

## THE THEME OF WWII IN JOSEPH HELLER'S NOVEL "CATCH-22"

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### ABSTRACT

This article is devoted to the theme and time –structure of the American writer Joseph Heller's novel "Catch-22". In addition, the author uses black humor in his novel in order to highlights that with the help of humor the author demonstrates the absurdity, anxiety and bureaucracy of the war. As well as the time and structure are also arguable thing in this novel.

**Keywords:** WWII, Joseph Heller, Catch-22, anachronies, time, structure, black humor or dark humor.

### INTRODUCTION

World War II began in 1939 and lasted for 6 years until 1945. It is important to say that WWII was the deadliest conflict in all of human history. It involved more countries, cost more money and killed more people than any other war in the human history. It is obvious from history not only the Uzbeks but also the Ukrainians, Russians, Kazakhs, Americans, British and other nations fight against the enemies courageously.

It is generally estimated that more than fifty million people lost their lives in the Second World War. Gruesome acts, in which both soldiers and civilians were dying because of absurd desire of some individuals to gain control over the whole world, are not rare in the novels and the way such deeds are depicted is almost breath-taking. This feature seems to be common for many authors whose books deal with the topic of war.

When reading war novels, it is nearly impossible not to come across passages where death and cruel actions are being talked about. The intention of the author to present stories and events acting as true to life is achieved by means of high descriptiveness and naturalistic mode of narration, which, on the other hand, the reader may find macabre or even disgusting from time to time.

The impact of World War II in literature is multifaceted. It has given the rise to diverse form of literary expressions ranging from memoir to non-fiction to fictionalized true stories, from historical studies to journalistic works and dealing with in terms of economic and social context. The writers and literary people in the vast universe of writings inspired by WWII are again very diverse groups of ex-soldiers, historians, victims and others of different countries. All war novels seem to be highly descriptive with a great emphasis on detail in order to make the reader feel as if he were present in the war himself. A perfect portrayal of the environment can be regarded as one of the writers' major goals. In this sense, everything looks very vivid and close to reality. It is often whole paragraphs that contain information serving to depict the concrete situation fully and with all nuances.

One may object that there is no point in discussing this feature since all war novels logically make use of various war events and the war in general becomes the primary theme. However,

it is possible to find instances of books in which this particular topic represents only one type among others, equally important. Although Waldmeir finds it unfortunate to categorize war novels because “they refuse to hold still, and they tend to flow into and through one another” (p 10), he learns from John T. Fredericks’ and Chester Eisinger’s divisions so as to make an organization of his own, which is as follows:

- “1) novels concerned primarily with a realistic portrayal of combat;
- 2) those which are principally studies of the effects of war upon an individual psyche; and
- 3) those which are above all else ideological” .

The idea of war, seen as the major focus, is what all militarily-oriented novels apparently have in common but the way it is integrated into the story can be understood as a distinguishing trait. So, the famous American writer Joseph Heller also write about the war and criticize it harshly with his novel “Catch-22”. Heller is also one of the authors who participates and attacks against the war. Heller's tragicomic vision of modern life, found in all of his novels, focuses on the erosion of humanistic values and highlights the ways in which language obscures and confuses reality. In addition, Heller's use of anachronism reflects the disordered nature of contemporary existence. His protagonists are antiheroes who search for meaning in their lives and struggle to avoid being overwhelmed by such institutions as the military, big business, government, and religion. *Catch-22* is most often interpreted as an antiwar protest novel that foreshadowed the widespread resistance to the Vietnam War that erupted in the late 1960s. While Heller's later novels have received mixed reviews, *Catch-22* continues to be highly regarded as a trenchant satire of the big business of modern warfare. (Sorkin, Adam J. (1993) University Press of Mississippi. p. 150)

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review is dedicated to the study of the WWII in Joseph Heller’s “Catch-22” and its structure and theme as well as how the black humor was used by the author. *Catch-22* is Joseph Heller’s the most famous novel. Through the protagonist, Yossarian’s struggle against Catch-22, the novel describes the life and inner world of the American soldiers and officers who are stationed in an Italian Island Pianosa during World War II. Being full of flash backs, repetitions, and conflicting words, the long novel is complex both in language and structure. Since it was first published in 1961, many critics have been written about it. Some critics, especially some early critics, held the view that *Catch-22* lacked the design and structure. However, later critics hold the view that the structure of *Catch-22* was meticulously worked out by Heller, and it has some thematic significance. Heller’s view of the absurd is often imposed on the events he presents. Heller takes an advantage of using authorial action, making it as a positive narrative technique. In this novel there appeared conflict of interests between what Yossarian who is the main hero, knows to be his personal interest (which suggests that he stop risking his life by flying missions) and what he is told is his interest as part of his country (which demands that he continue flying missions). Yossarian's experiences teach him the absurdity of a society that misperceives so badly the value of the individual. He witnesses the national, ultimately inhuman spread of M & M Enterprises; he deals with the organization men who seize opportunities to govern; he struggles to deal with the conventions crystallized in *Catch-22*. The substance of the novel is reiterated by the manner of its telling - by a structure and diction that confuse, frustrate, and shock. Heller noted that his novel *Catch-22* gave the impression of being a formless novel. (*Catch-22*. New York: Simon and Schuster 1961)

To give the impression is the operative phrase here; for if *Catch-22* seems formless, it is only because its material is organized into so many superimposed

patterns. The novel's chapters may be organized by their relative logicality and degree of fragmentation.

According to Jon Solomon, *Catch-22 is one of the formless novels which a rare species. A best examination of Heller's novel reveals not only that it has form, but that this form is carefully constructed to support the pervasive theme of absurdity, in fact to create its own dimension of absurdity. The most significant aspect of the structure of Catch-22 is its chronology...* (Jan Solomon "The Structure of Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*" *Critique*, Vol. 9 (1967): pp. 46–57.)

From this statement we can understand that the novel consists of numerous anachronies. The novel begins in medias res. At the time the novel begins, the number of missions has been raised to 45, and all of the important missions have already been finished: Ferrara, Orivieto, Bologna, and Avignon. That means that most crucial events have already occurred. So Mr Solomon wants to say that its impossible to write two time schemes. Heller creates a structural absurdity as well as he tries to obey the absurdity of characters and events in the novel. It is essential to mention that there is an arguable thing about narration style. While Jan Solomon (in "The Structure of Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*," quoted above) feels that the time-sequences are contradictory, Doug Gaukroger (in "Time Structure in *Catch-22*") argues that they are not. He said that *After spending so much time proving that the chronological structure of Catch-22 is indeed possible, only one question has why Heller spent so much effort in obfuscation. The answer is, I believe, twofold. The most doubtless is the effect created by treating all events as equally present. The aim is to confuse the reader's sense of order and to upset his basic assumptions regarding proper form and structure. The unorthodox treatment of time in Catch-22 is both parallel to, and prepares the reader for, the unorthodox treatment of the subject matter. It is only fitting that a novel which deals with an apparently absurd and confused world should be written in an apparently absurd and confused style.* (Douglas Gaukroger "Time Structure in *Catch-22*" *Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction*, Volume XII, No. 2 (1967): pp. 70–85.) Moreover, the reach and extent of the analepses are not clearly indicated. There are many ellipses in retrospect, and almost all the durations of the ellipses in *Catch-22* are not indicated by the narrator. That makes it more difficult for the reader to find out the timeline of the story. Therefore, because of the numerous anachronies and their ambiguous extent, the reader has a feeling of being trapped in a chaotic and absurd world while reading through the novel, which is similar to the feeling of the characters in the story. Moreover, there are two images of *catch-22*'s structure: the first is novel's schematic organization and the second one is its fractured organization. Heller's incremental story-telling confuses in two ways. It fragments the scene being told, creating a situation in which every fact is presented out of context. To comprehend fully an event, the reader must recall and organize widely-separated pieces of data. Furthermore, the technique complicates efforts to understand what is happening by serving up clues which are either contradicting or baffling in their inadequacy.

However, the author wrote this novel in a humorous way, which that time called as a black humor. While the novel is somewhat narrowly focused on criticizing the American military and the bureaucracy that supports it, it is still well received by a vast audience. The reason that such a cynical work could be so popular is due to the humor Heller uses to convey his message. *Catch-22* is effective because the reader laughs at the absurdities of war and of the military in general. Generally speaking about black humor or dark humor, it was found in 1960 in America. Most dark humor novels of this time used the elements of absurdity, anxiety and labyrinth imagery. The author Frederick. R Karl supports that *the best humor in this novel derives from Yossarian's openness in a society closed to authenticity and a good faith. When the open character describes as a responsive, decent and sensitive, he throws himself to the closed*

*society as an unresponsive, fixed and unflexible. The results often can be tragic.* (Frederick. R. Karl *Contemporary American Novelists*, ed. Harry T. Moore pp. 134–142.)

Here, the author wants to say that with the help of the protagonist Yossarian, Heller describes the society. When the readers read this novel, they assume that it is antiwar novel, but the writer claims that it isn't the book's main purpose. Heller satirizes many aspects of society, but "nonetheless, in the eyes of the youth of the time Heller and his novel were most identified with the antiwar issue.

### **Analysis and results**

The fact that Heller was actually a bombardier in the U.S. Army Air Corps explains his vivid imagery of Yossarian's missions and his overt parody of the military in general. Heller is obviously concerned about the military, but also focuses on other social dilemmas he feels need to be addressed. Heller may satirize the bureaucracy of the military, but he never specifically protests America's involvement in WWII. Having fought in this war, Heller seems to maintain a level of patriotism even though he does not necessarily agree with certain aspects of the military itself.

On the other hand the author appeals to his audience and is able to criticize much more about society than he would be able to had his novel been written in a serious tone. People enjoy jokes and enjoy the process of comprehension that takes place when figuring out why something is funny. The sheer enjoyment of humor makes people much more open to the content matter being presented. If Heller were to have written his novel in a serious tone in 1961, people would likely have been put off by such negativity and harsh criticism of respected institutions. 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 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.* (Joseph Heller CATCH-22 ) The only thing going on was a war, and no one seemed to notice but Yossarian and Dunbar. Yossarian is one of the few "normal" characters found in the books, or at least he thinks he is. As the story progresses, it appears that no one is "normal." Values either no longer apply, or do in reverse. In this backwards world of Catch-22, where everyone is crazy, Heller uses black humor and satire to make light of an otherwise dismal situation.

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, the tenor of which is echoed in subsequent dialogue as well:

*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.

Satire in the book mainly attacks three general things: senior military officers, professional and business interests, and society's remarkable reliance on forms, papers, rules and regulations. From my point of view, to analyze and understand this novel is very difficult because while analyzing and learning this novel and author I faced up a lot of difficulties. One of the difficulties is the structure of time, he uses anachronies and flashbacks. For this reason the readers come across a bit of misunderstandings. Also, professions and businesses are attacked throughout the book. A very humorous example of this is the antics of Gus and Wes, Doc Daneeka's assistants. They are incredibly incompetent, as all they do is bring people to the hospital who have temperatures of 102 and above, painting their gums and toes with a gentian violet solution. The competency of the nurses can also be questioned, and their treatment of a man covered completely in bandages. The only thing the nurses do for him is to switch the bottles of liquid going in and out of his body (Magill 849). The doctors do not know what to do about Yossarian either. He stays to the infirmary for several weeks complaining about his liver. The doctors tell him it is not jaundice but they do not know what it is. Finally, they tell him that nothing is wrong with him at all and let him go. Another attack of businesses is the story of how Chief White Halfoat and his family were exploited by the American Oil Industry. Wherever they lived, workers found oil underneath, and kicked them off the land. Then they followed them to the next spot they planned to live. Every place they went there was oil.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion it is essential to mention that Joseph Heller was one of the representatives of postmodern writer. Naturally, his novels were written in postmodern way without form or employ a free play of words, structures as well as characters since it justifies the most interesting tenet of postmodernism, absurdism or irrationality. Within a postmodern setting, time does not restrict the human subject and the mind to one particular event or instance. There is a constant movement in the subject's mind that is retrospective as well as prospective, while not ignoring the present time too. As it is mentioned above that Heller in *Catch-22* incorporates dark humor in order to communicate an important message. This dark humor is a product of the 1960s, and reflects distinct qualities about this generation and culture. Absurdities, anxiety, and labyrinth imagery are key elements in the dark humor novels of this time, all of which are reflected in Heller's *Catch-22*. *Catch-22* is a concept everyone can understand. That's why it so quickly became part of the language — a phrase to be called upon when there seems no way out of the traps life can set for you and when humor really is the best response. Different formulations of "Catch-22" appear throughout the novel. The term is applied to various loopholes and quirks of the military system, always with the implication that rules are inaccessible to and slanted against those lower in the hierarchy. In chapter 6, Yossarian (the

protagonist) is told that *Catch-22* requires him to do anything his commanding officer tells him to do, regardless of whether these orders contradict orders from the officer's superiors.

Anderson says *Catch-22* took one of life's worst experiences and made it funny. Heller understood completely what soldiers encounter in war and identified with their frustration about being caught in a situation over which they have no control. He turned that frustration into his famous *Catch-22*, an idea that perfectly captures the absurdity of war and the mind-numbing bureaucracy that supports it. Heller's humor, says Anderson, is what makes the bookwork.

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