"What else is there?" : surrealism and the love of life in Catch-22 /

Dobbs Eric

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarship.richmond.edu/honors-theses

Recommended Citation

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Research at UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu.
"What else is there?"
Surrealism and the Love of Life in *Catch-22*

Eric D. Dobbs
April 2, 1971
Outline

I. Introduction
   A. Quote: "What else is there?"
   C. Animacy is good; inanimacy is bad.
   D. Style.

II. Thematic Material
   A. Madness.
      1. A world gone mad.
      2. Individual insanity.
      3. Perversion.
      4. Sanity.
   B. Monsters.
      1. The bureaucracy.
         a. Making it official makes it so.
         b. The Glorious Loyalty Cath Crusade.
         c. Bureaucratic geometrical progression.
         d. Communications.
      2. Unchecked Capitalism.
         a. Milo as Satan.
         b. Sacrifice of life to the God of acquisitiveness.
   C. The War.
   D. Snowden's Secret.

III. Catch-22 as existential Bildungsroman.
   A. Archetypal significance of events surrounding Snowden's death.
   B. Survival is not enough.
   C. Milne's two great sins.
   D. "The Eternal City."
   E. The message at the end and Yossarian's commitment.

IV. Surrealistic Style.
   A. Absurdity.
      1. The military.
      2. Chauvinism
   B. Black Humor.
      1. The Judaeo-Christian God.
      2. Death and grief
4. Madness.
5. Bureaucratic mistakes.

C. Nightmare
1. Major at the basketball court.
2. Kafkaesque trials.
   a. Clevinger.
   b. The chaplain.
3. Waking is no relief.
   a. Snowden.
   b. Milo's bombing.

V. Conclusion.
"What else is there?"

Surrealism and the Love of Life in *Catch-22*

In Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* two characters are engaged in a discussion about the shortness of life. They are Dunbar, who cultivates boredom in order to make the time pass slowly, and Clevinger, an argumentative young man who believes in the powers of reason and the virtues of education. Clevinger thinks Dunbar is crazy for trying to make time pass more slowly by spending it doing unpleasant things.

"Guess how fast?" Dunbar said suddenly.
"Huh?"
"They go," Dunbar explained.
"Who?"
"Years."
"Years?"
"Years," said Dunbar. "Years, years, years."

..."Do you know how long a year takes when it's going away?" Dunbar repeated to Clevinger. "This long." He snapped his fingers. "A second ago you were stepping into college with your lungs full of fresh air. Today you're an old man."
"Old?" asked Clevinger with surprise. "What are you talking about?"
"Old."
"I'm not old."
"You're inches away from death every time you go on a mission. How much older can you be at your age? A half minute before that you were stepping into high school and an unhooked brassiere was as close as you ever hoped to get to Paradise. Only a fifth of a second before that you were a small kid with a ten-week summer vacation that lasted a hundred thousand years and still ended too soon. Zip! They go rocketing by so fast. How the hell else are you ever going to slow time down?"
Dunbar was almost angry when he finished.
"Well, maybe it is true," Clevinger conceded unwillingly in a subdued tone. "Maybe a long life does have to be filled with many unpleasant conditions if it's to seem long. But in that event, who wants one?"

"I do," Dunbar told him.
"Why?" Clevinger asked.
"What else is there?" (pp. 38-39)

What else, indeed? This is the question confronting many of the characters in Catch-22. The question is not to be inflected to ask what new life comes after this life. The question means, "There is nothing else besides this life but death." This is why Yossarian's question, "Where are the Snowdens of yesteryear?" is so shatteringly disturbing. The question demands that we face Snowden's terrible secret, and that secret is more than most men can bear.

The general problem of Catch-22 is the problem of life and death in a world of matter and energy. Snowden's secret is "man is matter... the spirit gone, man is garbage." (pp. 39-43) One should not be misled by the word "spirit." No immortal creation is meant by the word in Heller's context. The word is synonymous with life here, and life is a very temporary state in Catch-22. The living organism is a chemical aggregation which traps energy and delays the process of entropy whereby that energy is reduced to its lowest level: the general temperature of the universe. Living things are the exception rather than the rule in the universe, so they are engaged in a constant battle against the elements. The elements, however, being unconscious, cannot be considered either benevolent or malevolent. Both words, by virtue of their Latin roots, denote will, and the elements are involuntary.

It is not bad enough that man, as a living organism, must face this unconscious enemy. In Catch-22, as in real
life, the problem is compounded by the fact that man, as a species, persists in slaughtering others of his kind. Man's inhumanity to man makes the question of whether it is worth the trouble to stay alive in a world full of cruelty such an imposing one.

Heller's Yossarian and other characters believe that despite all the horrors, man-made and otherwise, that exist in the world, life is valuable and they must hang on to it as long as possible. In the great universe of matter, a living, conscious piece of matter is a rare thing and therefore precious. After the organism is no longer capable of slowing down and using the decay of energy into heat, then that organism is no longer any different from the soil and rocks. Yossarian does not want to be rock. Neither does he want to be a gear. When censured for making an obscene remark to Nurse Cramer, Yossarian replies that she called him a gear. Yossarian knows what it is like to be animate, and despite its disadvantages he likes it. Yossarian is engaged in the ancient struggle for survival in which life and death are, by definition, good and bad respectively.

It is the style used by Heller which makes his treatment of these ancient themes so special. He uses a general comic surrealism which makes Catch-22 a refreshing and exciting novel. Some of the specific techniques used by Heller are absurdity, black humor, and dream-like atmosphere. The dream-like atmosphere can take on the characteristics of either a normally weird and illogical dream or those of
terrifying nightmare. Using these techniques, Heller describes a vast number of the conditions on this planet, and, in the end uses them to demonstrate his major theme that life is precious.

First in this discussion comes a survey of the thematic material itself. The novel is a potpourri of examinations of various aspects of the human condition. A few are madness, cruelty, perversion, terror, loneliness, love, hate, and justice. There are also sallies into religion, mysticism, and psychology. The novel itself is, after all, basically psychological in nature. A major theme is the effect on men's minds of dangerous wartime conditions, and most of the events in the novel are seen from the point of view of Captain John Yossarian, whose mental processes have definitely been affected by his wartime experience.

One of the most important themes of the novel is madness. It is against a background of madness that the action is played. *Catch-22* is set in a world gone mad. Each character, whether he is sane or not, is an involuntary point set in a matrix of madness. One of the most frequent questions asked of one character by another is, "are you crazy?" Although it would be a pointless task to count them, the number of times a character says to another, "you're crazy" would be staggering. Heller occasionally helps us toward an understanding of his own views on madness and sanity by telling us omnisciently whether a character is mad or sane: "There were many principles in which Clevinger believed passionately. He was crazy." (p. 17)
The world gone mad is the earth in World War II. It is in this world that Clevinger declares Yossarian insane because Yossarian has "an unreasonable belief that everyone around him was crazy," and because he had an "unfounded suspicion that people hated him and were conspiring to kill him." (p. 20) "... But Yossarian had proof, because strangers he didn't know shot at him with cannons every time he flew up into the air to drop bombs on them...." (p. 17) In the world gone mad Yossarian is one of the few sane men left. In the second chapter in which the tone of the novel is still generally light, Yossarian's sensations are described humorously: "Everywhere he looked was a nut, and it was all a sensible young gentleman like himself could do to maintain his perspective amid so much madness." (p. 20) Later, in the grim chapter entitled "The Eternal City," the view is similar but the tone quite dark: "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...." (p. 405)

One of the very first premises which the reader must accept is that war is madness and that the defenders must perforce become just as mad as the aggressors. The reader must keep in mind that people who hate hunting because they can't bear to see the slaughter of animals will turn their attention during wartime to the design of more "efficient" machineguns. Men who would be shocked and disgusted by the shotgun murder by thieves of a sleeping family will kill thousands of innocent people with bombs, gas, and bullets in order to
steal some coal or iron ore. The reader must remember that it was in the war depicted in this novel that a corps of the most educated, gentle and humane men in the world gathered in the Southwestern United States to construct the deadliest and most destructive weapon in history.

Hand and hand with the madness of the war goes the real ugly perversions of some of the characters. The most notable example is Captain Aardvaark or Aarfy. Perversion in Catch-22 is a denial of healthy, natural urges such as the sexual drive. In Catch-22 Hungry Joe is not perverted because he obtains pleasure from photographing intercourse and naked women. He is just a bit more frantic about sexual satisfaction than some of the other characters. He doesn't harm anyone or anything in his pursuit of happiness. Aarfy, however, is uninterested in the Roman prostitutes. He says it is because he "never paid for it in his life."

This proves not to be the case. Aarfy's sexual satisfaction comes from sadistic cruelty. Throughout the novel, Aarfy seems not quite human. There is something wrong with someone who is not at all afraid while the Germans are shooting cannons at him.

Another character who is unmoved by the German's cannons is Havermeyer, who flies in a straight line until he sees the bombs he has just dropped hit the target. Havermeyer likes killing. He derives pleasure from killing tiny mice with a tremendous army pistol. It is Havermeyer, by the way, who calls Hungry Joe crazy. Characters
like Aerfy and Havermeyer, who seem to be little concerned about the safety of their own lives, make life difficult for the sane, "crazy" characters like Yossarian and Dunbar.

Part of being sane in *Catch-22* is having the intelligence to be afraid. Those who are sane, in that they value their own lives, are the ones most plagued by terror. Yossarian is the character in the novel who is most truly alive in that he is the man who feels things most intensely. He has the potential for great happiness and equally great unhappiness. He finds himself in a situation which will deprive him of happiness and even his life if he does not

In the end he strikes a blow for his own survival and that of others by refusing to fly more missions so that Colonel Cathcart can become a general.

Hungry Joe is also thirsty for life and responds with terror at the great possibility of losing his life. His terror takes the form of nightmares. He has the nightmares only after he has finished his missions, however. It is waiting for Colonel Cathcart to raise the number of missions required for recycling that upsets Hungry Joe's sleep. He is more terrified of having to go back into combat than he is of combat itself. Hungry Joe is a victim of Colonel Cathcart, one of the monsters of *Catch-22*.

*Catch-22* is filled with monsters. These monsters do not necessarily desire evil, but they are constant threats to the survival and happiness of the characters in the novel who really love life. The imagery throughout
the novel presents dangers as being gigantic, overwhelming and mysterious in this power.

Yossarian and a few other characters in Catch-22 are clutching at life in a constant battle with the forces which would take life away. The characters who deliberately and without protest risk life almost inevitably lose it to the hungry powers of death.

Yossarian sees these monsters everywhere. They are the ugly, black, malignant-looking puffs of anti-aircraft fire, Colonel Cathcart and Colonel Korn, and the organs of his own body which may turn coat and kill him from within. There are monsters also which Heller just creates. Consider the white, turnip-shaped cloud that got Clevinger. The very B-25 bombers flown by the characters of Catch-22 are described as ugly ungainly beasts, but the real monster in Catch-22 is the great tangled bureaucracy of the military organization. Here is Yossarian's true enemy.

The bureaucracy in Catch-22 does get the job done. The bombs do get dropped, and the allies do win the war. It is the abuses which are fostered by the bureaucracy which make it a monster. Without the bureaucratic arrangement that has been set up by Colonel Cathcart could not force the men to fly more missions. The system has left the possibility of a Cathcart open. Where a possibility of abuse exists within a system then someone will seize the opportunity and make the possibility a reality. This could be called "Heller's
Law" of bureaucratic abuse. Milo's activities could not have been possible without the bureaucratic system of the allied and Axis military organizations.

The bureaucratic monster also makes possible the official "death" of Doc Daneeka. To the bureaucrats and to those living under the bureaucracy the stamp of officiality makes it so. A piece of paper, a pilot's manifest falsely filled out, saying that Doc Daneeka was aboard an airplane that crashed makes the doctor's death a bureaucratic reality. The people on the ground who saw the crash of the plane while Doc Daneeka was right in their midst suddenly do not see him anymore. He is denied medical care and food. He isn't paid. He doesn't need these things because he is dead. The bureaucrats' disease even infects Yossarian and Dunbar. In Catch-22 Dunbar is A. Fortiori if the temperature card on his hospital bed says so. Yossarian becomes Warrant Officer Homer Lumley merely by getting into the bed so identifying him. To Yossarian, having in his tent the personal effects of Mudd, a flyer killed before he had officially checked into the squadron, is the same as having the dead man himself there. Sergeant Towser can do nothing about it, because as far as he is concerned Mudd never even existed.

Clevinger laughs at the idea that if someoné just walks up to the map at the base on Pianosa and moves the
bombline, then the Great Big Siege on Bologna will be lifted. That is exactly what Yossarian does, and that is exactly what happens. Temporarily, by changing one little cog in the bureaucratic machine, Yossarian makes a symbolic change into a bureaucratic reality.

Heller uses The Glorious Loyalty Oath Crusade as an absurd scale model of the whole military bureaucracy in order to satirize it. Heller gives us a hint as to how a bureaucracy can be skirted or opposed. One simply has to frighten the bureaucracy. Major____ de Coverly shatters the Great Loyalty Oath Crusade simply by frightening it away. The August major is a fearsome mystery to everyone including the nasty mastermind of the Crusade, Captain Black. The Crusade worked by instilling fear of punishment in its victims. When the man of whom the mastermind was most afraid opposed it, it vanished into thin air. Yossarian is able to avoid punishment for his activities because Colonel Cathcart is afraid of his name.

Another aspect of the bureaucratic monster satirized by Heller is the geometrical accumulation of both pieces of paper and underlings. Major Major witnesses the startling phenomenon of one piece of paper growing into a book-sized sheaf as it gathers addenda and memoranda. The addition of Colonel Scheisskopf to his staff allows General Peckem to "begin agitating for two additional majors, four additional captains, sixteen additional lieutenants and untold quantities of additional enlisted
men..." (p.312) Peckem tells Scheisskopf, "Nothing we do in this large department of ours is really very important, and there's never any rush. On the other hand, it is important that we let people know we do a great deal of it."" (p.314)

One of the factors that allows Peckem's department to do a great deal of nothing is the use of machines and modern systems of communications. IBM machines were already at work during the war and were able to transform Major Major into a major from a private without his going through the lower ranks. They also provided the dying colonel in the hospital who was attended by all other kinds of "-ologists" with a cetologist who tried to discuss Moby Dick with him.

Communications is the means by which the system stays together. Communications also provides the possibility of another abuse. The hierarchy of the system is rather meaningless because a man of the very lowest rank can render a general nearly powerless if the low-ranking man is in the right position. Ex-Pfc. Wintergreen is in a position to exercise power because he is a mail-clerk and has access to a mimeograph machine. He has the cleverness to make many high-ranking men dependent upon him. When he has secured his position by that means, he is no longer vulnerable to punishment for abuse of the system.

Ex-Pfc. Wintergreen is a competitor of Milo
Kinderbinder's. Milo is the human incarnation of one of the other great monsters of Catch-22: the monster of unchecked capitalism which survives by human sacrifice. It is no random quip of black humor when Heller says that in Africa, to which Milo had extended the power of his great cartel, graven images of Milo's "moustached face could be found overlooking primitive stone altars red with human blood." (p. 233) Also note that in the "Thanksgiving" chapter, XXXIV, the men "give humble thanks to Milo" for the gigantic meal he provides. One critic has gone so far as to say that Milo ... "is to be conceived of as the supreme deity of this insane world." He also says that Milo ... "does indeed represent the prince of powers of the air" and that he is "unmistakeably identified with Satan."¹

When an opportunity presents itself for Milo to make a little more money he cannot resist it. Men's lives mean nothing when the syndicate stands to benefit. He steals carbon dioxide from life jackets, parachutes, and morphine from first-aid kits. In the place of these goods he puts a little card stating that "What's good for M&M enterprises is good for the country," a direct echo of the Eisenhower administration member's remark concerning General Motors. Even a child, Nately's whore's kid sister, can be sacrificed to the god of acquisiteness. When Yossarian and Milo are in Rome, Milo abandons the search for the homeless child
because he learns of the profit to be made in illegal tobacco.

After Milo bombs the base on Pianosa with his planes, the public is outraged until he opens his books and his tremendous profit is revealed. His profit redeems him, because, as everyone knows, "the business of America is business," and one cannot blame a man for making a profit. There are no human feelings in the god of acquisitiveness. Milo is filled with "crushing bereavement" as he watches Snowden's funeral with Yossarian. He is upset not because he is in the presence of death, which the chaplain feels is "arcane and supernatural," but because he is taking such a tremendous loss on his Egyptian cotton deal.

Milo is thoroughly scandalized by the fact that Yossarian is giving away the fruit which he is being given by the mess hall for his liver condition. To Milo, giving anything away is a terrible heresy. Where is the profit in it? How can anyone do such a thing? It is un-American. In the world where acquisition is god what could be the motive of giving something away and getting nothing tangible in return? Milo would be completely satisfied if Yossarian were getting some kind of tax break by his philanthropy. Also, it should be remembered that Milo's prime motive in helping Yossarian search for Natelly's whore's kid sister is that Milo owes Yossarian favors.
Milo is merely tendering payment for services rendered. Also, in Milo's system of thought, the Germans are not the enemy. They are good businessmen who pay their bills and members of his syndicate.

The third great monster in Heller's catalogue is the war itself. War, bureaucracy, and the god of acquisitiveness make up a kind of ghastly, interlocking trinity of forces bent on the sacrifice of human life and happiness. It is extremely interesting that most of the characters on Pianosa do not really understand the nature of the business they are engaged in. To Colonel Cuthbert, a few more casualties on a dangerous mission will enable him to send more of his stupid, impersonal letters of condolence, thereby increasing his chances of appearing in the Saturday Evening Post. To the Captains Pritchard and Tren, war is a great adventure which is the greatest event of their lives. None of these men has learned Snowden's secret. There is one point in the novel in which many of the men are told Snowden's secret, but Heller does not tell us whether they understand it or not. This incident is the sudden, horrifying death of Kid Sampson when he is cut in half at the beach by the propeller of McWatt's airplane. The people on the beach are in the business of killing and being killed, and this particular event should not cause the wholesale panic and revulsion which the people evince. Death should almost be a matter of course for them. Why, then, do they scream and run away? Why do they continue
in the winter to sneak "...to peek through the bushes
like a pervert at the moldering stumps "of Kid Sampson's
legs where they had washed up on the beach? Why do not
the men from the mortuary go to the beach and dispose of
the legs? (p. 339)

The closest Heller comes to giving us reasons for
this behavior is when he tells us that Yossarian auto-
matically thinks of Snowden's "eternal, immutable secret"
whenever he thinks of Kid Sampson's rotting legs. Kid
Sampson's death, in its suddenness and goriness, is the
nearest equivalent the large number of people at the beach
can experience to the individual, isolated experience had
by Yossarian in the airplane. "Man is matter." That is
the secret which is revealed to the masses on the beach.
Heller does not tell us the secret in so many words until
the next to last chapter of the novel. He prefers to hint at it
in gross and subtle ways throughout the novel so that the reader
will be even more shocked because, paradoxically, he is
prepared for the secret. Heller implants the secret in
the reader before its actual revelation so that it will
be sensed by him subliminally, and he will be horrified when
he discovers that his subconscious was right.

One of the subtle hints given by Heller appears in
the chaplain's "mystical experiences." In reality there is
nothing spiritual about them at all. The naked man in the
tree really is a naked man in the tree. The chaplain's
experiences of *déjà vu*, *jamas vu*, and *prescuc vu* are explained as a physical phenomenon, an aberration of memory. Without spirit, mysticism, and an afterlife, then, the end of life is the return of death, a reversion to an inert, totally unconscious state. Yossarian and the others are faced with the existential problem of a life that ends absurdly in death.

In this light, *Catch-22* can be viewed as an existential *Bildungsroman*, in which Yossarian is the young man faced with the problem of making meaningless life meaningful.

Yossarian's experience with Snowden is the turning point in his life. It is his initiation, to speak archetypically. After his experience with Snowden, Yossarian is like Adam, except that he is no longer innocent. This raises a problem concerning Yossarian's nakedness after the event. It is a reversal of the events in Genesis. However, it is a reversal only on the surface. Adam before the fall is protected from the difficulties of life by the Garden of Eden. Yossarian before the Spilling of the secret is protected by the psychological defenses built up to protect the individual against the reality of man's materiality. After the Spilling, Yossarian is unprotected. The terrible knowledge cannot be avoided, and Yossarian, like Adam, is stripped of his protection. The clothing symbolizes the protection we all carry with us. After the Spilling, however, Yossarian, unlike Adam, does not mourn his lost
innocence. He spurns the clothing until the secret is thoroughly embedded in his consciousness so that it cannot be repressed. The defenses cannot be reestablished.

There are other parallels to the Genesis story in the events following Snowden's death. Some of the critics have noticed these parallels and commented on them. One critic has compared Milo's offer of the chocolate covered cotton ball to the temptation by Satan in Genesis. The tree from which Yossarian watches Snowden's funeral is openly compared to the tree in the Garden of Eden, and Milo represents Satan. Milo strokes the tree "affectionately" and comments on it "with proprietary gratitude." Yossarian tells him, "It's the tree of life... and the knowledge of good and evil, too." Milo replies that, "it's a chestnut tree." (p. 257) Milo is distracting Yossarian in order to try to get him to accept the temptation.

After the events surrounding Snowden's death, Yossarian begins his quest for a way to live with Snowden's secret. At first, the quest takes the shape of an intensified drive for survival. To survive is equivalent to avoiding as long as possible the return to inertness which is the inevitable end of a living thing.

Mere survival is not enough, however. Yossarian is offered the chance to buy his survival by submitting to the "odious deal" offered by Cathcart and Korn. He does accept the deal because he feels that there is no
other hope of surviving. He is faced with a choice.
He can accept the deal and live with the knowledge that he
saved his own neck without helping the other pilots, or
he can face court-martial for being absent without leave
in Rome. However, as Milne points out in his article,
"facing the court-martial would represent a paralysis of
the will, a desire to maintain purity of conscience at the
cost of inaction."³

The important word here is "inaction." Yossarian
finally comes to the realization that mere survival makes
life truly meaningless, and that the only way to establish
even the illusion of meaning is to make some positive action
against the forces which strive to make life unhappy.
Yossarian is a character in a novel in which "exploitation
and the submission to exploitation" are "the two great sins."⁴
Cathcart and Korn are the sinners and they are inviting
Yossarian to sin with them. If he allows himself to be
court-martialed he stays out of sin but the sinners escape
unscathed. If, however, he flees from the sinners and
thereby renders them vulnerable to rebellion by the
other men they are exploiting, then he has taken some
action against the forces of evil and has given his life
new meaning.⁵

The horrors of exploitation are impressed upon
Yossarian in the "Eternal City" chapter. In this chapter,
which owes much to Homer, Dante, Dostoyevsky, Kafka, and
Joyce, Yossarian witnesses the sin of exploitation, but
he does not fully comprehend the sin of submission.
The seeds are planted but they do not come to fruition until after Yossarian's closest brush with death, the stabbing by Nately's whore. When he returns to full consciousness he knows that he cannot submit to the odious deal, thereby aiding and abetting the colonels. He must strike against them, and the only way to do that is to run away from them. Here is Heller's trick on the shallow reader. An act which seems like cowardice, is really an act of great courage and commitment. Yossarian faces the necessity of running away with doubt at first. It is the hope granted by the news of Orr's safe arrival in Sweden that bolsters Yossarian's courage and gives him the strength of will to escape with the determination to succeed.

At the end of *Catch-22* the message is that the beauty and meaning of life lies in resisting and combatting the forces which threaten to end it. The existential commitment here is similar to the redeeming value of Streben in Goethe's *Faust*, except that the redemption is not found in some supernatural afterlife but in this, the only life.

Heller has chosen to present his theme that life can be beautiful and extremely valuable using an absurd, surrealist style. At this point this analysis will switch from examination of the thematic material to an examination of Heller's peculiar style and its appropriateness.
The general style of *Catch-22* is a kind of comic surrealism. The word general is used because the use of surrealism in the novel is not always comic. The particular techniques used by Heller such as absurdity, black humor and the creation of a dream-like atmosphere may be regarded as surrealistic techniques.

The surrealist, according to one definition, has the "aim of achieving effects of 'surrealism' through the juxtaposition and combination of verbal images and physical objects ordinarily considered incongruous." Apparently this is Heller's aim in the passages which stretch the reader's willingness to suspend disbelief. In order to impress the reader with the insanity of the war, the military, and the world in general, Heller will describe a scene or event in such a way as to seem completely unbelievable and fantastic. In a surrealist painting the parts are more realistic than the whole, but the unreality of the whole gives the parts their shocking realism. This is the effect Heller produces in the more fantastic scenes of *Catch-22*. For instance, it is almost inconceivable that Aarfy could actually get away with the rape and murder of the servant girl in the "Eternal City" chapter while Yossarian is arrested for being absent without leave when confronting Aarfy with the gravity of murder. By straining the reader's willingness to suspend disbelief in this scene, Heller is making a very loud scream in the
night against the warped system of rewards and punishments which seems to prevail in the world.

Heller does not strain Coleridge's suspension too often. He prefers to use the devices of absurdity and black humor more often. The funnier parts of the book are most often simply exposes of the absurdity of some of men's activities. Much like the awarding of "Surrealism in Real" prizes in the annual "Dubious Achievement Awards" of Esquire magazine, Heller lampoons the real-life foolishness of many of our institutions. In Catch-22 the most obvious target is, of course, the military.

In Chapter XXXIII, entitled "Nately's Whore," the author literally strips away the veneer of superiority that is an officer's uniform. He pulls off the bogus respectability of the officer's uniform like a breakaway costume in a burlesque show when he describes Nately's whore surrounded by a crowd of "naked military bigshots." Heller could have left the dart in at this time without further twisting, but the reader is in the grimmer last half of the book, and some comic relief is liberally granted. The reader (if he is not a sensitive military bigshot) can now relish with glee the nude colonel's chagrin when Dunbar says, "You don't look like an American colonel. You look like a fat man with a pillow in front of him." Heller's devastating blow is struck when he makes the general say, "We'll never be able to convince anyone we're
superior without our uniforms." (pp.346-349)

Heller also takes obvious delight in impishly, turning solemn military rituals into Swiftian spectacles of folly. In the "Lieutenant Scheisskopf" chapter he withers parades, one of the army's most beloved rituals. He describes the "impressive fainting ceremony" while the men are in formation before the parade and puts the word "absurd" into the mind of Yossarian concerning parades. The parading squadrons won pennants as prizes for their superior marching. "To Yossarian the idea of pennants as prizes was absurd. No money went with them, no class privileges. Like Olympic medals and tennis trophies, all they signified was that someone had done something of no benefit to anyone more capably than anyone else. The parades themselves were equally absurd." (p. 71)

While he is devastating the military way of life, Heller also reduces chauvinism to a level of total absurdity with his description of the Glorious Loyalty Oath Crusade. By describing the incredible waste of time and energy expended by the men who administer and take the oaths, the author shows how one man, the slimy Captain Black, can reduce hundreds of men to cowards by means of a silly appeal to their fear of punishment for not observing the American fetish for patriotism.

Along with absurdity, Heller uses black humor as a comic device. Some may object to the use of black
humor by an author who seems to profess to be so humane. What possible purpose can be served by using such terrible things as pain, death, and blasphemy as a vehicle for producing laughter? The answer is that Heller does not use black humor wantonly like a dirty jokester. When Heller uses black humor it is for the purpose of bitter and pointed protest. The protest is bitter because, in general, the objects of the protest cannot be remedied, but the author feels that the reader should be aware of these wrongs in order that he know the face of the enemies of happiness. Some mental satisfaction can be gained by laughing in the faces.

The bitterest black humor protest in the novel is against the Judaeo-Christian God. This protest is concentrated in chapter XVIII, entitled "The Soldier Who Saw Everything Twice." In this chapter Yossarian has his hilarious theological debate with Lieutenant Scheisskopf's wife. We laugh with shocked, guilty glee when Yossarian refers to God's "warped, evil, scatological mind." (p.178) If there is such a God, Yossarian wants to know why he had to make such a terrible mess of creation. As the chapter proceeds it becomes apparent that Heller would like to know the same thing.

The concluding segment of the chapter exploits death and grief. In this segment the doctors persuade Yossarian to impersonate the dead son of a family who
have traveled all the way from New York to the Southwest to see the boy before he dies. The humor and the pathos mix most effectively. Yossarian tells them that his name is not Giuseppe but Yossarian, but none of the family notices that he is not their son or brother. The mother continues to call him Giuseppe over the brother's protests that his name is now Yossarian. "What difference does it make?" the mother answered..."He's dying."

Heller's protest against the way in which Yahweh has established the human condition is stated by the father who tells Yossarian to tell God "...it ain't right for people to die when they're young... I don't think he knows it ain't right..." The mother, "who seemed to know," tells Yossarian to dress warm in heaven. (pp.184-5)

In this scene the humor arises from the absurd treatment of the distressful situation. The pathos and the protest are all the more powerful because of their contiguity with the comedy.

In the "Soldier in White" segments Heller uses pain and injury as the vehicles of black humor. In the first segment, Heller's treatment of the Soldier in White is irresistibly amusing even though his description of the soldier's bandages makes the reader almost feel the agony of the man. The irreverent remarks of Yossarian and Dunbar are the most darkly humorous parts. Heller, however, is not using the pain of the soldier just for another
sick joke. This time the black humor is used to dramatize further the extremely destructive influences of the pressures of war on the psyche. It is in the final Soldier in White chapter that Dunbar finally goes to pieces upon the return of the bandaged man.

Douglas M. Davis uses the psychiatrist scene from the "Nurse Duckett" chapter in his excellent anthology, The World of Black Humor. In this scene Heller makes his most overt statement concerning Yossarian's true sanity in a world gone mad: "You're immature," says Major Sanders the psychiatrist. "You've been unable to adjust to the idea of war.... You have a morbid aversion to dying. You have deep-seated survival anxieties. And you don't like bigots, bullies, snobs or hypocrites. You're antagonistic to the idea of being robbed, exploited, degraded, humiliated or deceived. Misery depresses you. Ignorance depresses you. Slums depress you. Greed depresses you. Crime depresses you. Corruption depresses you. You really are crazy!" It is this psychiatrist's list of reasons for considering Yossarian insane that proves him one of the few sane men left.

The final stroke of black humor in this chapter comes when A. Fortiori is sent home instead by bureaucratic mistake. This unjust turn of events is another example of the weird system of rewards and punishments that seems to apply in this world. In the world of
Catch-22, just as in the real world some men are wealthy without ever having to work and others struggle hard all their lives and still can never rise out of their poverty.

This eternal pattern of frustration contributes to another surrealistic device used by Heller in Catch-22: nightmare. Norman Mailer has called the whole novel a nightmare in an essay he has written about contemporary writers. This is something of an exaggeration. Heller prefers to intersperse the nightmarish sequences between passages which are ribaldly humorous or rather realistic. Reading Catch-22 is somewhat like walking through a gallery of pictures by Andrew Wyeth in company with the absurdly playful, surrealistic paintings of René Magritte hanging next to the ghastlier creations of Salvador Dali.

Heller's nightmares follow several basic patterns. One of these patterns is based on the kind of dream which is basically unremarkable or even pleasant which turns viciously into a horrifying ordeal. An example of this is Major Major's experience at the basketball court. In disguise he joins the players who have ostracized him from the court because of his sudden promotion to squadron commander upon the death of Major Duluth. The other officers pretend not to recognize him in his disguise of false glasses and moustache. After he is on the court they begin to shove him about and finally beat him away from the court. The reader is at first amused at his disguise.
Then the reader feels pity for the pathetic little man who wants only to play basketball amidst an atmosphere of jolly camaraderie. Pathos is followed by shocked disbelief at the nightmarish turn of events.

Heller's debt to Kafka for his nightmarish style is especially evident in the two interrogation scenes. These scenes are examples of the nightmare pattern of helplessness in the hands of evil persecutors. The first scene is the interrogation of Clevinger before the Action Board at the training camp in the Southwestern United States. The second is the interrogation of the chaplain on Pianosa for being Washington Irving.

Clevinger's interrogation before the Action Board is reminiscent of Kafka's *The Trial*. The victim in this case, does, however, have some idea of what he is charged. Clevinger's nightmare is being a man with a firm belief in the efficacy of sweet reason. He finds himself before men whose reason is blinded by hate or entirely nonexistent. It is the "brutal, uncloaked, inexorable hatred of the members of the Action Board" that shocks Clevinger. Clevinger is aghast to learn that "... nowhere in the world, ... not even among all the grisly connivers in all the beer halls in Munich and everywhere else, were there men who hated him more." (p.80)

Hate and malevolence are the foremost ingredients of the chaplain's interrogation scene also. The chaplain
is different from Clevinger in various respects. He also is a man of faith, however wavering it may be. His faith lies in God and religion rather than in reason. He lacks faith in himself, however, and he doesn't think of God at all while he is in the hands of his cruel persecutors. He hasn't the vaguest idea of what he could have done until he is shown one of the letters with which Yossarian has tampered. His persecutors really do not care whether he is guilty or not. They are sadists in search of a victim. There is nothing that the chaplain can do to stop them. In this scene the reader sees, though it is not directly stated the application of one of the clauses of the nonexistent Catch-22. The clause referred to here is the one that says, "They have the right to do whatever we can't stop them from doing." (p.398) Whether it is just or not that is exactly what the chaplain's persecutors believe. The chaplain is completely at their mercy, and since the men are not men but unreasoning brutes they do have the right to treat him as they please according to the law of the jungle.

But they do not kill him or even beat him. The men release him out into the daylight with the warning that they've got his number, and that they will get him when they are ready. When the chaplain emerges from the dungeon into the bright light of day the effect is the same as an actual awakening from a nightmare.
Herein lies one of Heller's best-conceived techniques for establishing the illusion of nightmare. The character experiencing the nightmare is almost always shown afterwards in a normal light of day situation. Also, the character carries with him the same jarred, uneasy sensation after the nightmare which a sleeper carries with him the morning after, even if he cannot remember the details of the dream. Most people have experienced a nagging fear or worry the morning after a bad dream only to realize with a start that what they are worried, chagrined, or frightened about was only a dream figment. The difference is that the morning after the dreamer can experience the sudden rush of relief, but in Catch-22 the nightmare really happens. In Catch-22 the dream just does not "seem so real;" it is real. The nightmares in Catch-22 are hideously grotesque situations and events which cannot be real but seem so real and then are real. To understand what life is like for Yossarian and other characters in Catch-22, one only has to imagine having a nightmare, waking up, and then learning that the events of the dream really have occurred during one's sleep.

Snowden's death, the turning point in Yossarian's life, is the major example of the last mentioned horror. Yossarian suffers the shattering experience of learning Snowden's terrible secret. He falls into a profound state of psychological shock and is kept under sedation for two days. When he returns to a normal state of
consciousness he cannot put off the nightmare of Snowden’s death as an unreal event. It did indeed happen, and this reality permanently alters Yossarian’s behavior.

Snowden’s death and Milo’s bombing of his own base both follow another nightmare pattern. Both events are sustained periods of terror which occur without warning. The description of Milo’s air-raid has the same hideous, seeming realism of the bad dream from which the victim cannot awake. When it is over, like Snowden’s death, it is all too real.

The tones of nightmare rise to a crescendo in the final three chapters of the novel until Yossarian regains full consciousness after the operation on the wound inflicted by Nately’s whore. It is in the final chapter that Yossarian awakes from the compounded nightmare of all the events which have happened to him during the weird time scheme of the novel. In the Mike Nichols film based on the novel, the director began with the premise that all the events of the film run through Yossarian’s mind after he is stabbed.

At the end of the novel one gets the impression that life will no longer be so nightmarish. Indeed, the absurdist style is most applicable only to the description of life that is rendered absurd by the situation. While he is in a situation in which he is open to exploitation, Yossarian is living an absurd existence. He is rendered
into a thing when he should be a flexible, intelligent being capable of preventing his own exploitation by the powers of evil and corruption. It is because Heller intends to impress upon us the supreme value of life that he makes it seem so absurd. Absurdity can only be removed from the human situation when the individual makes his commitment to avoid being exploited and avoid exploiting others. To avoid being turned into an inert thing before death makes this unavoidable should be the goal of every human being.
Footnotes


2. Ibid. 59.

3. Ibid. 62.

4. Ibid. 59.

5. Ibid. 62.


N. B. All page references in this paper to Catch-22 are drawn from the Modern Library edition.
Bibliography

Novels:

Books and Anthologies:

Articles:


Ramsey, Vance. "From Here to Absurdity: Heller's Catch-22." In Whitbread above. 97-118.


Stern, J. P. "War and the Comic Muse." Comparative Literature. XX, 193-216.


