and other fertile "markets"; Nately's quarrel with the old man in Rome is a good deal more disturbing than its earlier counterpart, Clevinger's arguments with Yossarian; and the death of Snowden is described in greater and more vivid detail. These differences are relatively minor, but collectively they create the effect that Richter describes as a gradual darkening of tone.

The third and final section (chapters 34-42) takes its definitive tone from the reappearance of the soldier in white in chapter 34, though it may indeed begin with the bombing of the undefended village. As others have noticed, these final chapters differ in that time does seem to advance. Here there are almost no flashbacks and the crucial narrative events are "new": Kid Sampson's grisly death, the interrogation of the chaplain, the disappearance of Orr, the search for Nately's whore's kid sister, Yossarian's insurrection. Often, however, the new events climax repetitions which have been built up throughout the book—the interrogation of the chaplain, for example, or Aarfy's murder of the maid, or Milo's failure to help Yossarian. And the one flashback is of major importance, the final rendering of the death of Snowden. The new events, harder to brush aside as comical but deeply related to what has come before, trigger Yossarian's reconsideration of his experiences on Pianosa. The result is the novel's climactic event, Yossarian's desertion.

To speak of the novel's *climactic* event is again to assert that the meaning of *Catch-22* emerges artfully out of what appears to be structural chaos. Heller's suppression of a normal fictional chronology paves the way for the numerous repetitions necessary to his unusual strategy. These repetitions take the form of individual sequences which invariably move from the comic to the terrible, from an amused acceptance of life's ironies to a belated recognition that most of these ironies are in fact human creations and utterly unacceptable. The acceptance and recognition referred to are of course the reader's, for *Catch-22* is ultimately a rhetorical fiction in which Heller argues against the all too general acceptance of just such moral monstrosities as he depicts everywhere in his novel. The repetitions crucial to Heller's argument are organized into three narrative "cycles" to permit the book as a whole, not just the individual repetitions, to render events that first seem harmlessly comic, then cause for some concern, and finally the basis for a genuine moral protest.

Properly understood, the structure of *Catch-22* points up the need for an effective moral response to the injustices of the modern social order. Yossarian's decision to desert is climactic because it represents such a response. His

decision affirms that effective moral protest *is* possible, however hopeless such protest may seem and however painful the immediate consequences may be. Unfortunately, Yossarian's decision has often been misconstrued. Everyone sees that his desertion is the novel's climax, but the controversial nature of this act has obscured its structural connection with the repetitions preceding it. To reassess Yossarian's decision is to see how it brings Heller's fictional argument to the right conclusion.

Yossarian's desertion has been condemned or praised for the wrong reasons. It has been condemned as the irresponsible behavior of a hedonist, someone who believes that “the only real horror is physical pain and ultimately death”; it has been praised as the act of someone who understands that “one's own substance is infinitely more precious than any cause.” Both views suggest that Yossarian is consistently cynical concerning spiritual values or “causes”; whether he is a coward or the only sane man on Pianosa, he apparently acts at the end on the same perceptions he has insisted upon throughout the book. In fact, however, Yossarian changes toward the end of *Catch-22*. In the final fifty pages he moves away from some of the views he espoused earlier, including the view that one's own substance is infinitely more precious than any cause. Indeed, Yossarian deserts because he finally realizes there *are* greater horrors than physical pain and death.

The inadequacy of Yossarian's earlier point of view is implied by the two illusions he must finally discard. The first illusion is that he can afford to tolerate the evil done by such “delightful” characters as Milo. As Heller has said, Yossarian's tolerance for Milo reinforces “the theme of insanity accepted without any eye-blinking”; it suggests that Yossarian is like all too many of the other men in his basic “indifference” to what happens to others. James Mellard [see Further Reading list] argues that Yossarian rejects Milo as early as the scene in which he sits naked in the tree overlooking Snowden's funeral, but there is a major difference between questioning Milo, as Yossarian does there, and rejecting Milo, which Yossarian only comes to do in chapter 39. Quite simply, Yossarian does not *act* on what he knows about Milo until the end of the book, thus exposing his second, related illusion: that there is nothing he can do about the system and its representatives. Yossarian sometimes appears to protest the system's injustices, as when he stands naked to get his medal; but his protests are symbolic gestures and do not alter his basic acceptance of the system's constraints. Yossarian is simply wrong when he assumes that he can do nothing about the “madness” of his world. When he deserts, Yossarian finally does something that will affect the system: he ceases to serve it.

Many readers have questioned whether Yossarian's desertion is a responsible action, but there can be little doubt that Heller intended it as such. On one of his charts Heller wrote, “In making the decision to desert [sic], Yossarian accepts the responsibility he now knows he has to the other men. As he says, he is not running *away* from his responsibilities, but *to* them.” Heller also remarks that “Nately's whore becomes a symbol of [Yossarian's] guilt and responsibility for never intervening in the injustices he knows exist everywhere,” a point he repeats when he says, “although [Yossarian] has done nothing to cause Nately's death, he's done nothing to prevent it.” At the end Yossarian finally acts to help prevent the deaths of all the Natelys, for if he had accepted Cathcart's “deal” everyone else would have continued to fly more missions without protest. Yossarian's protest on behalf of others as well as himself lies behind Heller's descriptions of *Catch-22* as “a liberal book” and “an optimistic novel with a great deal of pessimism in it.” At the time he wrote *Catch-22* Heller believed that evil is very much a human creation, the product of human institutions which need to be recognized for what they are and changed. Thus his insistence that Yossarian becomes a viable model only when he has “moved off dead center finally and begun to act for himself.”

It should now be clear that Yossarian's ultimate values are not “purely physical.” Yossarian does pursue physical pleasures throughout the novel and never denies their importance, but his primary concern is not survival at any price. Indeed, Yossarian would simply have accepted Cathcart's “deal” if survival had been his first priority. After all, Cathcart offers him the opportunity to return to the United States and pose as a war hero, a *live* war hero. Instead, Yossarian opts for desertion, which endangers him but offers the other men the right kind of moral example. Yossarian is motivated not by a selfish instinct for survival but by his final understanding of Snowden's “secret.” One must say *final* because a first version of this “secret” is offered in an earlier rendering of Snowden's death: “That was the secret Snowden had spilled to him on the mission to Avignon—they were out to get him.”

Like everything depicted in the first 300 pages, this is a misleading half-truth that betrays Yossarian's early emphasis on survival per se. Much later, Snowden's "secret" is significantly redefined. Man is matter, and if he is dropped out a window he will fall, if he is set fire to he will burn, if he is buried he will rot. But man is evidently something more than matter, for Heller adds, "the spirit gone, man is garbage. That was Snowden's secret. Ripeness was all." It is the spirit which counts, not "matter." To capitulate to Cathcart would be to kill the spirit, to deny the distinction between man and other forms of "garbage." Yossarian cannot do this even though it would insure the physical safety he has pursued so zealously, for he has finally learned the secret embedded in the entrails of all the Snowdens: men and women must protest against the forces that would render them garbage or they are indeed nothing more than droppable, burnable, buryable matter.

Yossarian's belated "conversion" is crucial because it is presented as exemplary. It climaxes an experience very like the reader's, as both come to feel something like shame for their indifference to the deaths of Clevinger, Snowden, and the others, and their amused tolerance for such figures as Aarfy, Milo, and the senior officers. Indeed, Yossarian acts on behalf of all those who first laughed at the novel's "absurdities" but who came to look back with horror at what they were laughing at. This confirms that the novel's repetitions are the key to its meaning. Heller once said that he meant to expose "the contemporary regimented business society," and he does just that in his brilliant satiric caricatures of the senior officers, representative professional and business figures, and such remarkable examples of the capitalistic spirit as Milo and ex-P.F.C. Wintergreen. Yet Heller's portrait of this world did not require the elaborate system of repetitions that underlies the novel's complex structure. Heller added this feature because he wanted to make his crucial point about widespread complicity in the regimented business society. He wanted people to laugh and then look back with horror at what they were laughing at. They had to recoil from the *same* events they first laughed at because otherwise they might be tempted to trace the novel's darkening tone to changing circumstances within the fiction. Heller could not permit this, for it is essential to his argument that the world of *Catch-22* has *always* been what it is only belatedly perceived to be. By rendering the same events in such radically different ways, Heller encourages people to see that their problems involve more than life's destructive circumstances. Even more crucial is their failure to recognize these circumstances for what they are and to act accordingly. This is why one of the funniest of all novels is finally not very funny at all, for Heller arrests his reader's laughter and exposes the complacent beliefs he has shared with Yossarian.

Indeed, the greatness of *Catch-22* lies in Heller's ability to convert the tenets of a conventional liberalism into the informing ideas of a powerfully moving fable. Like such novelists as Theodore Dreiser, John Steinbeck, and Richard Wright, Heller dramatizes the crippling effects of modern society on the sensitive individual as in his portraits of Yossarian, Dunbar, the chaplain, Major Major, Clevinger, Nately, and Snowden. Yet he goes beyond his liberal predecessors to show that the enemy is not just the corporations and their authorities (in this case the military and its commanding officers). "They" are indeed amoral if not immoral; "they" are Korn, Black, Cathcart, Scheisskopf, Dreedle, Peckem, Aarfy, Wintergreen, and Milo. In a very real sense, however, M & M Enterprises is not the enemy, for someone like Milo only has the power he is allowed to have. As Pogo once remarked, memorably if ungrammatically, "we have met the enemy, and it is us." *Catch-22* is a masterful confirmation of Pogo's insight. (pp. 146-51)

#### Source Citation (MLA 7<sup>th</sup> Edition)

Merrill, Robert. "The Structure and Meaning of 'Catch-22'." *Studies in American Fiction* 14.2 (Autumn 1986): 139-152. Rpt. in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Ed. Roger Matuz and Cathy Falk. Vol. 63. Detroit: Gale Research, 1991. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 23 Mar. 2014.

**Title: Joseph Heller: At War with Absurdity**

Author(s): Jean E. Kennard

Publication Details: MOSAIC 4.3 (Spring 1971): p75-87.

Source: *Contemporary Literary Criticism Select*. Detroit: Gale. From *Literature Resource Center*.

Document Type: Critical essay

Heller's vision of the horrifying absurdity of service life in World War II is, as the constant references in [*Catch-22*] to its wider implications indicate, merely an illustration of the absurdity of the human condition itself. *Catch-22* reflects a view of the world which is basically that of Jean-Paul Sartre and the early Albert Camus. The world has no meaning but is simply there; man is a creature who seeks meaning. The relationship between man and his world is therefore absurd; human action having no intrinsic value is ultimately futile; human beings have no innate characteristics. Reason and language, man's tools for discovering the meaning of his existence and describing his world, are useless. When a man discovers these facts about his condition he has an experience of the absurd, an experience which Sartre calls "nausea." But there are innumerable contemporary novels which are fundamentally Existentialist. What is interesting about *Catch-22* is that the experimental techniques Heller employs have a direct relation to Existentialist ideas; they are an attempt to "dramatize" his view of the human condition rather than merely describe it. (pp. 75–6)

The question of authority is central to the novel. God certainly no longer runs the organization, though He lingers on in certain distorted images some characters still have of Him. (p. 76)

Duty is now owed to such vague abstractions as patriotism and free enterprise, which have become exactly the tyrannous absolute values that Camus talks of in *L'Homme révolté*. The old man in the brothel in Rome exposes patriotism as illogical: "Surely so many countries can't all be worth dying for".... Capitalism and free enterprise lead Milo to bomb his own unit and he excuses his action with the old slogan that what is good for money-making interests is good for the country. "Incentive" and "private industry" are "goods" and their evil results cannot change anyone's attitude towards them.

Such assertive values as patriotism, then, are merely words, words which have become divorced from meaning. Heller's awareness of the separation of word and idea, which Sartre talks of, is apparent in several places in the novel. General Peckem who "laid great, fastidious stress on small matters of taste and style" ... has lost all sense of what words *mean* and writes his directives in a manner which combines impeccable grammar and trite adjectives. Language no longer communicates but serves to confuse things further. When Yossarian makes a game of censoring letters, declaring one day "death to all modifiers," the next declaring a "war on articles" and finally blacking out everything except "a", "an", and "the", he finds that it creates "more dramatic interlinear tensions ... and in just about every case ... a message far more universal".... (pp. 76–7)

*Catch-22* is, of course, Heller's illustration of the irrational nature of the world. Any attempt to argue logically and reasonably ends in a paradox; one reaches that point where thought reaches its confines, which Camus talks of...

*Catch-22* is composed of rules which apparently operate to make it impossible for a man to find a reasonable escape from them. They do not exactly contradict each other, but are continually inadequate to the occasion and always disregard the individual human life. They are intended to impose order upon chaos, but life so exceeds these rules that they only serve in the end to create more chaos. One of the clearest examples of this is the firemen who leave the blaze they are attempting to control at the hospital in order to obey the rule that they must always be on the field when the planes land. ...

Since the rules do not work, anything may happen. There is no reasonable justice. (p. 77)

In a world where philosophical ideas, traditional morality and reason itself are apparently useless, all man has to hold on to is his own physical body. The value which Heller supports throughout the novel is that of human existence, the individual human life.... There is no talk of love or even of close friendship in the book; the pleasures of life are purely physical—food, liquor, sex—just as the only real horror is physical pain and ultimately death. “In an absurd universe,” writes Frederick Karl, “the individual has the right to seek survival ; ... one's own substance is infinitely more precious than any cause” [see *CLC*, Vol. 1].

The view of the world in *Catch-22*, then, is the same view as that presented by Sartre and Camus , and the aware individual in this world comes to very much the same realizations about it as do Roquentin and Mathieu in Sartre's novels. He realizes that there is no ultimate reason for doing one thing rather than another.... (p. 78)

The aware individual realizes, too, that there is “no way of really knowing anything.” ... [We] learn that there are always two widely divergent official reports for every event that takes place.

When everything is questionable, it is a small step to questioning one's own identity.... Names, uniforms, marks of identification are all a man has in Heller's world to assure him of his own identity.

Yossarian and the chaplain, probably the two most aware characters in the novel, both have experiences of the absurd very similar to those of Roquentin in Sartre 's *La Nausée*. The chaplain experiences “terrifying, sudden moments when objects, concepts and even people that the chaplain had lived with all his life inexplicably took on an unfamiliar and irregular aspect that he had never seen before and made them seem totally strange.” ... Yossarian's experiences also have the effect of alienating him from his environment, but are less concerned with the strangeness of objects than with their profusion and gratuitousness. (pp. 78–9)

Heller, like Sartre and Camus , is not however totally pessimistic. Valid action is possible for the individual; there is even the suggestion of a sane universe which Sweden may represent. The hope of Sweden is perhaps a false note in the novel, but it is important to remember that it is only a possibility, a state of mind rather than a real place. Although Orr has, at least reportedly, reached Sweden, ironically by pretending to be “crazy,” Yossarian at the end of the novel does not really expect to get further than Rome.

In a discussion of the techniques which Heller has employed to convey his view of the world it would be easy to ignore the obvious. *Catch-22* is a very funny book. It would be easy to ignore this because, in spite of the laughter it evokes, the overall impression is as much of horror as of humor. The laughter evoked is not of the kind that unites us warmly in sympathy with the human race as we enjoy its foibles, but rather that which serves to alienate us by exposing the bitter ironies of existence. Nevertheless I believe that humor is a way of understanding the techniques of the novel. Laughter, as Bergson suggests, is caused by incongruity, by a frustrating of our expectations of a certain result, and it is a failure to fulfill certain of the reader's expectations which is the link underlying the so-called absurd techniques of the novel. (p. 79)

[When] the reader is confronted with the juxtaposition in one sentence of references to several unrelated events about which he so far knows nothing, we cannot say that it is not like life. Actually it is; we often overhear conversations which are meaningless to us because we do not understand to whom or to what they refer. Yet we are surprised to find it in a novel. In this instance, obviously, it is our expectations about the nature of the novel, not about life, which are not being fulfilled. This is, I think, the key to defining the absurd techniques. In some way each of them plays against and frustrates the reader's expectations of a novel, the illusions, one could say, that he has about the nature of the novel. ...

It is obvious that the narrative technique of *Catch-22* does not fulfill the expectation of the reader for a continuous line of action in which one episode is related to the next, at the very least chronologically, and in which events are life-size and probable. Situations which are initially familiar enough to the reader may be gradually exaggerated to the point of absurdity. (p. 80)

The futility of all human action is suggested by Heller in the number of times events or conversations are repeated so that the reader, like Yossarian, eventually has the feeling that he has “been through this exact conversation before.”...

The narrative technique serves to confuse the reader about time and to destroy any certainty he may have about what has taken place, thus creating in him the same doubts about reality that Yossarian experiences and that Sartre and Camus speak of. Heller employs three basic methods of disrupting the expected chronological flow of the action. The first is a simple one. He often makes a statement about an event which has taken place and deliberately omits the clarification which the statement requires. Therefore many of the major events in the novel are referred to two or three times, sometimes in increasing detail, before the full account is given....

The second device creates confusion in the mind of the reader by presenting him with two apparently contradictory statements about the same event before providing a clarification. (p. 81)

The third method is an extension of the second: contradictory accounts are given of an event and no solution is provided. The reader is left uncertain of the truth and in some instances asked to believe the incredible. ...

As well as confusing the reader about the time or exact nature of the events in the novel, Heller also frequently shocks him by adopting attitudes to objects or situations opposite to the expected ones. By introducing these unexpected attitudes in a very casual way, he not only challenges the traditional value system but suggests through his tone that nothing unusual is being said, thus doubling the shock effect....

Heller's methods of characterization, like his narrative techniques and his use of tone, depend upon a frustration of the reader's expectations. (p. 82)

There are two possible ways ... of failing to fulfill a reader's expectations about character in a novel: one is to change the character's identity, provide multiple personalities for the same name, or one name for various figures, and thus disturb the reader's whole conception of identity, as do John Barth and Samuel Beckett ; the other is to provide caricatures, figures who are no more than puppets and in whom the reader is not expected to believe. Heller occasionally appears to experiment with the first method, as, for example, in the scene where Yossarian pretends to be a dying officer whose parents fail to recognize him, or where Yossarian and Dunbar discover they can change identities by changing hospital beds. But although in these scenes the characters experience doubts about their identities, the reader is always quite clear about the identity of the character and no real confusion is created.

Most of the characters in *Catch-22* are, however, caricatures, cardboard figures who are distinguished for the reader by their particular obsessions. Each lives with an illusory view of the world which isolates him and makes the results of his actions very different from his expectations. Each is, in his way, the unaware individual who, as Camus illustrates in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, believes that he can operate in the world as he imagines it and that his actions will achieve their purpose. (p. 83)

Most of these characters are introduced to us in deceptively explanatory paragraphs which appear to sum up their personalities in a few adjectives, but which really provide the reader with irreconcilably opposite traits.... Gradually the characters become increasingly absurd as the personality traits of each are seen to be one, an obsession. It is believable that one of Milo's moral principles was that “it was never a sin to charge as much as the traffic could bear,” ... but by the time his activities have taken over Europe and North Africa in one vast syndicate and he has bombed his own men, he has become little more than a personification of greed. Scheisskopf's enjoyment of parades may be initially credible but his childish delight in calling off parades that have never been scheduled is not. These characters may have names, parents, heredity, professions and faces, but we cannot very long sustain the illusion that they are “real” human beings.



The most important device a novelist has to suggest an irrational world is, of course, the treatment of reason itself. Reasoning, in *Catch-22*, invariably ends up in some variation of Catch-22; apparent logic is used to destroy sense. The reader is led into following an argument which progresses logically, but which arrives at an absurd conclusion. (pp. 83–4)

Sentence structure is used throughout *Catch-22* to add to the reader's confusion about characters and events and contributes to the impression of an irrational world. The novel is full of complex sentences in which the individual clauses and phrases are not related to each other or are related at a tangent.... (p. 84)

Frederick Karl describes Yossarian as “the man who acts in good faith to use Sartre 's often-repeated phrase,” and claims that all Yossarian “can hope to know is that he is superior to any universal force (man-made or otherwise), and all he can hope to recognize is that the universal or collective force can never comprehend the individual.” He goes on to call Yossarian's final decision “a moral act of responsibility,” “reflective, conscious and indeed free,” while the other characters are not free, he considers, because they are unaware. This is all true; it is obvious that Yossarian is a man of whom Sartre would approve, but it does not go far enough. Certainly awareness is a prerequisite to the right action as Heller sees it. It is proved useless to be simply good like the chaplain or merely innocent like Nately, unable to detach himself from his father's values. And certainly Yossarian acts in freedom, but in the name of what? I do not think that it is only in the name of his own individual life, although this is his starting point. What most critics have overlooked is that Yossarian changes, is the one character who learns from his experience in the novel.

At the beginning of *Catch-22* Yossarian attempts to exercise his reason to escape from the situation he is in. “Everywhere he looked was a nut, and it was all a sensible young gentleman like himself could do to maintain his perspective against so much madness.” ... He soon learns, however, that everyone considers everyone else “a nut” and that when he attempts to argue logically against flying more missions he comes up against Catch-22. He realizes that to use reason in the face of the irrational is futile and that the way out of Catch-22 is simply to rebel, in Camus ' sense, to take a stand, to say “no.” He refuses to fly any more missions. This is, of course, the way the problems of Catch-22 have been solved earlier in the novel: the young officers solve the problem of the “dead man” in Yossarian's tent simply by throwing out his possessions; Major de Coverley solves the “great loyalty oath” Catch, which is preventing the men from getting their meals, simply by saying “ ‘Give everybody eat.’”...

Until the final episode in the book, Yossarian is the great supporter of individual right.... “That men would die was a matter of necessity; which men would die, though, was a matter of circumstance and Yossarian was willing to be a victim of anything but circumstance.” ... Yossarian indeed realizes, as Karl suggests, “that one must not be asked to give his life unless everybody is willing to give his,” but by the end of the novel he has come to realize the logical extension of this concept, that, if what is true for one must be applied to all, then one cannot attempt to save one's own life at the expense of others. One cannot give tacit acceptance to other people's deaths, without giving everyone the same right over oneself. (pp. 85–6)

Yossarian is given the chance to save his own life if he lies about Colonels Cathcart and Korn to their superior officers. He will, in accepting the offer, probably act as an incentive to his fellow officers to fly more missions in which many of them may be killed. He is given a chance, in Camus ' terms, to join forces with the pestilences. After accepting the offer he is stabbed by Nately's whore and realizes perhaps that by joining those who are willing to kill, he has given everyone the right to kill him. If one rebels, one must rebel in the name of a value which transcends oneself, human life is the value for which Yossarian rebels and runs off to Rome, but it is not merely his own individual existence. (p. 86)

If we look back at the novel in the light of what Yossarian's decision reveals, we can see that Heller has presented us with a series of character studies of selfish men and has shown how their actions for their own gain have involved death for others. They are all like Major Major's father, “a long-limbed farmer, a God-fearing, freedom-loving, rugged individualist who held that federal aid to anyone but farmers was creeping socialism.” ... Milo, another

“rugged individualist,” bombs his own men; Colonel Cathcart, aiming at impressing the Generals to obtain promotion, keeps raising the number of missions his men must fly. To claim as Karl does, that these characters “are not really evil in any sinister way” but just “men on the make” is inaccurate. The “man on the make” is evil to Heller, since he gains at the expense of others and asks them to do what he is not willing to do himself.

The last ten pages or so of the novel may be sentimentally handled, as critics have suggested, but they present the key to a full understanding of what Heller is saying. In an irrational and gratuitous world the aware individual has to rebel, but his rebellion must be a free act and in the name of a value which can be applied to all men and does not limit their freedom.

The style of *Catch-22*, like the narrative technique, the tone and the methods of characterization, serves to frustrate the reader's expectations.... The reader expects to be drawn into the world of a novel, then, but *Catch-22*, while initially providing him with familiar human situations, ends by rejecting him. The novel itself becomes an object which provides the reader with the experience of the absurd, just as the trees provide it for Roquentin in Sartre's *La Nausée*. After attempting to relate his preconceptions about novels, his “illusions” about the form, to this novel, the reader is finally stripped of them. *Catch-22* simultaneously shows man's illusory view of the world, employs techniques to suggest the irrational nature of the world and is itself an object against which the truth of its statements may be tested. (pp. 86–7)

**Source Citation** (MLA 7<sup>th</sup> Edition)

Kennard, Jean E. "Joseph Heller: At War with Absurdity." *MOSAIC* 4.3 (Spring 1971): 75-87. Rpt. in *Contemporary Literary Criticism Select*. Detroit: Gale, 2008. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 23 Mar. 2014.

**Title: Pathological communication patterns in Heller's 'Catch-22.'**

Author(s): Michael Moore

Source: *ETC.: A Review of General Semantics*. 52.4 (Winter 1995): p431. From *Literature Resource Center*.

Document Type: Article

Copyright : COPYRIGHT 1995 Institute of General Semantics

In Schizophrenia, the foremost psychotic disorder, patients suffer from thought and communication breakdown. One of the theories concerning the development of schizophrenia ties it to patterns of pathological communication within the family (Bateson et al., 1956). Weakland (1960, pp.374-375) listed the following combination of processes, characteristic of schizophrenogenic interactions: 1) Involvement in an intense relationship where accurate discrimination of the message has vital importance for the individual; 2) the other person expresses two orders and one of these denies the other; 3) the individual cannot react to the contradictory messages (cannot metacommunicate). The protagonist of Joseph Heller's novel *Catch-22* (1961) finds himself in an extended relationship teeming with these characteristics. Indeed, I regard the entire novel as an inventory of the major pathologies of thought and communication. (For a related list of the communicational maneuvers which characterize schizophrenic transactions, see Palazzoli et al., 1978, p.25). I shall illustrate several such pathologies by quotes from the text.

## Not Listening

The simplest case of not listening and perhaps the most frequently encountered one, results from self-centeredness:

"Doe Daneeka wasn't interested. 'You think you've got troubles?' he wanted to know. 'What about me?'" (p.40).

A more extreme type of not listening is disconfirmation, that is, neither a confirmation nor an outright rejection:

"'Darling, we're going to have a baby again,' she would say to her husband. 'I haven't the time,' Lieutenant Scheisskopf would grumble petulantly. 'Don't you know there's a parade going on?'" (p.72).

"'I don't want any special dishes. I want exactly what you serve all the other officers... Is that clear?' 'Yes, sir,' said Milo. 'That's very clear. I've got some live Maine lobsters hidden away that I can serve you tonight with an excellent Roquefort salad and two frozen eclairs... Will that do for a start?' 'No.' 'Yes, sir. I understand.' For dinner that night Milo served him broiled lobster with excellent Roquefort

salad and two frozen eclairs" (p.103).

In the following example disconfirmation by the total disregarding of the other's communication (and, in this case, of the other's apparently lethal condition) hits the reader directly in the eye. One must know, of course, that Aarfy has perfect hearing:

"`Aarfy, help me,' he pleaded almost weeping. `I'm hit! I'm hit!' Aarfy turned slowly with a blind, quizzical grin. `What?' `I'm hit, Aarfy! Help me!' Aarfy grinned again and shrugged amiably. `I can't hear you,' he said. `Can't you hear me?' Yossarian cried incredulously, and he pointed to the deepening pool of blood... `I'm wounded! Help me, for God's sake! Aarfy, help me!' `I still can't hear you,' Aarfy complained tolerantly... `What did you say?'" (p.297).

#### Not Meaning What You Say

Those who do not mean what they say remove the very foundation of communication, for the naive audience tends to react to the manifest meaning of their messages. More sophisticated collocutors find themselves in a dilemma: When should they act upon the obvious meaning, and when should they reverse it?

"`I want someone to tell me,' Lieutenant Scheisskopf beseeched them all prayerfully. `If any of it is my fault, I want to be told.' `He wants someone to tell him,' Clevinger said. `He wants everyone to keep still, idiot,' Yossarian answered. `Didn't you hear him?' Clevinger argued. `I heard him,' Yossarian replied. `I heard him say very loudly and very distinctly that he wants every one of us to keep our mouths shut if we know what's good for us'" (p.71).

"Captain Black was deeply disillusioned by this treacherous stab in the back... `Oh, it doesn't bother me a bit,' he responded cheerfully to everyone who came to him with sympathy" (p.120).

"`Everything is going to be all right,' his visitors tell the dying men."

(p.190).

### Denying Reality

One of the ego defense mechanisms, denial of reality, plays an important role in several psychopathologies, including borderline personality organization (instability, drastic mood shifts and behavior problems, disturbance in basic identity) and narcissistic character disorder (an extreme sense of self-importance, a constant need of attention, and a lack of caring for others).

"`Aarfy, are you insane?' Yossarian was almost speechless.

`You killed a girl. They're going to put you in jail!' `Oh, no,'

Aarfy answered with a forced smile. `Not me. They aren't going to put good old Aarfy in jail. Not for killing her.'

`But you threw her out the window. She's lying there dead in the street.' `She has no right to be there,' Aarfy

answered. `It's after curfew'" (pp.427-428).

His doctors have encased the "soldier in white" of the following quote in bandages; the only communication with him occurs through the thermometer placed in a hole covering his mouth. His fellow patients accuse the nurse of his death:

"...if she had not read the thermometer and reported what she had found, the soldier in white might still be lying there alive..." (p.171).

### Absolute Literalness

Though it has a comic, "who's on first," quality, absolute literalness has the characteristics of a deadly ploy, with schizophrenic ingredients. Divesting words and expressions of their extra meanings renders communication sometimes grotesque, often impossible:

"`I'd give everything I own to Yossarian,' Milo persevered gamely in Yossarian's behalf. `But since I don't own everything, I can't give everything to him, can I?'"

(p 384).

"`In what state were you born?' `In a state of innocence'"

(p.440).

"John Milton proved fruitful in still one more respect. He was versatile, and Major Major soon found himself incorporating the signature in fragments of imaginary dialogues. Thus, typical endorsements on the official documents might read, 'John, Milton is a sadist or 'Have you seen Milton, John?' One signature of which he was especially proud read, 'Is anybody in the John, Milton?'" (p.100).

"'Now, where were we? Read me back the last line.' "'Read me back the last line,'" read back the corporal, who could take shorthand. 'Not my last line, stupid!' the colonel shouted. 'Somebody else's.' "'Read me back the last line,'" read back the corporal. 'That's my last line again!' shrieked the colonel, turning purple with anger. 'Oh, no, sir,' corrected the corporal. 'That's my last line. I read it to you just a moment ago'" (p.80).

#### Mistaking the Map for the Territory

The dictum, "The map is not the territory," suggests the frequent lack of differentiation between signifier and signified. We can trace back several types of irrational thought processes (such as reification and superstitious thought, see Moore, 1981) to this confusion. In Heller's novel the fighter pilots violate this principle when they treat the ribbon on the map as the cause, rather than the effect of their dangerous bombing missions (1):

"In the middle of the night Yossarian knocked on wood, crossed his fingers, and tiptoed out of his tent to move the bomb line over Bologna" (p.123).

The Army regards Doc Daneeka's name appearing on the pilot's manifest as more real than his physical presence:

"'You're dead, sir,' one of his two enlisted men explained... You've probably been dead all this time and we just didn't

detect it... The records show that you went up in McWatt's plane to collect some flight time.

You didn't come down in a parachute, so you must have been killed in the crash."

Another instance of the alleged superiority of documents over human communication:

"'I'm not Fortiori, sir,' he said timidly. 'I'm Yossarian.' 'You're who?' 'My name is Yossarian, sir. And I'm in the hospital with a wounded leg.' 'Your name is Fortiori,' Major Sanderson contradicted him belligerently. 'And you're in the hospital for a stone in your salivary gland.' 'Oh, come on, Major!' Yossarian exploded. 'I ought to know who I am.' 'And I've got an official Army record here to prove it,' Major Sanderson retorted"

(p.307).

Levels of reality become confused in the Major Major Major business (p.88), as well, when an IBM computer promotes him to the rank of Major.

The following three pathological communication patterns (circular reasoning, non sequitur, and contradictions) defy the rules of logic and undermine critical thinking.

#### Circular Reasoning

"How can he see he's got flies in his eyes if he's got flies in his eyes?" (p.47).

"'Don't contradict me,' Colonel Cathcart said. 'We're all in enough trouble.' 'I'm not contradicting you, sir.' 'Yes you are. Even that's a contradiction'" (p.142).

"'You won't marry me because I'm crazy, and you say I'm crazy because I want to marry you?'" (p.164).

"'I didn't steal it from Colonel Cathcart!' 'Then why are you so

guilty, if you didn't steal it?' 'I'm not guilty!' 'Then why would we be questioning you if you weren't guilty?'" (p.393).

#### Non Sequitur

"The chaplain had sinned, and it was good... Common sense told him that telling lies and defecting from duty were sins. On the other hand, everyone knew that sin was evil and that no good could come from evil. But he did feel good; he felt positively marvelous. Consequently, it followed logically that telling lies and defecting from duty could not be sins" (p.372).

"'Bribery is against the law, and you know it. But it's not against the law for me to make a profit, is it? So it can't be against the law for me to bribe someone in order to make a fair profit, can it? No, of course not!'" (p.272).

#### Real and Apparent Contradictions

"Yossarian stopped playing chess with him because the games were so interesting they were foolish" (p.9).

"The Texan turned out to be good-natured, generous and likable. In three days no one could stand him" (p.10).

"Yossarian was sorry to hear they had a mutual friend. It seemed there was a basis to their conversation after all" (p.12).

"'I won't take the valve apart now,' he said, and began taking it apart" (p.319).

The contradictions often have a blatantly paradoxical character (2):

"How many winners were losers, successes failures, rich men poor men? How many wise guys were stupid? How many happy



endings were unhappy endings? How many honest men were liars, brave men cowards, loyal men traitors...?" (pp.421-2).

"There were usually not nearly as many sick people inside the hospital as Yossarian saw outside the hospital..." (p.170).

"Racial prejudice is a terrible thing Yossarian. It really is. It's a terrible thing to treat a decent, loyal Indian like a rigger, kike, wop or spic" (P.45).

"Look at our own recent history. Italy won a war in Ethiopia and promptly stumbled into serious trouble. Victory gave us such insane delusions of grandeur that we helped start a world war we hadn't a chance winning. But now that we are losing again, everything has taken a turn for the better, and we will certainly come out on top again if we succeed in being defeated" (p251).

The atmosphere has additional schizophrenogenic ingredients. Yossarian reacts to a crazy world ("Everywhere he looked was a nut...", p.21), where double binds rule:

"...the only people permitted to ask questions were those who never did" (p.36).

"She ordered Yossarian to get right back into his bed and blocked his path so he couldn't comply" (p.300).

Word salads add to the schizoid atmosphere: "'Who is Spain?' 'Why is Hitler?' '...How was trump at Munich?' 'Ho-ho beriberi'" (p.35).

And, of course, at last we encounter the major Catch. The paradox inherent in the twisted logic of Catch-22 type regulations seems analogous to schizophrenogenic double binds:

"Orr was crazy and could be grounded. All he had to do

was ask; and as soon as he did, he would no longer be  
crazy and would have to fly more missions" (p.47).

## Conclusion

Toward the end of Heller's book its protagonist has a schizophrenic breakdown: His hallucinations have distinct paranoid ingredients (pp.406-407, 439). What a befitting result of a history of communication pathologies! While the author has taken some poetic license in letting Yossarian develop schizophrenia within a few months' military service, he has amply illustrated the crucial importance of semantic hygiene for mental health.

## NOTES

(1.) Compare with a Letter to the Editor, in Time magazine, August 8, 1994, p.3, concerning the Soccer World Cup: "In Germany some people sat in front of their TV screen shouting commands to players who were thousands of kilometers away."

(2.) These resemble some of Villon's ballads (cca. 1460; see Bonner, 1960). One, subtitled Of Counter-truths contains the following lines: "There is no joy except in sickness,/ nor truth outside the theater,/ nor coward like a knightly man,/ nor grimmer sound than melody..."

## REFERENCES

- Bateson, G., Jackson, D. D., Haley, J. & Weakland, J. H. (1956). Toward a theory of schizophrenia. *Behavioral Science*, 1, 251-264.
- Bonner, A. (1960). *The Complete Works of Francois Villon*. New York: McKay.
- Heller, J. (1970). *Catch 22*. New York: Dell. (Original year of publication, 1961)
- Moore, M. (1981). An edited collection of superstitions collected in Hungary in the 1870's. National Auxiliary Pub. Serv., Document # 03856.
- Palazzoli, M. S., Boscolo, L., Cecchin, G. & Prate, G. (1978). *Paradox and Counterparadox*. New York: Jason Aronson.
- Weakland, J. H. (1960). The "Double-Bind" hypothesis of schizophrenia and three-party interaction. In D. D. Jackson (Ed.), *The Etiology of Schizophrenia*. New York: Basic Books.

Dr. Michael Moore is a member of the Department of Education in Science and Technology at Technion-Israel Institute of Technology at Haifa, Israel. He has been a visiting Professor at the University of California, Davis.

Abstract: Joseph Heller's novel 'Catch-22' clearly depicts situations that would induce schizophrenia in people. Schizophrenia develops where individuals are subjected to pathological communication patterns, such as when people do not listen to each other, or disregard communication, or deny reality. Other dysfunctional communication methods shown in the novel include using literal meanings, circular reasoning, double binds and contradictions.

### Source Citation (MLA 7<sup>th</sup> Edition)

Moore, Michael. "Pathological communication patterns in Heller's 'Catch-22.'" *ETC.: A Review of General Semantics* 52.4 (1995): 431+. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 23 Mar. 2014.

**Title:**Dramatic Tension in *Catch-22*

Author(s): Louis Hasley

Publication Details: The Midwest Quarterly 15.2 (Jan. 1974): p190-197.

Source:*Novels for Students*. Ed. Diane Telgen. Vol. 1. Detroit: Gale, 1998. From *Literature Resource Center*.

Document Type:Critical essay

Full Text: COPYRIGHT 1997 Gale Research, COPYRIGHT 2007 Gale, Cengage Learning

Full Text:

In the following essay, Hasley explores how Heller uses a dramatic contrast between humorous and harrowing incidents to heighten the horror of the novel.

A book that was widely acclaimed a classic upon its appearance and that has suffered no loss of critical esteem deserves many critical examinations. Now, more than ten years after its first publication in 1961, Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* may justify another attempt to fix certain qualities in it more precisely than has yet been done. My special concern here is the pattern of dramatic tension between the preposterous events of the story and the built-in dimension of laughter. It is part of the pattern that the laughter, intermittent and trailing away just before the end, contributes to a catharsis in which the grimness of war provides the dominant memory.

It is part of the book's greatness that its hilarious force comes so near to a stand-off with the grimness. Heller has achieved his declared purpose, mentioned elsewhere, not to use humor as a goal, but as a means to an end. "The ultimate effect is not frivolity but bitter pessimism," he said (*Time*, Mar. 4, 1966). And yet the alternating play of humor and horror creates a dramatic tension throughout that allows the book to be labeled as a classic both of humor and of war. It is not "a comic war novel" despite the fact that comedy and war are held more or less in solution, for the war is *not* comic but horrible—this we are not allowed to forget. The laughter repeatedly breaks through the tight net of frustration in which the characters struggle only to sink back as the net repairs itself and holds the reader prisoned in its outrageous bonds.

Right here the unskillful reader may protest that *Catch-22* is a comic war novel. For who could believe that war is conducted as the novel pictures it—realism blandly ignored, motivations distorted beyond recognition, plausibility constantly violated. Even conceding that war is not peace, that the conditions of any war are abnormal, could any serious work stray so far from what we know of human character?

The answer lies in an artistic strategy relating to the thesis of the novel, which, put simply, is this: War is irrational; and the representative things that happen in war are likewise irrational, including man's behavior in war. This thesis is an underlying assumption, a *donnée*, illustrated not documentarily but imaginatively throughout the book. It is, in terms of the book, unarguable—you take it or leave it—for the author has seen to it that all the evidence favors his thesis. What he asks, and it is everything, is that his readers accept the credibility of his characters and their actions, if not at face value, then as wild, ingratiating exaggeration that nevertheless carries the indestructible truth that war is irrational.

It would be an uncritical reader indeed who would accept at face value the greater part of what is related in this hilarious, harrowing hook. For the absurd, the ridiculous, the ludicrous, are pyramided, chapter after chapter, through the lengthy book's entire 463 pages.

Starting with the opening page in which Captain Yossarian, the book's non-hero, is goldbricking in a hospital bed and censoring letters which he as censoring officer signs "Washington Irving" and sometimes with variant whimsicality "Irving Washington," to the last page in which "Natelly's whore" makes a final but unsuccessful attempt to stab Yossarian because he had told her of Natelly's death—through all this the predominance of the *outré* in events and behavior is unchallenged. One such episode has Yossarian appearing naked in formation to be pinned with the Distinguished Flying Cross by General Dreedle. Another has Lieutenant Milo Minderbinder

directing his buddies in the bombing of their own camp and leaving the runways and the mess halls intact so they could make a proper return landing and have a warm snack before retiring. But it is useless to enumerate. “So many monstrous events were occurring that he [the chaplain] was no longer positive which events *were* monstrous and which *were* really taking place.” That quoted sentence can stand as characterizing the events of the entire book.

The effect of such wildly imagined actions is an artistic triumph in which the reader perceives the author's attitude as overtly playful in expression and managed event, this being the only way, or at least a meritoriously acceptable way, of facing the fundamental inhumanity and irrationality of war. The author begins with an *absurdum*, though the reader does not always recognize it as such, and makes it into a further and unmistakable *reductio ad absurdum*. It thus becomes unabashed hyperbole; its literary costume is familiar to one who has read Cervantes, or Rabelais, or Swift, or the American humorists of the Old Southwest and their principal heir, Mark Twain, who could be as darkly pessimistic as is the author of *Catch-22*.

Heller's comic genius, however, does not come to rest in the mere contrivances of exaggeration, daft though the exaggerations are. No part of the whole texture of objectively rendered dialogue, narrative, description, and introspective characterization fails to enhance the total artistry. Of random examples, let us cite first a bit of comic circularity—not hard to find—such as this one in which the staff psychiatrist, Major Sanderson, questions Yossarian:

“Hasn't it ever occurred to you that in your promiscuous pursuit of women you are merely trying to assuage your subconscious fears of sexual impotence?”

“Yes, sir, it has.”

“Then why do you do it?”

“To assuage my fears of sexual impotence.”

Even in a paragraph of only ten lines, Heller can blend a telling bit of narrative with characterization and cynical reflective analysis:

Nately was a sensitive, rich, good-looking boy with dark hair, trusting eyes, and a pain in his neck when he awoke on the sofa early the next morning and wondered dully where he was. His nature was invariably gentle and polite. He had lived for almost twenty years without trauma, tension, hate, or neurosis, which was proof to Yossarian of just how crazy he really was. His childhood had been a pleasant, though disciplined, one. He got on well with his brothers and sisters, and he did not hate his mother and father, even though they had both been very good to him.

Verbal humor crops up with considerable frequency in *Catch-22*. Yossarian, for example, said he “would rather die than to be killed in combat.” A certain apartment maid in Rome (who wore lime-colored panties) “was the most virtuous woman alive: she laid for *everybody*, regardless of race, creed, color or place of national origin.... “Often the irony is both humorous and grim, as in Corporal Whitcomb's form letter for Colonel Cathcart's self-serving and hypocritical condolence:

Dear Mrs., Mr., Miss. or Mr. and Mrs.: Words cannot express the deep personal grief I experienced when your husband, son, father or brother was killed, wounded or reported missing in action.

Much of the verbal humor still more acutely serves Heller's almost constant preoccupation with characterization, as when Colonel Cathcart adjures his men to attend a U.S.O. show.

“... Now, men, don't misunderstand me. This is all voluntary, of course. I'd be the last colonel in the world to order you to go to that U.S.O. show and have a good time, but I want every one of you who isn't sick enough to be in a hospital to go to that U.S.O. show right now and have a good time, and *that's an order!*”

Some indication of the mixture of horror and hilarity appears in examples already cited. But not enough to show how the cumulus of horror maintains itself against the pull of hilarity and finally establishes its ascendancy. Reappearing periodically throughout is Yossarian's memory of the bombing flight over Avignon when Snowden is mortally wounded and Yossarian as bombardier bandages a thigh wound of Snowden only to find that "whole mottled quarts" of Snowden's guts fall out when Yossarian rips open the injured man's flak suit. Memory of this experience recurs to Yossarian at intervals throughout the book, but it is so metered that it is only in the second to the last chapter that the horrible trauma experienced by Yossarian is brought home to the reader, helping to provide a clinching explanation of his refusal to obey any further flying orders and his decision to desert.

But there are other notable horror scenes of a different kind. In a chapter called "The Eternal City," Yossarian wanders through the bombed ruins of Rome compassionately in search of a twelve-year-old girl who has been made homeless. It is a dark night of the soul, a nightmare of the bizarre and the surrealistic typified by a blue neon sign reading: "TONY'S RESTAURANT. FINE FOOD AND DRINK. KEEP OUT." As Yossarian tramps the streets in the raw, rainy night,

A boy in a thin shirt and thin tattered trousers walked out of the darkness on bare feet.... His sickly face was pale and sad. His feet made grisly, soft, sucking sounds in the rain puddles on the wet pavement as he passed, and Yossarian was moved by such intense pity for his poverty that he wanted to smash his pale, sad, sickly face with his first and knock him out of existence because he brought to mind *all* the pale, sad, sickly children in Italy.... He made Yossarian think of cripples and of cold and hungry men and women, and of all the dumb, passive, devout mothers with catatonic eyes nursing infants outdoors that same night with chilled animal udders bared insensibly to that same raw rain.

Other similarly pathetic sights whip up in Yossarian a tide of frenzied anguished questions.

The night was filled with horrors, and he thought he knew how Christ must have felt as he walked through the world, like a psychiatrist through a ward full of nuts, like a victim through a prison full of thieves.

Another dramatically moving horror scene centers on an unfortunate character whose name, given him by a father with a bizarre sense of humor, is Major Major Major. By the whim of an IBM machine he is vaulted from private to major in four days; later he is arbitrarily named squadron commander by Colonel Cathcart, whereupon Major Major Major Major is dogged by ineptitude, loneliness, and ostracism. In a desperate attempt at fellowship he joins in an outdoor basketball game, first disguising himself with dark glasses and a false moustache. The scene that follows gradually takes on the ritual killing of a scape-goat reminiscent of Shirley Jackson's brilliant horror story, "The Lottery."

The others pretended not to recognize him, and he began to have fun. Just as he finished congratulating himself on his innocent ruse he was bumped hard by one of his opponents and knocked to his knees. Soon he was bumped hard again, and it dawned on him that they did recognize him and that they were using his disguise as a license to elbow, trip and maul him. They did not want him at all. And just as he did realize this, the players on his team fused instinctively with the players on the other team into a single, howling, bloodthirsty mob that descended upon him from all sides with foul curses and swinging fists. They knocked him to the ground, kicked him while he was on the ground, attacked him again after he had struggled blindly to his feet. He covered his face with his hands and could not see. They swarmed all over each other in their frenzied compulsion to bludgeon him, kick him, gouge him, trample him. He was pummeled spinning to the edge of the ditch and sent slithering down on his head and shoulders. At the bottom he found his footing, clambered up the other wall and staggered away beneath the hail of hoots and stones with which they pelted him until he lurched into shelter around a corner of the orderly room tent.

Of course, Yossarian is no King Lear whose single tragic fault causes him to fall from on high. He lies, goldbricks, fornicates, cheats at gambling, even for a time goes about naked. Yet he is more sinned against than sinning. The military organization, commanded by a vain, selfish publicity seeking, ambitious, greedy and unscrupulous

authoritarian, has persecuted his squadron beyond endurance by periodically raising the number of missions required before a flier can be sent home. The number starts at twenty-five and moves by stages up to eighty. It is only after Yossarian points out that he has now flown seventy-one “goddam combat missions” that his rebellion becomes final and he refuses to fly any more missions.

The central actions of Yossarian are nevertheless not to be seen as those of a strong-minded individualist. The entire sense of the book is that war, in itself irrational, makes everyone connected with it irrational. There are no good guys in this book. Just about everyone of the approximately two score characters of some importance is called crazy at one time or another. Not only can Nature be hostile (“There was nothing funny about living like a bum in a tent in Pianosa between fat mountains behind him and a placid blue sea in front that could gulp down a person with a cramp in a twinkling of an eye”); the Deity is likewise roundly vituperated by Yossarian. In an adulterous visit to Lieutenant Scheisskopf's wife (on Thanksgiving!) he argues with her about God.

“And don't tell me God works in mysterious ways,” Yossarian continued.... “There's nothing so mysterious about it. He's not working at all. He's playing. Or else he's forgotten all about us. That's the kind of God you people talk about—a country bumpkin, a clumsy, bungling, brainless, conceited, uncouth hayseed.... What in the world was running through that warped, evil, scatological mind of His when He robbed old people of power to control their bowel movements? Why in the world did he ever create pain?”

Even the chaplain is not immune from what seems the universal corruption of war. He

had mastered, in a moment of divine intuition, the handy technique of protective rationalization, and he was exhilarated at his discovery. It was miraculous. It was almost no trick at all, he saw, to turn vice into virtue and slander into truth, impotence into abstinence, arrogance into humility, plunder into philanthropy, thievery into honor, blasphemy into wisdom, brutality into patriotism, and sadism into justice. Anybody could do it; it required no brains at all. It merely required no character. With effervescent agility the chaplain ran through the whole gamut of orthodox immoralities....

The responsive reader of *Catch-22* is thus made to walk a tight-rope as he leans first to riotous humor and then tips to the side of black tragedy. There is much in the book that illustrates Charlie Chaplin's dictum that humor is “playful pain.” “The minute a thing is overtragic,” says Chaplin, “it is funny.” And he is supported emotionally, if not logically, by W. C. Fields, who said: “I never save anything funny that wasn't terrible. If it causes pain, it's funny; if it doesn't it isn't.” The humor in *Catch-22*, we are forced to conclude, is only secondary. Where Heller comes through in unalleviated horror is where the message lies. The book's humor does not alleviate the horror; it heightens it by contrast.

It is not therefore the disinterestedness of pure humor that we find in *Catch-22*. It does not accept the pain of life with wry resignation. Instead it flaunts in bitterness the desperate flag of resistance to the wrongs of this life— wrongs suffered, not by the wholly innocent, but by the insufficiently guilty. And the wrongs are perpetrated not only by unscrupulous, ignorant, and power-hungry men, but also by the inscrutable Deity.

#### Source Citation (MLA 7<sup>th</sup> Edition)

Hasley, Louis. "Dramatic Tension in *Catch-22*." *The Midwest Quarterly* 15.2 (Jan. 1974): 190-197. Rpt. in *Novels for Students*. Ed. Diane Telgen. Vol. 1. Detroit: Gale, 1998. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 23 Mar. 2014.

**Title:He Took Off: Yossarian and the Different Drummer**

Author(s): Walter R. McDonald

Publication Details: The CEA Critic 36.1 (Nov. 1973): p14-16.

Source:*Novels for Students*. Ed. Diane Telgen. Vol. 1. Detroit: Gale, 1998. From *Literature Resource Center*.

Document Type:Critical essay, Excerpt

In the following excerpt, McDonald places Yossarian's character within the tradition of "American rebels" such as Huck Finn, Hester Prynne, and Ike McCaslin.

Yossarian of Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* has been called a coward, an amoralist, a cop-out, a traitor. Others see him as a casualty, an individualist, a prophet of love, the last soul true to himself. The first readers object primarily because he "takes off," claiming this is artistically, patriotically, or morally no way to end the book.

Yet Yossarian gives up safety, rewards, and a hero's homecoming when he flees. He is in fact following an American tradition—escaping, or trying to escape, in order to save himself from absurdity, compromise, or despair. In what Hemingway called the source of modern American literature, *Huckleberry Finn*, Twain's puckish hero (after surviving a river's length of encounters with man's hideous inhumanity to man) also "lights out" for the Indian Territory. The similarity is striking when we realize that Yossarian leaves rather than be comfortably tamed and returned as a hero to the civilized States (for the glory of Colonels Cathcart and Korn) and that Huck leaves to avoid the comfortable (but to him confining and compromising) civilized family life.

There is in American fiction a tradition of heroes who "take off," or who renounce ease, or who deny themselves pleasure in quest of individual rather than conventional fulfillment. This radical individualism—absurd, perhaps, or ascetic—shows Yossarian at the end of the story to be not a cop-out, but one of many rebels in a tradition of rebels.

Thoreau set the tradition's example and gave it voice in the concluding chapter of *Walden*: "If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away." Such a code romanticizes Natty Bumppo, for example, who refuses the comfort of the Effinghams' cabin in *The Pioneers*, preferring the free wilderness (and see his Lone Ranger solitude in the other Leatherstocking tales, as well).

In a spirit of free renunciation and penitence, Hester Prynne resumes her symbol in *The Scarlet Letter*, long after anyone requires it. Hawthorne speculates that Pearl would "most joyfully" have entertained her mother in England in regal comfort. But Hester hears a drum no others hear.

However much we may think Lambert Strether's ethics are precious and overstrained at the end of *The Ambassadors*, we recognize in him another American individualist denying himself pleasure (marriage to Miss Gostrey) in order to save his concept of honor.

As if reading Thoreau's urging as a command ("Enjoy the land, but own it not," from "Baker Farm" in *Walden*), Faulkner's Ike McCaslin renounces his birthright to save himself and, he hopes, the land, which has been cursed by slavery. Repeatedly, his cousin McCaslin Edmonds urges him to inherit the land and demands a reason for his refusal. The involuted Part IV of "The Bear" is Ike's attempt to explain the call of the different drummer he hears. Finally, even the temptation of his bride's sweet body is not enough to break his resolve, and Ike becomes uncle to half a county and father to none.

With Frederick Henry the tradition begins to involve patriotism rather than mere personal gain. But since it is the Italian Army, most readers easily allow him to take his farewell to Italian arms without rebuke. His desertion seems hardly that, justified as it is by the absurd circumstances. Justified also by this American code of individualism, he deserves to escape, deserves better surely than the tragic end, his farewell to Catherine Barkley's English arms.

Because life in those times played such dirty tricks on individuals, we even allow an American like Jake Barnes to exile himself in Europe after the war (*The Sun Also Rises*). Life in exile may not have been as simple as a hero's return; it may, in fact, have required a certain asceticism for Jake Barnes to endure the sad desperate crowd of his lost generation. But it is his solitary choice, preferring his troubled priestly life among the lost to the sterile homecoming of young Krebs in "Soldier's Home."

But it is Yossarian himself, literally marching backwards with his gun on his hip, who is the fullest example of Thoreau's man marching to a different drummer. At this same time of rebellion, he refuses to fly any more missions because, as the final blow, Nately has been killed. It is this point, it would seem, which critics would object to, rather than his actual desertion. For it is at this time, not when he runs away, that Yossarian quits the fight.

When he refuses to fly, his superiors have two choices: to court-martial him or to let it pass. Seeing a chance for profit to themselves, Colonels Cathcart and Korn offer him a deal: as Yossarian summarizes for the chaplain, "They'll let me go home a big hero if I say nice things about them to everybody and never criticize them to anyone for making the rest of the men fly more missions." It is such a "good deal" that Colonel Korn says, "You'd have to be a fool to throw it all away just for a moral principle."

But that is exactly what Yossarian does. The passage is Heller's *donnée*, the stipulation of the rules the rest of his fiction is to be played by. The "deal" is what takes Yossarian out of the war. He does not desert from combat; he takes off from a "luxurious, privileged existence" that he would "have to be a fool" to turn down.

At first, even though he knows it would be "a pretty scummy trick" he would be playing on the men in his squadron who would have to remain, Yossarian leaves his new "pals" the colonels exhilarated. "He was home free: he had pulled it off; his act of rebellion had succeeded; he was safe, and he had nothing to be ashamed of to anyone."

But after Nately's whore stabs him and as he is recovering in the hospital, Yossarian cannot go through with "the odious deal." The colonels have even compounded the lie by writing in the official report that Yossarian has been stabbed while heroically saving his colonels from a Nazi spy. Yossarian's "moral principle" which Colonel Korn has scorned interferes: "Let them send me home because I flew more than fifty missions," Yossarian said, "and not because I was stabbed by that girl, or because I've turned into such a stubborn son of a bitch."

But by now he is trapped: as Major Danby explains, "If you don't go through with the deal, they're going to institute court-martial proceedings as soon as you sign out of the hospital." If he goes through with the deal, he violates his moral principle, dupes his country, and betrays his fellows. If he refuses and is court-martialed, he risks becoming another Billy Budd, whom Captain Vere martyred to preserve discipline. For if Yossarian is found innocent, "Other men would probably refuse to fly missions, too ... and the military efficiency of the unit might be destroyed. So in that way," Major Danby concludes, "it *would* be for the good of the country to have you found guilty and put in prison, even though you *are* innocent."

Here, Heller is carefully plotting, ethically walking the thin line between anarchy and individualism, and even doing so conservatively. Yossarian is in an absurd dilemma; he is faced with preposterous alternatives. Given such a situation, he invents a compromise: he does not want "to destroy the military efficiency of the unit"; neither does he want to be the pampered bellwether of the colonels' flock. So he says, "I can run away.... Desert. Take off. I can turn my back on the whole damned mess and start running." Even before he hears that Orr has arrived in Sweden, Yossarian has decided to light out for the Territory. Orr's escape merely injects more hope into him.

Yet it is no life of ease Yossarian seeks in Sweden now, as he once has yearned for. Before things come to a crisis, Sweden has represented Elysium to him: Yossarian "would certainly have preferred Sweden, where the level of intelligence was high and where he could swim nude with beautiful girls with low demurring voices." But Sweden



then “was out of reach,” and at the story's close it may still be. Though the movie makes Yossarian ridiculous, rowing hopelessly away in his tiny raft for Sweden, the novel's Yossarian is more realistic:

“You'll never get there,” Major Danby warns. “You can't run away to Sweden. You can't even row.

”But I can get to Rome,” Yossarian says, “if you'll keep your mouth shut when you leave here and give me a chance to catch a ride.”

Rather than swimming nude with beautiful girls, Yossarian's goal is more spartan now, to live accordingly to his “moral principle” or “responsibilities”—to march not in Scheisskopf's parade nor in Cathcart's and Korn's, but to the beat of his own drummer—specifically, at first, to rescue Nately's whore's kid sister from the hell of “The Eternal City” and save her life by taking her with him to Sweden.

He has chosen the harder way. Although he refuses the martyrdom of a court-martial, he has also renounced the free trip home to a hero's welcome. “Your conscience will never let you rest,” Danby warns, but Yossarian laughs: “God bless it... I wouldn't want to live without strong misgivings.” Yossarian has not bought a ticket to safety, either. The last time we see him, that latter-day fury Nately's whore slashes out at him. “The knife came down, missing him by inches.”

“He took off,” therefore, running not away from but toward his own honor. Like many in American fiction before him, by rebelling, he denies himself the easy, comfortable way. When I asked Heller if he was conscious of this radical tradition of renunciation, he replied in a letter dated February 8, 1971:

I conceived the ending to my book first and wrote the book; and it was only in the years since that I dwelled upon it as being in an old tradition of alienation and renunciation. To the protagonists you mention [see above, Huck, Hester, Ike, etc]. can be added Ahab, Bartleby, Hightower (again Faulkner), to name a few.

The difference, though, is that Yossarian does not make good his escape, but only tries, and that this attempt is illegal and turns him into a fugitive, thereby instituting a struggle between him and the authorities in the environment he repudiates. It may have been an easy way out for me, but definitely not for him, who could have more safely and comfortably accepted the offer of the Colonels to turn him into a hero and send him home. My purpose was to raise a question rather than answer one; his action institutes a conflict rather than evades one. And if his mood is one of elation at the end, it is mainly because he has moved off dead center finally and begun to act for himself.

Yossarian, marching backwards by himself and then renouncing a hero's comfortable role, is our clearest dramatization of Thoreau's man who steps to the beat of a different drummer. In Heller's intention, Yossarian is not copping out, is not taking the easy way, but rather “moved off dead center finally.” And in his peculiar world of horror and absurdity, he is ironically a “traditional” American rebel, like so many other cultural mavericks who have made their separate, principled peace.

**Source Citation** (MLA 7<sup>th</sup> Edition)

McDonald, Walter R. "He Took Off: Yossarian and the Different Drummer." *The CEA Critic* 36.1 (Nov. 1973): 14-16. Rpt. in *Novels for Students*. Ed. Diane Telgen. Vol. 1. Detroit: Gale, 1998. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 23 Mar. 2014.

**Title: Catch-22: Overview**

Novel, 1961

Author(s): Eric Solomon

American Writer ( 1923 - 1999 )

Source: *Reference Guide to American Literature*. Ed. Jim Kamp. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Detroit: St. James Press, 1994. From *Literature Resource Center*.

Document Type: Work overview, Critical essay

Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* is essentially a postmodern war novel. It recreates and mocks, simultaneously, the tradition of ironic and grim war fiction that culminated in the separate peace sought by Ernest Hemingway's characters. And Heller's book deconstructs all wars and establishments: ostensibly about World War II, but written after Korea, and published during Vietnam, *Catch-22* parodies the American business, religious, and political hegemonies that the military echelons reflect.

The humor of *Catch-22* appeared to Philip Toynbee to resemble a Marx brothers film as Kafka might have conceived it. The novel is apocalyptic and lunatic, illogical and post-Christian. And very funny. A work also of black humor, *Catch-22* has a hero in Yossarian who not only perceives the system's venality and corruption but ultimately makes an existential choice for freedom. To leave the insane war—where men are suborned to bomb their own units for business purposes, where pilots are sacrificed for their superior officers' records, where the good and the innocent become victims—is not to desert in the face of the enemy but to refuse to help this enemy within; as Walt Kelly's Pogo remarked, "We have met the enemy, and he is us."

Heller has admitted that his novel is "about the contemporary regimented business society" and satirizes oil claims, public relations, psychiatry, racism, loyalty oaths, and security trials as well as larger American idealistic constructs such as sportsmanship, success, patriotism, and abstract morality: the Protestant Ethic and the American Dream. Heller writes of war in terms of contemporary philosophy, raising matters of time's indeterminacy, phenomenology, alienation, and illogic. Like a Swift, Heller apologizes for his soldiers' revolts because in the absurd world of war, the men revolt against what is revolting. And Heller's vision is such that in doing so they convert revolutionary anger into sardonic comedy.

There are four basic character divisions in this novel that traces a bomber squadron's missions during the Italian campaign; their drunken and sex-obsessed leaves in Rome; their absorption into the business enterprises of the madly corrupt mess officer Milo Minderbinder who cheats and steals to the motto "What's good for M & M Enterprises is good for the country," even to the extent of arranging to bomb American bases and steal their morphine; their attempts to stop the ever-increasing numbers of missions to be flown before the pilots can go home; their disappearances and deaths. First there are the purely corrupt, ambitious men who use their fellow humans: the Colonels Cathcart and Korn, Generals Dreedle and Peckham, and officers who accept the system, Cargill, Scheisskopf, Black, Whitcomb, Aarfy; they are all, like Aarfy, murderers. At the opposite end of the spectrum are the outsiders, good men trapped in and mostly wiped out by this system: Natel, Chief White Halfoat (whose family history as a Native American is appallingly awful and humorous), Hungry Joe, McWatt, Danby, Dunbar, the Chaplain. Yossarian is one of them, and momentarily their leader, for in refusing to fly any more missions, he saves the remnant. While the third character group is predatory, too, each is so outrageously comic and so self-aware of rapacity, that the individuals are only evil in the sense of a Groucho Marx or W.C. Fields persona: Milo, ex-Pfc Wintergreen, Doc Daneeka, even Clevinger, Major Major Major, and Major \_\_\_\_\_ de Coverly. Fourth, there are those who carry the novel's serious subtext, the dead who never were alive in the book: the unknown soldier Mudd who did not officially get on the roster, Kraft, the invisible soldier in the hospital, and, crucially, Snowden, whose ghastly death in Yossarian's arms over Avignon recurs again and again in a T.S. Eliot-like litany that raises the overwhelming question, What is Man? (Just matter, entrails). In categories of their own are the women nurses who are only objects of lust, and Orr, the wise squirrel of a pragmatist who tries to teach Yossarian how to crash and escape by raft to Sweden.

In many important ways the novel is deeply religious as it moves from portraying Yossarian as a mock-savior eschewing false gods of violence and business—Heller stated that he was depicting business society "against the background of universal sorrow and inevitable death"—to showing his paranoia become valid when he makes a terrible night journey through a devastated Rome where "The night was filled with horrors, and he thought he knew how Christ must have felt as he walked through the world...." Heller asserts that the comic world of American bomber squadrons is a function of the tragic world of beaten children and murdered whores. Thus, Yossarian's refusal to be tempted by the Colonels who would save him at the price of betrayal of his fellow pilots, his commitment to himself, to the young sister of a dead whore, to Sweden—freedom—turn *Catch-22* from a war novel of despair to a universal fiction that ends in hope, in the admission of the protagonist's humanity, into a leap for freedom and responsibility (just as Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* will rise from underground), in the acceptance of contingency and a war against war. All this and marvelous comic writing too make *Catch-22* one of the great war novels of this century.

**Source Citation** (MLA 7<sup>th</sup> Edition)

Solomon, Eric. "Catch-22: Overview." *Reference Guide to American Literature*. Ed. Jim Kamp. 3rd ed. Detroit: St. James Press, 1994. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 23 Mar. 2014.

**Title:An overview of *Catch-22***

Novel, 1961

Author(s):Darren Felty

American Writer ( 1923 - 1999 )

Source:***Literature Resource Center***. Detroit: Gale. From *Literature Resource Center*.

Document Type:Work overview, Critical essay

[Felty is a visiting instructor at the College of Charleston. In the following essay, he discusses how *Catch-22* explores larger issues of social order and individual responsibility within the context of a war novel.]

As most critics recognize, *Catch-22* offers more than a critique of World War II, despite its focus on the destructiveness of warfare. Instead, Joseph Heller employs this setting to comment upon the condition of mid-century American life. His satire targets not just the military but all regimental institutions that treat individuals as cogs in a machine. His central character, Yossarian, recognizes the insanity of social institutions that devalue human life and tries to rebel against them, first in minor ways and finally through outright rejection of them. Yet Yossarian is not, as some have contended, an immoral or non-idealistic man. He is a man who responds to human suffering, unlike characters such as Colonel Cathcart and Milo Minderbinder, who ignore the human consequences of their actions. Yossarian's perceptions conflict with most everyone else's in the book. Thus, his encounters with people inevitably lead to mutual misunderstandings, to Yossarian labelling everyone else crazy, and to a sense of pervasive lunacy. This lack of rationality creates wild comedy in the novel, but, ultimately, it drives the book toward tragedy.

Yossarian sees the conflicts of the war in purely personal terms. To him, his enemies, which include his superior officers, are trying to murder him. Those who believe in the war cannot comprehend his reduction of its conflicts to personal assaults. The young airman Clevinger, for instance, refuses to accept Yossarian's views that people are trying to kill him:

“No one's trying to kill you,” Clevinger cried.

“Then why are they shooting at me?” Yossarian asked.

“They're shooting at *everyone*,” Clevinger answered. “They're trying to kill everyone.”

“And what difference does that make?”

Clevinger was already on the way, half out of his chair with emotion, his eyes moist and his lips quivering and pale... There were many principles in which Clevinger believed passionately. He was crazy.

Yossarian reduces the war to its barest elements and refuses to see himself as one component in a wider cause, which befuddles the “principled,” patriotic Clevinger. Yet Yossarian does not reject the aims of the war (stopping the spread of Nazism); he reacts the way he does because he sees that the aims have been perverted. The men no longer serve a cause; they serve the insane whims of their superiors.

Men with authority in the novel do not focus on a common goal (which Clevinger believes), nor do they recognize the humanity of those they command. They value only the power they hold in the military (or the medical, religious, or commercial professions). To gain more power, these men corrupt and exploit the founding principles of the institutions they serve. For instance, instead of fighting to stop totalitarian regimes that would eliminate freedom, the military itself has imposed totalitarian rule. To maintain it, they utilize “*Catch-22*,” a rule that they can change to fit their needs and that keeps the men trapped in their current roles. “*Catch-22*” grows more sinister as the novel progresses. It begins as a comic absurdity reflecting the essential powerlessness of those in the squadron since it keeps them flying the additional missions Colonel Cathcart orders:

There was only one **catch** and that was **Catch-22**, which specified that a concern for one's own safety in the face of dangers that were real and immediate was the process of a rational mind. Orr [who wants to keep flying] was crazy

and could be grounded. All he had to do was ask; and as soon as he did, he would no longer be crazy and would have to fly more missions.

When Yossarian attempts to go over Colonel Cathcart's head to division headquarters, the rule simplifies further. Despite the fact that he has flown the number of missions needed to complete his tour of duty, as specified by Cathcart's superiors, he still must obey Cathcart because "**Catch-22**" "says you've always got to do what your commanding officer tells you to." The soldiers, who see no alternative to these rules, accept them. Thus, the soldiers (except Yossarian and a scant few others) are insane because they ascribe to insane principles. They see not reality but the "reality" constructed by those who manipulate them. And they die, not to stop the Germans, but to fulfill the ambitions of their superiors and to maintain the institutions that abuse them.

Of even wider significance than military authoritarianism, however, is Milo Minderbinder's capitalistic fervor and the excesses he commits in its name. Through Milo, Heller condemns the unscrupulous expansion of commercial interests that exploit people for profit or even reduce them to the status of commodities. Milo himself acts not out of maliciousness, but out of blindness. He recognizes only the right to profit, which forms his very morality. Milo embodies an American ideal. He is an individualist who believes in initiative, hard work, and opportunism, and these principles make him rich. But he is also the ultimate organization man. He forms the M & M Enterprises syndicate on the premise that every man owns a share. Thus, by supposedly incorporating everyone into his ventures, he monopolizes the black market and ensures the cooperation of those he manipulates. His vision proves destructive, however, because it excludes any notion of humanity. For instance, he contracts with the Allies and the Germans to both bomb and defend a bridge at Orvieto, and he even bombs his own squadron to make money to offset his losses in the Egyptian cotton market. When Yossarian criticizes him for his actions at Orvieto, Milo replies, "Look, I didn't start this war.... I'm just trying to put it on a businesslike basis. Is anything wrong with that? You know, a thousand dollars ain't such a bad price for a medium bomber and a crew." Here, Milo unwittingly reveals his purely economic intelligence, which equates men with machinery. His agreements also betray his notions of loyalty: neither the Allies nor the Germans are his enemies because they both belong to the syndicate. He remains loyal only to his economic empire, in which the sanctity of a contract means more than the sanctity of life.

The catastrophic results of the callous misuse of power in the novel find their most wrenching expression in the "Eternal City" chapter. This chapter loses all vestiges of comedy and becomes a nightmare vision of brutality run amok. Yossarian wanders through Rome encountering a succession of horrors and thinks, "Mobs with clubs were in control everywhere." He also learns the essence of "**Catch-22**": "**Catch-22** says they have a right to do anything we can't stop them from doing." Power is all. And the power to control belief is even more valuable than the power to kill, since, as Yossarian realizes, "**Catch-22**" works because people *believe* that it exists when it actually does not. Like Milo Minderbinder's capitalistic rationalizations, it serves to "bind" people's minds. Therefore, they accept the abuses heaped upon them and the world turns absurd.

In such a world, Colonel Cathcart can keep raising missions and Milo can brazenly bomb his own squadron. Hence, the restraints governing commerce and the military have completely collapsed. Survival becomes all that matters, and one must look to save himself because the institutions that supposedly support him actually look to cannibalize him. Yossarian learns this lesson most forcefully through the death of Snowden, an event that haunts him throughout the book but which he only fully understands at the novel's end. When Snowden's insides spill out as Yossarian is trying to save him, Yossarian discovers a secret: "Man was matter.... Bury him and he'll rot like other kinds of garbage. The spirit gone, man is garbage." He graphically encounters human vulnerability and comprehends the essential need to understand another's humanity, to see his "spirit," not to view him as only an expendable object.

Thus, the more Yossarian understands the abuses of those who wield power, and the more he sees people suffer because of these abuses, the more stubborn he becomes in his refusal to participate in the war. When he finally decides to desert from the military altogether, he does not run from the defense of principles of freedom, individuality, and justice. He, like his dead comrades, defended those ideals. His only recourse besides desertion are

imprisonment or accepting Cathcart and Korn's deal to become their "pal." Both options ultimately defend Cathcart and Korn's actions and spur others to continue fighting. If imprisoned, Yossarian implicitly validates his superiors' "right" to punish him. If he accepts their deal, he would advocate murder, since men are now dying not for the cause but to help maintain their superiors' hold on authority. As Victor J. Milne contends, Yossarian's flight affirms "that an individual has no right to submit to injustice when his action will help to maintain an unjust system." Instead, Yossarian tries to flee the system itself. However futile this effort, he refuses to sanction corrupt officials and become, like them, an exploiter of others for personal gain, thereby preserving his own moral character.

**Source Citation** (MLA 7<sup>th</sup> Edition)

Felty, Darren. "An overview of *Catch-22*." *Literature Resource Center*. Detroit: Gale, 2014. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 23 Mar. 2014.

**Title: From Avignon to *Catch-22***

Author(s): David M. Craig

Publication Details: War, Literature, and the Arts 6.2 (Fall-Winter 1994): p27-54.

Source: *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*. Ed. Linda Pavlovski. Vol. 151. Detroit: Gale, 2004. From *Literature Resource Center*.

Document Type: Critical essay

[(essay date fall-winter 1994) *In the following essay, Craig discusses the influence of Heller's World War II experience as a pilot over Avignon on the writing of Catch-22.*]

Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

--Dylan Thomas

Joseph Heller's experiences as a bombardier over Avignon during World War II were catalytic to his career as a writer. In the experiences over Avignon, *Catch-22* begins. These experiences did not spark Heller's desire to be an author, for that had burned unabated since childhood.<sup>1</sup> Nor did the reaction the Avignon experiences occasioned occur quickly, regularly, or consciously. Rather, Avignon provided in highly compressed form Heller's essential subject--human mortality--and Avignon engaged his imagination in a way that this subject could eventually be given expression. No *Catch-22* reader is likely to forget the result, the Snowden death scene over Avignon or the secret of Snowden's entrails: "Man was matter ... Drop him out a window and he'll fall. Set fire to him and he'll burn. Bury him and he'll rot like other kinds of garbage" (429-430). While the evidence for the importance of Avignon is unmistakable, many pieces of the story are unknown or missing today. Heller's public accounts of these experiences come long after he has begun to feature Avignon in his writing, and, predictably, these accounts partake of the persona of Joseph Heller, the author of *Catch-22*.<sup>2</sup> The accounts are couched in jokes that distance the experience from the man.

Heller's early writing furnishes some of the links between his real-life experience and *Catch-22*, and these early fictional versions of Avignon illuminate the novel (and, for that matter, Heller's subsequent writing) as if by ultraviolet light, defamiliarizing the familiar. Avignon serves as the setting for two unpublished stories, "**The Miracle of Danrossane**" and "**Crippled Phoenix**," Heller's only short stories about the war.<sup>3</sup> Avignon also figures prominently in the planning material for *Catch-22*, most notably in an early draft of the Snowden death scene.<sup>4</sup> In this material, not in the published stories that preceded *Catch-22*, one first discovers Heller's masterplot, the core narrative that propels each of his novels. This masterplot--what I call the "dead child story"--consists of the same constellation of narrative elements: guilt, secret knowledge, bad faith, and the death of children (or, alternatively, of wounded innocents). The thrust and destination of this narrative is death, a death that serves, as does Snowden's in *Catch-22*, as the occasion for narrative clarification.<sup>5</sup> The narrative's import is as humanly simple and as humanly complex as mortality itself: humans are matter. With this masterplot, Heller seeks to do what Tolstoy does in *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, to have character and reader alike experience the immanence and imminence of death. Like Ivan Ilych, we are apt to be resisting readers, able to acknowledge, as Ivan does, the rightness of the syllogistic reasoning that says "Caius (or Snowden) is a man; men are mortal"; but not wanting, as Ivan and Yossarian do not want, to apply this abstraction to ourselves. Heller's early writing about Avignon, then, allows exploration of the process by which he draws upon and gains control over personal experience and documents its "increasingly conscious transformation into writing" (Said 196).<sup>6</sup>

Each of the accounts of Avignon--"**The Miracle of Danrossane**," "**Crippled Phoenix**," the early manuscript, the published one, and, as I discuss elsewhere, "*Catch-22* Revisited"--has an aspect of meta-narration entailing a struggle of how to locate and voice the story. In "**The Miracle of Danrossane**," the Avignon story--that is, the dead child story--is a secret known only by the local residents, and Heller's plot unfolds his American protagonist's efforts to find someone who will disclose the secret. In "**Crippled Phoenix**," the story resides within the principal characters themselves, in the guilty pasts of Dan Cramer, an American pilot, and Morain, a member of the French

underground. The plots of both stories depend upon working out what can and cannot be told as well as what can and cannot be confronted. In an early manuscript version of the Snowden death scene, Yossarian endeavors to have the chaplain understand his own reactions to what happened over Avignon, not the event itself. Finally, in *Catch-22*, Yossarian endeavors to unlock the significance of Snowden's dying words and, in so doing, to plumb the meaning of death. As in the previous versions, Yossarian's understanding hinges upon telling the story of what happened, albeit to himself. In each story of Avignon, Heller makes the telling of the story as important as the having told, as if the repeated tellings will help the author himself understand what happened.

During the war, Heller flew two missions to Avignon. Before the Avignon missions, he had, by his own account, romanticized war: "I wanted action, not security. I wanted a sky full of dogfights, daredevils and billowing parachutes. I was twenty-one years old. I was dumb" ("Revisited" 51). Avignon shatters his romantic wishes, for as he remarks in "*Catch-22* Revisited": "There was the war, in Avignon, not in Rome or Ile Rousse or Poggibonsi or even Ferrara" (141).<sup>7</sup> On the August 8, 1944 mission to bomb a railroad bridge, Heller for the first time saw a plane shot down.<sup>8</sup> As a bombardier on one of the lead planes, which had been assigned to drop metallic paper to disrupt the radar for the anti-aircraft guns, Heller could look back on what was happening to the rest of the squadron. He saw a burning plane fall into an uncontrollable spin. Parachutes billowed and opened: he would later learn that three men had gotten out, while three others were killed in the crash. One of the three survivors was found by members of the Avignon underground, hidden and eventually smuggled back across enemy lines. This mission provides the basis for the "Crippled Phoenix" and, presumably, the inspiration for the survivor's guilt that its protagonist Dan Cramer experiences.

On August 15, 1944, Heller's squadron returned to Avignon to bomb another railroad bridge over the Rhone, and this mission would provide the model for the Snowden death scene. For both Heller and Yossarian, it was their 37th mission. In notes Heller made in 1966 about the mission, he records: "Man wounded in leg. Wohlstein and Moon killed" ("Chronology 2/13/66," Heller papers, Brandeis University). According to Heller, the details from the novel correspond

... perhaps ninety percent to what I did experience. I did have a co-pilot go berserk and grab the controls. The earphones did pull out. I did think I was dying for what seemed like thirty minutes but was actually three-hundredths of a second. When I did plug my earphones in, there was a guy sobbing on the intercom, "Help the bombardier, but the gunner was only shot in the leg."(Heller, "**Translating**" 357)

In recounting the experience, Heller confines the correspondences between the actual and the novelistic Avignon missions to "physical details" and denies any similarity between Yossarian's emotional reactions and his own.<sup>9</sup>

Heller's own explanations as well as his fictional use of Avignon indicate that more than physical details are at play. Whether factual or fictional, each account that Heller gives of Avignon contains an Ur-plot that turns upon an intense experience of personal mortality. In answering interviewers' questions about his own experience, Heller repeatedly dwells on his sensation that he had died in the air above Avignon. He remembers pressing the talk button of his head set, hearing nothing, and thinking he was already dead. Heller stresses his sense of distorted time, of events that unfolded in microseconds seeming to last much longer.<sup>10</sup> His change of habits after this Avignon mission also testifies to the mission's effects; from then on, Heller carried a personal first-aid kit and vowed never to fly once his combat missions were over (a vow kept until 1960 when a 24-hour train ride convinced him to reassess the dangers of flying). The comic "*Catch-22* Revisited" retelling provides a perspective on Heller's reactions in that he makes himself, not the wounded airman, the victim. "I went to the hospital the next day. He looked fine. They had given him blood, and he was going to be all right. But I was in terrible shape, and I had twenty-three more missions to fly" ("Revisited" 142). Of course, the wound becomes mortal in *Catch-22*, or as Heller laconically describes the wound's change: "He was shot through the leg ... But I added to it and had him shot in the middle" (Barnard 298).



"**The Miracle of Danrossane**" and "**Crippled Phoenix**" mark the artistic steps by which the wound gets relocated. Together with the early draft of the Snowden death scene and *Catch-22* itself, the stories offer a complex range of reactions to death: denial, confusion, immersion, and understanding. While all of these reactions figure in each work, one predominates in each, as if designating stages in Heller's thinking, from denial in "**The Miracle of Danrossane**" to understanding in *Catch-22*. As this progression indicates, the stories and manuscript draft of the death scene provided the vehicle by which Heller worked out his master plot, and determined that *death* could serve as thrust and destination for his narratives. In the stories, the journey toward this death is spatial and temporal, a visit to Avignon in "**Danrossane**" and a return to it in "**Crippled Phoenix**." In *Catch-22* and the novels that follow, the journey becomes psychological and emotional, one culminating in a death that surfaces, like Snowden's does, as if from the protagonist's subconscious.

"**The Miracle of Danrossane**," the slighter of the two unpublished war stories, recounts a correspondent's visit to the village outside Avignon where his father was born. This story's plot turns upon a father's denying his sons' deaths. The correspondent is intrigued by the name of the inn in which he stays, *L'Auberge des Sept Fils* [Inn of the Seven Sons]. While Durland, the innkeeper, will not talk about the name, the mayor tells the correspondent Durland's story. This telling provides the principal plot of Heller's story. Even though Durland had been a Nazi collaborator during the war, his seven sons had been killed by the Nazis as a reprisal for the death of two German soldiers. Durland himself bears responsibility for his sons' deaths because he neglected to protect them. The story is irony-laden: the Nazis' random selection of reprisal victims results in the deaths of Durland's sons (hence the darkly ironic title); although the Nazis think their selection random, one of Durland's sons has, in fact, been involved in killing the Nazi soldiers as revenge for the rape of a village girl by the soldiers; one of the actual killers goes free even though he volunteers to turn himself over to the Nazis and despite the mayor's informing on him. Durland himself never comes to terms with his sons' deaths; in fact, he tells the correspondent that his sons are out working in the fields.

In this earliest Avignon story, Heller announces the concerns that will characterize his subsequent accounts, as well as provide the principal concerns of his novels: guilt, secret knowledge, bad faith, and, most crucially, the death of children. "**The Miracle of Danrossane**"'s underlying structure has the primitive, evocative force of a folk tale. A young man, who is looking symbolically for his father (and thus for his own origins), finds a surrogate whose act of paternal bad faith has caused his own sons' deaths. Refusing to acknowledge their deaths or his own complicity in them, this father lives "respectably" in a house memorializing the dead sons. When the correspondent discovers the father's secret, he returns home and, as artist, transforms the secret into story. Thus conceived, the story the reader has just read originates in guilty, concealed knowledge--a conception that aligns it with such myths as those of Prometheus and the Garden of Eden, myths which Heller explicitly draws upon in *Catch-22*. The architecture of "**Danrossane**," particularly the crucial element of the sons' deaths, is striking for the way that it anticipates the design of Heller's novels. Later characterizing this design, Heller says:

Death is always present as a climactic event that never happens to the protagonist but affects him profoundly. I think I'm drawing unconsciously from experience for inspiration. The child, the dependent child or sacrificed child is always there. I would think that the death of my father when I was about five years old had much to do with that. There was almost no conversation about it ... Indeed, the traumatized child denies death very successfully, and then sublimates it, which I think is the process that went on in me. But it leaves me very sensitive to the helplessness of children and the ease with which they can be destroyed or betrayed deliberately or otherwise.<sup>11</sup>(Flippo 60)

Whether one accepts Heller's psychological explanation for the phenomenon or not, one cannot escape the way in which death serves as climactic event and as catalyst for narrative clarification in his writing and does so from the onset of his career.

"**Crippled Phoenix**" marks another step on Heller's journey toward *Catch-22*. Guilt-caused confusion characterizes the story's account of death, and, like the novel, this story features a protagonist who has been wounded in the leg. As its title signifies, the life after the Avignon death is crippling; there is no phoenix-like

resurrection. Evidently, Heller spent considerable time on the story, for there are three versions of it in the Brandeis collection and he tried placing it with different literary agents. Possessing clear affinities with *Catch-22*, as well as with *Something Happened*, "**Crippled Phoenix**" tells a double story of conscience: that of Dan Cramer, an American pilot who feels guilty for surviving the crash in which he was the only survivor, and of Morain, a French peasant who aided with Cramer's escape after the crash. Cramer has returned to Avignon to see Morain, to whom he feels grateful and about whom he feels guilty because Morain's son had been killed when a bombardier with one mission left to fly dropped his bombs too early. Cramer has an additional reason for guilt in that he has been unfaithful to his wife during a recent stay in London, and, even in bed with his wife in Avignon, he finds his mind wandering back to Luciana, a wartime liaison in Rome.<sup>12</sup>

More crucial to the action of the story, Cramer fails to come to terms with all this guilt. First, although Cramer goes to see Morain with the intention "of help[ing] him in some way," he cannot provide the support that Morain wants, for Morain suffers from his own wartime guilt. To Cramer, Morain confesses that he was afraid his daughter would be taken away to a Nazi work camp and so he forced her to become the mistress of a German official (which ruins her life and that of her child born of the relationship). Although Morain explicitly asks him to return to visit, Cramer, even after agreeing to, cannot bring himself to do so. Second, he fails to come to terms with his wife, although he shares some of the details with her about the wartime plane crash, which he alone survived. Convinced that his wife is too superficial to understand his feelings, especially about the war, he allows her to believe that their marital difficulties have been reconciled, all the while despising her.

Significantly, Cramer, who stands in Yossarian's position as participant in events of the past, cannot fully disclose his story to anyone; he thus remains isolated and tormented. In a symbolically resonant moment, Heller communicates the moral wilderness that Cramer has brought himself into because he is unable to confront his guilt; he also conveys the way in which Cramer has deliberately estranged himself from his wife.

Suddenly, though, [Cramer] was frightened. The forest was immediately before them (his guide, his wife, and himself), and he realized that Katherine belonged only to the fringe of his emotions, on that their endless surface of amiability and routine, and that everything might still be all right if he kept her there. But they were already between the trees.

This passage forecasts the role that Avignon will play in *Catch-22* (as well as anticipates Slocum's marriage in *Something Happened*). The passage locates the wilderness within the self, that wilderness which, as Conrad demonstrates in *Heart of Darkness*, is the territory of the modern condition. While the same elements--dead children, secret knowledge, guilt, and bad faith--constitute the story, Heller relocates them. In "**Danrossane**," Durland's history was part of public discourse, unknown only to the correspondent, the outsider. In "**Crippled Phoenix**," Cramer's and Morain's pasts are secret--in particular, the responsibility that each feels for a death. Each discloses his guilty past in the vain hope of confessional relief. However, both disclosures fail because the two men look to others to assuage their own inner guilt: Morain to Cramer when the injured party is his daughter and Cramer to his wife when he cannot accept his own actions. The guilty knowledge of what happened at Avignon isolates and estranges, at least until what happened there can be fully confronted and related. As the early manuscript version of the Snowden death scene powerfully suggests, this is what *Catch-22* is about.

An early draft of the Snowden scene documents Heller's evolving conception of Avignon and dramatizes the imperative for reporting what happened there. Snowden represents the death at a distance--Yossarian recounts the experience to the chaplain. Yet, this early version is raw and, in some ways, more emotionally charged than the novel. While the Snowden scene plays off the bloody hands scene in *Macbeth*, the literary allusion seems like a patina over what Heller will call in *God Knows* the "stink of mortality and reek of mankind" (107). In Heller's early rendering, Yossarian not only sees death, but also immerses himself in it.

"Dirty hands," Yossarian said. "Yesterday they touched a dead man's flesh."

The chaplain attempts to comfort him, but Yossarian continues:

"A dead man's private parts. I spoke to Doc Daneeker. Probably his lungs, his pancreas, his liver, his stomach, and some canned tomatoes that he had for breakfast. I hate canned tomatoes ..."

The chaplain tries again.

"But you don't understand. I enjoyed it. I actually enjoyed touching the graying flesh, the clotting blood. I actually enjoyed touching his lungs, his pancreas, his liver, his stomach and some canned tomatoes from his breakfast, even though I hate canned tomatoes. I made excuses to myself to touch every shriveling shred."

The chaplain tries one final time to console Yossarian.

"But even that's not the worst of it. I rubbed blood all over myself. And do you know why I rubbed blood all over myself? To impress people. To impress those God damned Red Cross biddies with the smiles and doughnuts ... and by God, it impressed, even Doc Daneeker, who broke down and gave me some codeine and told me about Cathcart and a tour of duty." (Heller papers, Brandeis University)

There are many noteworthy differences between this early version and the published one. Snowden's mortal wound is open, displaying what Heller will call in the novel "God's plenty" (429). Yossarian is compelled to touch the viscera, then compelled to relate to the chaplain his enjoyment of doing so. He has previously told Doc Daneeker about his experience. In *Catch-22*, Yossarian tells no one, although his recollections have the quality of telling the story to himself. Time works differently as well. In the manuscript, the experience, only a day old, has the immediacy of the here and now, while in the novel version, it emerges as if from Yossarian's subconsciousness. In *Catch-22*, the intensity of Yossarian's remembrance erupts into the present: "liver, lungs, kidneys, ribs, stomach, and bits of ... stewed tomatoes" (429). The same message is embedded in both--*man is matter*--but in the manuscript, Yossarian, and perhaps Heller, has not yet apprehended its significance.

The unpublished early version is, at once, more public and more private than the Avignon of the *Catch-22*. The appropriation of the dirty hands motif from *Macbeth* dissociates this version from Heller himself, connecting it to a literary past rather than a personal one.<sup>13</sup> Also by having Yossarian report the story, Heller publicizes Avignon in a way that third-person narration would not. This recounting of Avignon proclaims Yossarian's guilty consciousness, whereas the novel displaces it into the tree-of-life episode, in which Yossarian's nakedness reveals his guilt (likewise triggered by Snowden's blood).<sup>14</sup> Simultaneously, this early version is more private, more evocative of the Heller who experienced Avignon and of the author who repeatedly sets key scenes there. The confessional quality of the incident, with Yossarian trying to make the chaplain understand what he has done, directs attention to the personal reaction to the experience. Finally, Yossarian's revelation that, on one level, he enjoyed the experience points to the complexity of Heller's own experience over Avignon. This early version illustrates the attraction of the horrifying--an attraction that Heller seems compelled to specify.

Significantly, before the idea for *Catch-22* came to him, Heller had virtually given up writing. Of the time between the short stories that he wrote in the forties and the novel which he began in 1953, Heller later said, "I wanted to write something that was very good and I had nothing good to write. So I wrote nothing" (Sam Merrill 68). Out of the silence--a silence that he partially filled with reading--came a new method of writing, anti-realist and comic in orientation. Reading

the comic novels of Evelyn Waugh and Celine's *Journey to the End of the Night* ... Nathanael West's *Miss Lonelyhearts*, and ... Nabokov's *Laughter in the Dark* particularly, I was comprehending for the first time that there were different ways to tell a story, and the methods these people used were much more compatible with my own technical ability ... with my own imagination. (Ruas 151)

The realization that there are many ways to tell a story is what Heller's evolving use of the Avignon experiences documents.<sup>15</sup> The discovery was long in coming, though, for he did not publish *Catch-22* until 1961, sixteen years after the publication of his first story. By this time, he was 38, the same age as two other late-blooming, first-time novelists, George Eliot and Willa Cather.

Heller's key discovery involves discourse, not story, the *how* of narrative rather than the *what*.<sup>16</sup> His Avignon short stories (as did most of his other short stories) had linear plots that unfolded on a single narrative level. In each, characters journeyed to Avignon (or nearby Danrossane) to learn something from the past. Heller's narrative method was straightforward, the plots proceeding until access was gained to characters who disclose crucial, secret knowledge from the past. In *Catch-22*, Heller makes discourse--the narrative act itself--part of the story as well as its means of transmission. The Avignon mission on which Snowden dies illustrates this. As is well-known, Heller's narrator distributes references to the mission throughout the novel; sometimes cryptically as in the first reference: "Where are the Snowdens of yesteryear?" (35); sometimes explicitly as in: "the way Snowden had frozen to death after spilling his secret to Yossarian in the back of the plane" (170). In effect, the narrator dissects the Avignon plot as if performing a narrative autopsy on Snowden. This dissection creates a much richer narrative progression than that of the Avignon stories, one that depends upon discourse (the vertical narrative axis) as well as upon story (the horizontal axis).<sup>17</sup> Three effects follow from this: first, the meaning of Snowden's secret depends upon the interplay among narrative levels and involves the contrast of tragic and comic perspectives; second, Heller uses the synthetic dimension of narrative to complicate the narrative progression so that the authorial reader must participate in the unraveling of Snowden's secret; and third, Heller can make the text the verbal embodiment of Snowden's secret, that is, mortality exists in the conjunction of mind and matter.<sup>18</sup>

Heller's first reference to Avignon typifies the way he takes advantage of the interplay among the narrative levels. Yossarian's question about the Snowdens of yesteryear has complementary roles in the novel's story and discourse, in each case providing the pathway to who Snowden is and what his secret entails. For Yossarian, the question speaks to both an actual and a linguistic quest; he wants to know "why so many people were trying so hard to kill him" (34). To gain the knowledge he seeks, Yossarian, like the protagonists of the Avignon stories, must unlock a secret from the past, a secret of which Snowden is the embodiment (potentially, this knowledge is already available to him because he has already ministered to the dying Snowden). But the question is also about language as well as about history, as becomes clear when Yossarian translates it into French: "*Ou sont les Neigedens d'antan?*" [Where are the Snowdens of yesteryear?] (35). Heller underscores the seriousness of this linguistic dimension with the narrator's comment about Yossarian's willingness "to pursue [the corporal of whom he asked his question] through all the words of the world" (35). The narrator, of course, knows the answer to Yossarian's question, but instead of relating it, explains to the narrative audience why the question is so upsetting.<sup>19</sup> In doing so, the narrator also makes this query part of another narrative, that of the Fall. "Group Headquarters was alarmed, for there was no telling what people might find out once they were free to ask whatever questions they wanted to"--a concern for which Colonel Korn devises the ingenious solution of permitting only those people to ask questions who never asked any (35). At this moment, the story is simultaneously proceeding on different narrative planes, its comedy, in part, stemming from the resulting incongruity. Heller's discourse takes Yossarian's question to a higher level where Group Headquarters' response echoes the fears of the God from Genesis, who worries that Adam and Eve, possessing the knowledge of good and evil, may now be tempted to eat from the tree of life. The mythic echoes refigure Yossarian's Avignon experience as a fall into mortality and mortal knowledge, a point that Heller makes more forcefully in the subsequent tree-of-life scene.

The reference to "the secret Snowden had spilled to Yossarian" exemplifies the synthetic narrative progression of *Catch-22*, the progression implied by the novel's language. The episode advances the plot: for Yossarian, being in the hospital is better than flying over Avignon with Snowden dying (164). As the narrator formulates the matter, it is not just because the hospital is safer, protecting Yossarian from war, but also because people "couldn't dominate Death inside the hospital, but they certainly made her behave" (164). Death has become a character and its plot is the Lisa Doolittle story: "They had taught her manners. They couldn't keep Death out, but while she was in she had to act like a lady" (164). With this conception, Yossarian and the narrator seek to control death. Of course, their

plotting undoes them. In Heller's mordant, novel-long joke, death is no lady, although this metaphor does, for Heller, speak to its nature.<sup>20</sup> As with the many euphemisms for death, this reference makes dying seem familiar, comfortable, and acceptable.

As novelist, Heller knows better, representing death as violent, certain, and inevitable; and yet, he rages against its sway. In *Catch-22*, unlike his Avignon stories, he finds a form to express his outrage, the humor of the novel's discourse being its expression. His handling of "the secret Snowden had spilled to Yossarian" reference can illustrate this: his mixing comic and tragic perspectives; his verbal pyrotechnics, his delight in language as language; and his presentation of crucial narrative information (i.e. what exactly the secret entails) in a way that resists understanding. The passage itself iconically embodies Snowden's secret, the coded message encased by and hidden among the myriad external and internal threats to one's life.

There were too many dangers for Yossarian to keep track of. There was Hitler, Mussolini, and Tojo, for example, and they were all out to kill him. There was Lieutenant Scheisskopf with his fanaticism for parades and there was the bloated colonel with his fat mustache and his fanaticism for retribution, and they wanted to kill him. There was Appleby, Havermeyer, Black, and Korn ... There were bartenders, bricklayers and bus conductors all over the world who wanted him dead, landlords and tenants, traitors and patriots, lynchers, leeches and lackeys, and they were all out to bump him off. *That was the secret Snowden had spilled to him on the mission to Avignon ...* There were lymph glands that might do him in. There were kidneys, nerve sheaths and corpuscles. There were tumors of the brain. There was Hodgkin's disease, leukemia, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis. There were fertile red meadows of epithelial tissue to catch and coddle a cancer cell. There were diseases of the skin, diseases of the bone, diseases of the lung, diseases of the stomach, diseases of the heart, blood and arteries ... (170-71)

Heller is in high comic form here. Repetition, alliteration and pseudo-classification schemes, among other things, control the sequencing of details, and the details themselves multiply, even as I truncate them with ellipses, as if the details were cancer cells. The nonsense of this--"the many diseases ... [of] a truly diseased mind"--has, of course, a deadly seriousness, although neither Yossarian, nor the narrative or authorial audiences can entirely understand this yet (171). It is easier to proclaim human mortality than to understand it, easier to catalog external and internal threats to one's life than to comprehend them. This is what *Catch-22* is about; this is what readers along with Yossarian must be educated to. As the "**The Miracle of Danrossane,**" "**Crippled Phoenix,**" and the early version of the Snowden death scene demonstrate, here is also the journey that Heller himself has made from Avignon to *Catch-22*.

The second Avignon mission serves further to educate Yossarian and the authorial audience, and Heller's handling of it illumines the way in which he has transmuted experience into art. The mission is largely non-narrated, because Yossarian does not fly on it, having been previously wounded in the leg over Leghorn. Nevertheless, the mission provides an essential gateway to apprehending Snowden's secret and to Sweden, where Yossarian can indeed "live forever or die in the attempt" (29). In his notes to the novel, Heller describes how Yossarian's squadron comes to return to Avignon, and this description highlights another interpretation of Snowden's death, that of the army bureaucracy. "In the Chaplain's presence, Colonel Cathcart volunteers the Group for another mission to Avignon: he is instituting the procedure of having form letters sent to the families of casualties, and he wants to obtain a large number of casualties quickly enough to be written up in the Christmas issue of the *Saturday Evening Post*" (Heller papers, Brandeis University). In fact, however, no one is killed on the mission, although Orr, Yossarian's bunkmate and guide to Sweden is shot down. Orr seizes the opportunity to test all the equipment and supplies on his life raft in preparation for his journey to Sweden. After the mission, Yossarian leaves the hospital only to learn that the number of mandatory flying missions has been raised once more. At this news, he agrees to enlist in Dobbs' plot to assassinate Colonel Cathcart. If Yossarian would instead listen to Orr, who wants Yossarian to fly with him, Yossarian would have taken the direct route to Sweden, for Orr is shot down on his next mission, only to resurface in Sweden at novel's end. However, Yossarian would have not learned what he needs to, nor would Heller's readers.

In narrative terms, this Avignon mission operates according to the principle of substitution. The premises of the Snowden scene are reversed, with Yossarian himself playing the part of injured airman. For example, when Yossarian is wounded in the leg, he immediately overestimates the seriousness of the wound, immediately believing it to be life-denying, albeit sexually so. "I have lost my balls! Aarfy, I lost my balls! ... I said I lost my balls! Can't you hear me? I'm wounded in the groin!" (283-284). In Heller's notes to the novel, the wound was, in fact, intended as a castration, a conception that lends further evidence to the importance Avignon holds to Heller (Nagel, "The *Catch-22* Note Cards" 52-53). During the mission itself, Yossarian safely resides in the hospital recuperating, a proleptic version of the stay during which he finally cracks Snowden's secret. The danger of the mission also constitutes a substitution, the ambitious colonels who need casualties causing the real peril, rather than the Germans. This Avignon episode underscores what Yossarian has yet to learn: the significance of the threat posed by living in society, confirmed when Yossarian subsequently agrees to be the colonels' pal and to say nice things about them. At novel's end, thinking about this deal, he allows himself to remember Snowden and for first time meditates on his own experience over Avignon. Examining the entrails, albeit in memory, Yossarian confronts what he has previously refused to acknowledge.

With the design of the Snowden death scene, Heller expects the authorial audience to return to Avignon with Yossarian, demanding that they too inspect Snowden's exposed vital organs and understand the message those organs contain. The narrative approach is erratic, recapitulating the comi-tragic rhythms of the novel as a whole.<sup>21</sup> Yossarian is in the hospital recovering from the side wound that the knife-wielding Nately's whore inflicts on him. Predictably, the danger that the wound occasions results from the doctors who want to treat him by operating on his liver, not from treating the wound itself.<sup>22</sup> Heller's method is comic, but his point is serious:

"Where were you born?" [asks a fat, gruff colonel with a mustache.] "On a battlefield," [Yossarian] answers. "No, no. In what state were you born?" "In a state of innocence." (420)

The meaning and humor of this exchange depend upon the interplay between discourse and story. The incongruity of meanings that results alerts the authorial audience to what Yossarian must still learn. He does not yet realize the deal that he has just accepted from Colonels Cathcart and Korn to "[s]ay nice things about [them]" (416) is "a way to lose [him]self" (456). To discover this and to learn Snowden's secret, Yossarian must first unravel the message of the strange man who keeps repeating, "we've got your pal, buddy. We've got your pal" (422). At this point in the novel, Colonel Korn, the chaplain, and Aarfy all fit the message, for each could be the pal: Korn because he knows what the deal demands, Aarfy because he has been the navigator on so many of Yossarian's "missions," and the chaplain because he has indeed been Yossarian's friend. Instinctively, Yossarian realizes that each of the obvious possibilities is wrong, and in "the sleepless bedridden nights that take an eternity to dissolve into dawn" (426), he resolves the riddle. In the perverse logic of riddles, Snowden "had never been his pal" but was "a vaguely familiar kid who was badly wounded and freezing to death" (426). If Snowden was only vaguely familiar in life, he will become, through the power of recollection, intimately known in death. In death, he is Yossarian's pal and catalyst for his essential discovery of self.<sup>23</sup>

The death scene is so frequently analyzed that it needs little further examination here. I want, however, briefly to consider a passage from earlier in the novel which sets up this inspection. Its progression is reminiscent of Heller's own artistic journey toward Avignon: slow, hesitant, made in uncertain steps. The passage speaks to the problem at the heart of *Catch-22*, that of locating the wound and telling its story.

And Yossarian crawled slowly out of the nose and up on the top of the bomb bay and wriggled back into the rear section of the plane--passing the first-aid kit on the way that he had to return for--to treat Snowden for the wrong wound, the yawning, raw, melon-shaped hole as big as a football in the outside of his thigh, the unsevered, blood-soaked muscle fibers inside pulsating weirdly like blind things with lives of their own, the oval naked wound that was almost a foot long and made Yossarian moan in shock and sympathy the instant he spied it and nearly made him vomit. And the small, slight tail gunner was lying on the floor beside Snowden in a dead faint, his face as white as a handkerchief, so that Yossarian sprang forward with revulsion to help him first. (341)

Yossarian crawls back through the plane, as if moving back in time as well as in space. He mislocates the wound and even then cannot immediately bring himself to treat it, choosing instead to aid the tail gunner. The essential story, human mortality, is reified in Snowden's flesh. In his revulsion, Yossarian can better deal with the gunner's "dead faint" than with Snowden's living wound. The simile, "like blind things with lives of their own," renders mortality as a mysterious otherness, not just Snowden's but also, implicitly, Yossarian's own.

Eventually, Yossarian traces the wound with his fingers, just as he did in the manuscript version, and when he does, he unwittingly begins to explore his own mortality as well as Snowden's deadly wound. Yossarian finds "[t]he actual contact with the dead flesh ... not nearly as repulsive as he had anticipated, and excuse to caress the wound with his fingers again and again to convince himself of his own courage" (428). The reworking of these details from the manuscript confirms their importance, but significantly shifts the emphasis and meaning of the scene. In the manuscript, Yossarian caresses the viscera, in the novel the fleshy leg wound. In the manuscript, Yossarian attempts to "impress" others with actions as if this will authenticate his courage, while in the novel he wants to ascertain his own courage. But, in both cases, he initially touches without understanding. In fact, after fingering and then treating Snowden's leg wound, Yossarian can assure him confidently, "You're going to be all right, kid ... Everything is under control" (429). Of course, it isn't. What Yossarian needs to understand lies open before him, signified by the blood "*dripping ... like snow melting on the eaves, but viscous and red, already thickening as it dropped*" (emphasis added, 427). For Heller, the mystery of mortality lies in human embodiment--in the flesh, not in the spirit. Life begins and ends with the body. With his hands inside Snowden's wound, Yossarian experiences this, feels what he does not yet understand. However, his physical grasp anticipates and makes possible apprehension of the message of Snowden's entrails.

In Yossarian's famous insight, Heller defines mortality as a fusion of mind and matter, Yossarian's conceptualization of man enduring even as Snowden's body dissolves into bloody inert matter. Reflecting upon Snowden's death, Yossarian comes to understand his own mortality. As Denis de Rougement observes, "Suffering and understanding are deeply connected; death and self-awareness are in league" (51). Heller insists that Yossarian trace the contours of Snowden's and thus his own mortality: "liver, lungs, kidneys, ribs, stomach, and bits of stewed tomatoes Snowden had eaten that day for lunch" (429). The prose is hard and violent, as hard and violent as Snowden's wounds; its violence partakes of the violence of Heller's experience of treating a wounded colleague. The viscera of humans tether them to the material world. The viscera also take in the material world, digesting it like Snowden's stewed tomatoes. When the digestive process is viewed as Snowden's is, it becomes ugly and repulsive. But Heller believes these entrails also allow the viewer, as prophets have long believed, to detect the secrets of human existence: "Man was matter, that was Snowden's secret. Ripeness was all" (429-430).<sup>24</sup> Finally, Yossarian deciphers the message that has been available to him all along. The message identifies the two components of humanity: the material that inexorably leads to death, and the spiritual that Heller leaves deliberately ambiguous. In formulating the spiritual element, Heller omits the verb, so that the statement reads "the spirit gone." This formulation neither affirms nor denies the existence of spirit; it simply announces the concept. Without predication, the concept cannot be completed or brought to fulfillment. As deconstructionists would argue, the verb's absence only can be noted.

Heller's insistence that his authorial audience inspect Snowden's viscera also accomplishes quite a different end, what Bakhtin calls the "familiarization of the world through laughter" (23). "In this plane (the plane of laughter) one can disrespectfully walk around whole objects; therefore, the back and rear portions of an object (and also its innards, not normally accessible for viewing) assume special prominence" (23). Death, of course, is the object that Heller wants to inspect. By means of such elements as "the Snowdens of yesteryear," the Death that behaves, and the litany of threats to Yossarian's life, Heller has taken his authorial audience on this kind of narrative walk in his peripatetic approach to Avignon. In the catalog of Snowden's vital organs, Yossarian, the narrator, and Heller act out the imperatives for Bakhtin's comic formula. Having already familiarized the reader with the elements of this catalog, especially the liver and the tomatoes, the beginning and ending of the catalog, Heller allows the reality of mortality to be known, familiarized in a laughter that ridicules. Death, as well as life, is stripped in Heller's catalog, his comic dismemberment destroying the power that death had when it was unknown.

In retracing some of Heller's steps to the Snowden death scene, one is reminded of the blacking factory sections of David Copperfield and how they have helped to explain so much of Charles Dickens's life and art. Like Dickens, Heller uses his art to digest personal shocks, to explain them to himself, and to give an intelligible picture of the world in which such things occur.<sup>25</sup> So too like Dickens, Heller is a great humorist, and the acuity of his social vision frequently has been missed, as was Dickens's, in the laughter his fiction occasions. This laughter offers an escape from social institutions whose grip on the individual seems as intractable as that of *Catch-22* on Yossarian. While providing the pathway and accommodation for Snowden's secret, this laughter is begotten by pain. Heller's early representations of Avignon instance this; there is no humor in "The Miracle of Danrossane" or "Crippled Phoenix." For Heller, the painful recognition of Snowden's secret generates anger, anger usually expressed by black humor and unleashed by the genius of his novelistic discourse. He rages against the dying of the light.<sup>26</sup>

## Notes

1. Since childhood, Heller wrote stories and submitted them for publication, sending them to places like the *New York Daily News*, *Liberty*, and *Collier's*. He also dreamed of becoming a dramatist and in high school aspired to writing comedies like those of Moss Hart and George S. Kaufmann.
2. Heller's interviews continually address the issue of correspondence between his life and fiction, with Heller giving a variety of answers, sometimes contradictorily so. For a representative selection of interviews treating his war experience, see: Heller, "Translating," *Gentlemen's Quarterly*, Sam Merrill, Weatherby, Barnard, and Flippo.
3. "The Miracle of Danrossane," "Crippled Phoenix," and all other unpublished material to which I refer are part of a collection of Heller's papers that Brandeis University Library holds. In addition to these stories, Heller also worked on a novel about the war as early as 1945, which involved a flier nearing the end of his required quota of bombing missions and thinking about the meaning of the war.
4. James Nagel has done the seminal work on the manuscript and other working papers for *Catch-22*, but much more study remains to be done. Nagel isolates interesting and important changes between Heller's early plans and published novel, arguing that this material documents the author's "meticulous planning and analysis of his novel at each state of composition" ("Note Cards" 404); see Nagel.
5. While the Snowden death scene in *Catch-22* provides the most memorable formulation of such a death, variants on this story reappear at the end of the rest of Heller's work. In the novels, the crucial death always occurs in the penultimate chapter, with the exception of *Good as Gold* in which the funeral occurs in the penultimate chapter. In *We Bombed in New Haven*, Captain Starkey must tell and retell each newly named version of his son that he will die on the next bombing mission. In the ending of *Something Happened*, Slocum finally calls back to memory the details of the accident in which he killed his son, the spurting blood and twisted arms and legs. But he resists the knowledge available in this recollection, concluding it instead with the plea, "Don't tell my wife" (562). In a reversal of the pattern, *Good as Gold* closes with Bruce Gold standing at his mother's grave hoping for a message that does not come. The death of another "child," his brother Sid, has brought him to the cemetery. *God Knows* concludes with King David yearning for a God who will understand and make understandable the grief he feels for his dead sons: "I feel nearer to God when I am deepest in anguish" (338). In *Picture This*, Heller revises one of history's most famous death scenes, that of Socrates, so that he dies with the retching and convulsions caused by ingesting hemlock. Finally, in *Closing Time*, Heller uses Kilroy's death to mourn the passing of the World War II generation, to parody the dead child story, and to cast a retrospective light upon *Catch-22* in general and Snowden's death in particular.
6. Said makes a larger point about the relationship between certain writers' careers and the texts produced by them that can usefully be applied to Heller and, by extension, to his authorial returns to Avignon: "the text is a multidimensional structure extending from the beginning to the end of the writer's career. A text is the source and



aim of a man's desire to be an author, it is the form of his attempts, it contains the elements of his coherence, and in a whole range of complex and differing ways it incarnates the pressures upon the writer of his psychology, his time, his society. The unity between career and text, then, is a unity between an intelligible pattern of events and for the most part their increasingly conscious transformation into writing" (196).

7. Each of these sites has personal significance to Heller: Rome, which Heller visited shortly after it was liberated, afforded him his most memorable wartime leave (see Note 12); Il Rousse was an army rest camp on Corsica near where he was based; Poggibonsi was the destination for his first bombing mission, a mission on which he got bored and dropped his bombs too late; and Ferrara was the first mission on which Heller's squadron lost a plane.

8. There is a discrepancy in Heller's dating of this first Avignon mission; he lists it as August 8 in the "Chronology 2/13/66" and as August 3 in "*Catch-22* Revisited." In the "Chronology," Heller describes the mission as follows: "Rail Road bridge. Hirsch shot down, Burrhus, Yellon killed. First plane I saw shot down" (Heller papers, Brandeis University).

9. Notably, Robert Merrill, among others, agrees with Heller: "the fact that *Catch-22* appeared sixteen years after the end of World War II suggests that its author was not primarily interested in recapturing the intensity of his own experiences" (4).

10. See, for example, Sam Merrill 68 and Barnard 298.

11. In recounting a letter that his editor received from Bruno Bettelheim, Heller extends the implication of this narrative pattern, admitting in the case of *Something Happened* that the protagonist may be complicit in the child's death: "Now it could be that in terms of drawing on recesses of my mind, with which I'm not in touch, what Bruno Bettelheim said was there [i.e., the validity of a death in which a father deliberately kills his son]. I was not aware that I was aware of it" (Ruas 164).

12. Luciana apparently is an early version of the Luciana of *Catch-22*. As Cramer remembers her: "Luciana was best. Tall, young, and graceful, she was a novice at love, and he remembered her smile as she came to him, her ingenuous astonishment at the sudden force of her passion, and the fumbling manner." This early appearance of Luciana is also interesting for the light that it sheds on Heller's artistic recycling of personal experience. As he tells interviewer Sam Merrill, "[Yossarian's] encounter with Luciana, the Roman whore, corresponds exactly with an experience I had. He sleeps with her, she refuses money and suggests that he keep her address on a slip of paper ... That's exactly what happened to me in Rome. Luciana was Yossarian's vision of a perfect relationship. That's why he saw her only once, and perhaps that's why I saw her only once. If he examined perfection too closely, imperfections would show up" (64). As *Catch-22* reveals though, the Luciana plot is more closely tied to Heller's core authorial concerns than his remarks about his own personal experience would indicate. In the novel, Luciana's "perfection" is already impaired, for she has been wounded in an air raid and wears a pink chemise to hide her scar even while making love with Yossarian. Yossarian, however, is fascinated by it, runs his hands over it, and insists that she relate its story. Later after he has torn up the slip of paper with her address on it, Yossarian's search for her leads him into symbolic encounters with death: death in his nightmares about the Bologna mission and proleptic death he looks for her in Snowden's room.

13. While the allusion to *Macbeth* dissociates the experience from Heller's own, it also represents a connection, for Heller studied Shakespeare at Oxford while on a Fulbright Fellowship between writing his Avignon stories and planning *Catch-22*. This study may well provide another pathway between Heller's personal experience and the novel. The planning material to *Catch-22* reveals the extensive role literary allusions played in Heller's conception of the novel, especially Shakespearean allusions. For studies of these allusions in *Catch-22*, see Larson, and Aubrey and McCarron.

14. The importance of these elements--death, blood, guilt, and touch--is confirmed by the way that Heller reworks them in *Something Happened*. In its climactic episode, Slocum responds to the "streams of blood spurting from holes in his [son's] face and head and pouring down over one hand from inside a sleeve" by clutching him to his chest and in the process accidentally suffocating him (562). Unlike Yossarian, Slocum resists recounting the event, instead refiguring it, as Heller's chapter title tells us, into how "My boy has stopped talking to me."

15. David Seed shows how war novels like James Jones's *From Here to Eternity* and Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* also contributed to Heller's evolving conception of *Catch-22*; see 23-33.

16. Extending structuralist thought, Seymour Chatman uses the distinction, story and discourse, to differentiate between narrative content and the means by which this content is transmitted.

17. Patrick O'Neill insightfully demonstrates the way in which humor in modern and postmodern texts depends upon privileging discourse over story. In particular, he is interested in what he calls entropic comedy, comedy that is aware of the fictionality of all discourse and "of the element of play" that is involved in the production of any meaning (23). O'Neill's discussion of *Catch-22* as an example of entropic satire is also valuable, although I disagree with his conclusion that the novel's discourse undercuts the implications of its story.

18. I borrow the notion of a synthetic element of narrative from James Phelan, although I am modifying his definition. Phelan explores the relationship between character and narrative progression, and he conceives of three aspects of character, which in turn contribute to narrative progression: thematic (as conveyer of narrative and authorial meaning), mimetic (as designation for a "person," albeit a textual one), and synthetic (as linguistic construct). I use the concept of synthetic component of narrative progression, without attaching it to character.

19. Peter Rabinowitz distinguishes between narrative and authorial audiences. The authorial audience is the ideal reader posited by an author, the reader who completely attends to authorial intentionality. By contrast, the narrative audience is the reader implied by the text itself, by its narrative and rhetorical structure; this reader participates in the illusion that the text is real, that it constitutes a world.

20. There are several ways in which Heller's imagination links death and women. In the short stories, women frequently occasion symbolic, if not literal deaths. For example, in the unpublished "The Death of the Dying Swan," when Sidney Cooper returns home, he gives up his quest for life and, in effect, accepts death: "He longed for people who were real, people who lived with honest passions and found vigorous pleasure in the mere event of existing, people for whom death came too soon" (Heller papers, Brandeis University). *Something Happened* and *Good as Gold* work variations on this pattern. But Heller also associates women with insensate death, that in which senility (the death of the mind) precedes physical demise. The most noteworthy example of this occurs when Slocum believes his mother's senility and death foretell his own: "I can see myself all mapped out inanimately in stages around that dining room table, from mute beginning (Derek) to mute, fatal, bovine end (Mother), passive and submissive as a cow, and even beyond through my missing father (Dad)" (401). Finally, Heller connects passion with death, as when he uses Yossarian's love-making with Nurse Duckett on the beach to set up the scene in which McWatt's plane hits Kid Sampson, thereby turning the ocean red with blood and severed limbs. Similarly, Yossarian's passion for Luciana leads to death, albeit via memory and dreams.

21. Heller's comic strategies depend upon continually negating or reversing expectations. Typically, Heller's scenes suddenly darken in mood, as he reveals that what the reader has just been laughing at begets violence, death, or the morally outrageous; or similarly, dark scenes beget comic ones, dramatically changing the character of the text. Thus, the comic and the tragic function both as figure and ground in much the way they do in an Escher drawing. They constitute a pattern in which the relationship between figure and ground constantly reverses itself, so that first one element then another assumes the foreground.

22. The threat to operate on Yossarian's liver extends a novel-long joke and set of allusions to the Prometheus myth. As in this instance, the effect is usually double-edged, occasioning laughter and signifying mortality. The motif culminates, of course, in the Snowden death scene when Yossarian inspects the wounded airman's liver along with the other viscera. Heller uses tomatoes to a similar end, especially all the jokes about the chaplain's hot plum tomato. The stewed tomatoes that spill out of Snowden's stomach take part of their meaning from the tomato jokes that preceded them.

23. Heller reprises this conception in his conclusions to *God Knows* and *Closing Time*. In *God Knows*, the image of David's youthful self provides the catalyst for self-discovery. Lying on his deathbed, David serves as his own Snowden. In *Closing Time*, Yossarian and Sammy Singer, a narrator and Heller figure, talk about how Snowden, scarcely an acquaintance in life, becomes the closest of friends in death and the source for what they want to talk about for the rest of their lives.

24. This inspection accomplishes another kind of education as well, one that undercuts the typical military education and that reproduces the experience of combat veterans. As an aside, it bears attention that Heller satirically treats military education throughout *Catch-22*; for example, in such episodes as Lieutenant Scheisskopf's parades and the many briefing sessions. As described by John Keegan in his classic study *The Face of Battle*, the aim of such an education "is to reduce war to a set of rules and a system of procedures--and thereby to make orderly and rational what is essentially chaotic and instinctive. It is an aim analogous to that ... pursued by medical schools in their fostering among their students a detached attitude to pain and distress in their patients, particularly victims of accidents" (20). Yossarian has long recognized the insanity of war, but he has not, even while treating the wounded Snowden, taken the next step of recognizing his complicity in this insanity. Nor has he yet comprehended the effects of a "military" education. As his subsequent actions demonstrate, his studied recollection of Snowden's death occasions these recognitions. The death scene also serves as a brilliant representation of the sensations of the combat veteran. Again to draw upon John Keegan, in battle the combatants experience a "sense of littleness, almost of nothingness, of their abandonment in a physical wilderness, dominated by vast impersonal forces, from which even the passage of time had been eliminated. The dimensions of the battlefield (in this instance the inside of combat aircraft) ... reduced [the combatant's] subjective role, objectively vital though it was, to that of a mere victim" (322). Keegan's account closely parallels Yossarian's sensations in the Snowden scene and defines what Yossarian--and by extension the reader--must be reeducated to reject.

25. Edmund Wilson provides the classic formulation of the effects of childhood trauma on Dickens's subsequent career in "Dickens: The Two Scrooges." In part, I have adapted Wilson's argument to discuss the effects Avignon have on Heller's fiction and to draw my characterization of Dickens's comic art.

26. I have greatly benefited from the suggestions of Linda Van Buskirk, Randall Craig, Donald Purcell, John Serio, and Peter Freitag.

## Works Cited

- Aubrey, James R., and William E. McCarron. "More Shakespearean Echoes in *Catch-22*." *American Notes & Queries*. 3 (January 1990): 25-27.
- Bakhtin, M. M. "Epic and Novel." *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Carl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: U of Texas, 1981.
- Barnard, Ken. "Interview with Joseph Heller." *A Catch-22 Casebook*, eds. Frederick Kiley and Walter McDonald. New York: Crowell, 1973. 294-301.
- Chatman, Seymour. *Story and Discourse*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1978.

- Craig, David M. "Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* Revisited." *War, Literature, and the Arts*. 1.2 (1989-90): 33-43.
- Flippo, Chet. "Checking in with Joseph Heller." *Rolling Stone*. 16 April 1981: 50 +.
- Heller, Joseph. *Catch-22*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1961.
- ." *Catch-22* and After." *Gentleman's Quarterly*. March 1963, 95 +.
- ." *Catch-22* Revisited." *Holiday* April 1967: 44 +.
- ." On Translating *Catch-22* into a Movie." *A Catch-22 Casebook*, eds. Frederick Kiley and Walter McDonald. New York: Crowell, 1973.
- ." *Something Happened*. New York: Knopf, 1974.
- ." *Good as Gold*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979.
- ." *God Knows*. New York: Knopf, 1984.
- ." *Picture This*. New York: Putnam, 1988.
- ." *Closing Time*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994.
- Keegan, John. *The Face of Battle*. New York: Viking, 1976.
- Larson, Michael. "Shakespearean Echoes in *Catch-22*." *American Notes & Queries*. 17 (1979): 76-78.
- Merrill, Robert. *Joseph Heller*. Boston: Twayne, 1987.
- Merrill, Sam. "Playboy Interview: Joseph Heller." June 1975: 59 +.
- Nagel, James. "The *Catch-22* Note Cards." *Studies in the Novel*. 8 (1976): 394-405.
- ." Two Brief Manuscript Sketches." *Modern Fiction Studies*. 20 (1974): 221-224.
- O'Neill, Patrick. *The Comedy of Entropy: Humour/Narrative/Reading*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1990.
- Phelan, James. *Reading People, Reading Plots*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1989.
- Rabinowitz, Peter. "Truth in Fiction: A Reexamination of Audiences." *Critical Inquiry*. 4 (1977): 121-141.
- Rougement, Denis de. *Love in the Western World*, trans. Montgomery Belgion. New York: Pantheon, 1956.
- Ruas, Charles. "Joseph Heller." *Conversation with American Writers*. New York: Knopf, 1984.
- Said, Edward. *Beginnings: Intention and Method*. New York: Basic Books, 1975.
- Seed, David. *The Fiction of Joseph Heller*. New York: St. Martin's, 1989.
- Tolstoy, Leo. *The Death of Ivan Ilych and Other Stories*. New York: Signet, 1960.

Weatherby, W. J. "The Joy Catcher." *Guardian*. 20 November 1962: 7.

Wilson, Edmund. *The Wound and the Bow*. New York: Oxford UP, 1947.

**Source Citation** (MLA 7<sup>th</sup> Edition)

Craig, David M. "From Avignon to *Catch-22*." *War, Literature, and the Arts* 6.2 (Fall-Winter 1994): 27-54. Rpt. in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*. Ed. Linda Pavlovski. Vol. 151. Detroit: Gale, 2004. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 23 Mar. 2014.

Multimedia:

NYT resources that include original reviews, commentary on the movie, and Heller reading from the book

<http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/02/15/home/heller.html>

NPR story on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its publication

<http://www.npr.org/2011/10/13/141280833/catch-22-a-paradox-turns-50-and-still-rings-true>