

The Impact of Joseph Heller Post-Modernist Features in the Recent Scientific Studies

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Abstract

It is a crucial issue alongside other important topics to the academic level and also for the students who are interested in this regard. After the Second World War there were some writers who possessed some characteristics that we may categorize only to that period. One of these writers is the famous American one Joseph Heller. There are many books about the war but Heller's masterpiece "Catch-22" is incomparable to none of them. Heller is a satirical novelist, a short story writer and a playwright. (a) The features that led to "Black Humor". The humor that Heller makes use of is obviously a human selfishness in vain, this is very well represented in almost all the characters of this novel. The humor is dressed up in these characters to explain the absurdity even when they think that they are being moral and fair. (b) Humor as a stylistic choice. Joseph Heller is interested in a non-chronological narration and has been focused in a repetitive style approach. Heller was not alone in the war novels there many other such as Kurt Vonnegut, or Thomas Pynchon etc

Key words: *Black humor, morality destroyed, non-chronological events, irrationality, Catch-22, literary pun, mortality.*

1. Introduction

Numerous scholars agree that the climactic epiphany of Joseph Heller's funny and horrifying World War II novel *Catch-22* (1961) is the protagonist Yossarian.

Returning with his B-25 squadron from a bombing run over Avignon, Yossarian, an American bombardier, futilely tends to a mortally wounded gunner on his plane:

Yossarian ripped open the snaps of Snowden's flak suit and heard himself scream wildly as Snowden's insides slithered down to the floor in a soggy pile and just kept dripping out. . . . he gazed down despondently at the grim secret Snowden had spilled all over the messy floor. It was easy to read them 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. (429–30)

The critics may perceive the novel's terrified naturalistic vision of human mortality, but they may have missed it a striking literary irony underscoring that dour vision. In one of the most renowned poems in the English language, William Wordsworth's *The Prelude* (1850), the work's climactic vision occurs atop Mt. Snowdon in Northern Wales, the highest point in England and Wales. Could Heller have joined a more contrasting association with the somber Villon allusion, or Wordsworth's vision of life everlasting?

2. Humor as a Stylistic Choice

Catch 22 combines formal innovation and popular appeal. This is anomalous and hence instructive. The conventional novel has as its correlate a readership more or less well versed in the conventions of the novel. There is a presumption of shared background expectations about plotting and narrative sequence, about characterisation and the exploration of personality.

Seen in this way the novel is a commodity of consciousness, in which author and reader are linked by a nexus of cash and culture, the aesthetic expression of which is the novel's form.

Sociologically speaking it is thus the form of a novel which is its content. This means that whereas a novel which breaches these conventions is not axiomatically of sociological or aesthetic interest, a successful novel of this kind always is, whether success is defined by the standards of the market or the standards of critical taste, or by both.

Catch 22 is just such a work. Temporal sequence is so disordered that the reader is shuttled backwards and forwards in both time and space in so apparently random a fashion that it requires detailed notes to reconstruct the action

in linear time. A host of bizarre characters appear, reappear and disappear, sub-plots proliferate, and Heller withholds any clearcut indication of the novel's narrative line until the final chapters. A recipe for obscurity, one might suppose, its limited readership sanctioned by the arcane requirements of a handful of university courses. Indeed the manuscript was turned down by a spate of publishers. Yet the book proved to be an enormous commercial success. It has a publishing history of reprints that is even lengthier than that initial inventory of rejection slips, and had sold several million copies even before its eventual acquisition of a Hollywood imprimatur.

The story can be summarized by saying that it is set largely on an Italian island during World War II and concerns the efforts of Yossarian, a bombardier in the US Army Air Corps, to evade further combat duty. The death of a young gunner called Snowden in Yossarian's own aircraft transforms his lack of enthusiasm for flying combat missions into a desperate aversion to them. Between him and his intense desire to stay on the ground, however, are the aspirations of Colonel Cathcart, who is anxious to secure promotion by continually increasing the number of missions his men must fly. These rival action tendencies are displayed in an organisational setting of people.

3. The Features that Led to "Black Humor"

Catch, class and bureaucracy a whole host of other characters (in which the entrepreneurial activities of Milo Minderbinder are of especial significance). Yossarian finally refuses to fly any more and Colonels Cathcart and Korn, unwilling to risk a court martial, offer him a deal, a flight back to the USA if he will promote their interests there. Yossarian at first accepts, then changes his mind, and only then learns that a pilot called Orr, Yossarian's extent mate who was missing presumed killed, had in fact rowed all the way to Sweden and safety. Yossarian determines to join him, and deserts. This is *not*, however, how Heller tells the story. Such a conventional reconstruction of the narrative is simply not available during a first reading. For example, it is not until the penultimate forty-first chapter that the reader grasps the full import of Snowden's death, whereas chapter one begins about halfway through the timescale that the novel covers, and chapter eighteen is set in part at least, in the USA before Yossarian leaves for the combat zone. These are not simply isolated instances of flashback/flashforward technique. They exemplify an approach to linear time which is integral to the book's form. That there is an order to the text's forty-two chapters will be argued later in this paper. For the moment the relevant point is that order is not temporal. That this has implications for the reader can be seen from the initial critical reaction.

4. Critical Evaluation and Commercial Success

When the book was finally published (having taken eight years to write), the response of cultural gatekeepers was very mixed. "The unstinting admiration of novelists Nelson Algren ('the best American novel that has come out of anywhere in years') and Julian Mitchell ('a book of enormous richness and art, of deep thought and brilliant writing') was not shared by professional critics like Whitney Balliett and R.G. Stern. Balliett argued that Heller falls in his own laughter and finally drowns in it. What remains is a debris of sour jokes, stage anger, dirty words, synthetic looniness.' In a more measured tone. Stern suggested that 'Catch 22 has much passion, comic and fervent, but it gasps for want of craft and sensibility. . . The book is an emotional hodge-podge; no mood is sustained long enough to register for more than a chapter.' Such mapping of the critical response to *Catch 22* is to be distinguished from the task of establishing the reasons for its popular appeal. As the book's sales climbed into the millions however, the pattern of critical evaluation increasingly touched upon, and sought to

Nick Perry respond to, the fact of its commercial success. For example, speculated as to the book's readership, and summarised its attractions as follows: *Catch 22* obviously appeals to the student, who beneath his complacency and hipster frigidity is very confused and afraid.

It appeals to the sophisticated professional the educator, lawyer, professor - who must work at something he cannot fully trust. It appeals to the businessman, who does not really believe that his empire primarily serves the public good. It certainly appeals to all the new professionals - the advertisers, publicity men, television writers - whose world is little different from the absurd one Heller presents. There is here the suggestion that Heller's primary 'constituency' is what Gouldner and others have called the new class, the possessors of cultural capital. And there is the observation that the novel explores aspects of anxiety, ambivalence and absurdity which are somehow germane to their social and cultural situation. This cultural bourgeoisie differs from both the old moneyed class and the old working class. It has an ideologically grounded commitment to consistency, explicitness, reflexivity and understanding (all congruent with its resource base in knowledge). This is at odds with the organisational conditions under which many such class members are required to act, but these are the precondition for those privileges which they enjoy vis-a-vis the old working class.

Wright and Carchedi's accounts are only the best known of the many recent analyses of the 'contradictory' character of this class position. For present purposes, however, the particular merit of Gouldner's discussion is the emphasis he gives to language. He argues that the new class constitutes a speech community that is demarcated sociolinguistically by its culture of critical discourse.

That is, the modal speech act is justification, but the mode of justification involves no reference to a speaker's societal position or authority. Good speech is speech that can make its own principles explicit and is oriented to conforming with them. Within bureaucratic organisations, however, its realisation is constrained by the asymmetrical nature of the employment relation, the realities of hierarchical control and the facts of corporate power. Most, but not all, new class members are employees of bureaucracies, but, even for those who are not, such organisations are typically the clientele, the location, the salient environment in which they pursue their interests. Although this has routinely been represented as the clash?

5. Catch, Class and Bureaucracy

Professional and bureaucratic principles of organisation, it is more appropriate to see it as a conflict between the structure of organisational power and the occupational ideology and work preferences of some of its members. Their dilemma is how to reconcile what they perceive as the cognitive and technical necessities of their task with the social and political imperatives associated with their organisational position. In the analysis of *Catch 22* which follows it is identified as a text in which the power of language is deployed against the language of power. The novel thus not only displays the Oedipus of the new class but also advances their ideological claim as to the efficacy of good speech. Lexical disorder and social order - aspects of Heller's style.

In seeking to characterize *Catch 22* its critics employ such phrases as 'absurd, black humor, deadly serious lunacy, picaresque epic, ludicrous catastrophe, anguished farce, significant corn. However different the aesthetic judgements are, in each case, there is a common theme of words at war with one another, a juxtaposition of nouns and their qualifying adjectives that is not quite paradoxical but always anomalous. The basis for these judgements can be identified in Heller's prose style and sentence structure. Three features merit attention. First, there is a discernible tendency, both in dialogue and description, for sentences to lash back upon themselves. The best known definition of *Catch 22* is exemplary in this respect: 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 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. Orr would be crazy to fly more missions and sane if he didn't, but if he was sane he had to fly them. If he flew then he was crazy and didn't have to; but if he didn't want to he was sane and had to. Yossarian was moved very deeply by the absolute simplicity of this clause of *Catch 22* and let out a respectful whistle. The movement here is towards a sense of absolute entrapment, of being locked in by the language, and it is characteristic of verbal encounters between those in power and their victims. It leads Clevering to insist, 'I always didn't say you couldn't punish me, sir' (p. 88).

And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably," But Heller also offers us a hint that Yossarian retains a residue of doubt, and that an alternate picture is available, a picture provided by the aptly named and thematically significant character of Orr, already identified as 'crazy'.

All in all, Heller writes:

'Yossarian saw (Catch 22) clearly in all its spinning reasonableness. There was an elliptical precision about its perfect pairs of parts that was graceful and shocking, like good modern art, and at times Yossarian wasn't quite sure that he saw it at all, just the way he wasn't quite sure about good modern art or about the flies Orr saw in Appleby's eyes.' (pp. 54-55)

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