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Source: *Studies in American Humor*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (October 1974), pp. 99-106

Published by: American Humor Studies Association

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42573658>

Accessed: 27-07-2019 22:12 UTC

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CATCH-22 AND ANGRY HUMOR:
A STUDY OF THE NORMATIVE VALUES OF SATIRE

JAMES NAGEL

In one of the earliest reviews of Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, Whitney Balliett, writing in the *New Yorker*, charges that

Heller uses nonsense, satire, non-sequiturs, slap-stick, and farce. He wallows in his own laughter, and finally drowns in it. What remains is a debris of sour jokes, stage anger, dirty words, synthetic looniness, and the sort of antic behavior the children fall into when they know they are losing our attention.¹

It seems somewhat strange now to remember such initial misgivings about the humor of *Catch-22*, particularly in view of the fact that Heller's novel has become increasingly conspicuous among those discussed in studies of the comedy of horror, black humor, or, indeed, "angry" humor. The paradox inherent in each of these phrases indicates something of the complexity of any attempt to codify the humor of the novel, as does Balliett's variety of terms for it. There has not yet been published a single substantial article which specifies precisely what is funny about it, what the implications of such humor are, and what generic associations are implicit in its form.

The importance of genre classification for a study of the novel is, of course, a matter of attempting to come to it on its own terms, without imposing irrelevant standards and obscuring fundamental themes. This is a problem which many reviewers encountered when they judged *Catch-22* as a realistic "Novel" and found it wanting in verisimilitude, depth of characterization, and plot. However, a few recent critical studies attempt some classification of genre. In the best of these, Constance Denniston develops an interpretation of the book as a "romance-parody."² In other articles, Eric Solomon argues that it is a parody of serious war fiction,³ and Victor Milne calls it a mock-epic.⁴ These discussions, although they make some important contributions, do not satisfactorily describe the generic properties of *Catch-22*, for it is demonstrably a satire, essentially a Juvenalian satire which functions within the historical patterns of that form. What pure "comedy" exists is patently superficial, if enjoyable, and serves only as a surface for the underlying thematic foundation of the novel.

The humor of *Catch-22* is not the gentle entertainment of comedy but the harsh derision and directed social attack of satire. Unlike comedy, which depicts failures or excesses of basic human nature, the satire of

Heller's novel is selective, hitting out against definable groups within American society and creating a unified front against a corrupt and ridiculous enemy. In effect, as David Worcester theorizes, "Satire enters when the few convict the many of stupidity."⁵ In the case of *Catch-22*, one might say "stupidity and wickedness," for its objects of satire are portrayed as being both fools and knaves, and a sympathetic reader, laughing at the satirized subjects, feels himself to be a member of a select aristocracy based on virtue and intelligence. As Northrop Frye has indicated, satire requires at least two elements: humor resulting from the portrayal of fantasy, the grotesque, or the absurd; and a definable object of attack.⁶ *Catch-22* easily meets these requirements: Milo's bombing of his own squadron on Pianosa is fantasy; the old man of the whore house, to mention just one character, is grotesque; and the continuing logic and inexorability of the regulation *Catch-22* lapses into absurdity. The attack seems to center upon aggressive capitalism, bureaucracy, and certain "insane" and destructive elements of modern civilization which endure at the expense of humanity and compassion.

As an art form, *Catch-22* uses the standard devices of satire to enforce its traditional thesis that "vice is both ugly and rampant"⁷ and that the solution of the problem is to "live with fortitude, reason, . . . honor, justice, simplicity, the virtues which make for the good life and the good society."⁸ To make these points, the method of characterization becomes caricature: Heller's military officers, like Swift's Yahoos and Pope's Dunces, are reductive and distorted projections of human personality types. In this matter, Heller's novel is not so purely Juvenalian as Philip Roth's *Our Gang*, which launches a vituperative assault on thinly disguised individual human beings. Rather, in *Catch-22* each character becomes associated with an "aspect of the civilization under attack, the whole range embracing a wide variety of social levels and attitudes."⁹ The psychological equivalent of character reduction is monomania, and Heller is a master at portraying this condition: Milo Minderbinder, a modern reincarnation of Defoe's economic man, is a myopic encapsulation of the Madison Avenue mentality. He can make a profit on anything from making chocolate-covered cotton to selling supplies to the Germans, an enterprise he justifies in classical business terms. At one point he even has a Piltown Man for sale.¹⁰

Lieutenant Scheisskopf, who becomes a General before the novel is over, is perfectly willing to nail men together in formation, or to wire their hands to their sides, if it will result in more orderly parades. His decision not to do so is not the result of compassion but of the inaccessibility of nickel-alloy swivels and good copper wire. In addition to Milo and Scheisskopf, Captain Black (with his Loyalty Oath Crusade), General P. P.

Peckham (who wants all the tents to face Washington and thinks the USO should take over military operations—which it finally does), and Colonel Cathcart (who wants desperately to be featured in the *Saturday Evening Post*), are caricatures who cannot be evaluated by realistic standards. If they are to develop any functional thematic depth at all, they must be seen in their satiric roles as symbols of social attitudes, traditions, and patterns of behavior.

Just as the characterizations of *Catch-22* are within the framework of satire, so are other elements of the novel. For example, a traditional satiric plot tends to be both episodic and cyclical,¹¹ as are the rapid, almost jarring, shifts of scene in *Catch-22*. Also conventional in satire is the pattern of action which intensifies, rather than resolves, the central conflict. In addition, the setting of satire is often chaotic, crowded, and filled with images of corruption and decay. Alvin Kernan says that the satiric scene is one where “the deformed faces of depravity, stupidity, greed, venality, ignorance, and maliciousness group closely together for a moment, . . . break up, and another tight knot of figures collects. . . .”¹² Kernan cites as examples Juvenal’s Rome, Pope’s land of Dunces, and Don Juan’s London, but he could easily have used Heller’s setting: Aarfy for depravity, Cathcart for stupidity, Milo for greed, the old man for venality, and almost any of Yossarian’s superiors for maliciousness.

Yet another characteristic of satire, the ubiquitous image, has several expressions in Heller’s novel: images of a soldier covered entirely in white, of Yossarian naked in a tree at Snowden’s funeral, of the trunk of Kid Sampson tottering momentarily on a raft, and of the horrible moment when Yossarian opens Snowden’s flight jacket. These brutal and shocking images underscore the serious threats to human life which are behind Yossarian’s dilemma.

Perhaps the most significant dimension in which it is important to distinguish the humor of *Catch-22* from simple comedy is that of the normative values which are essential to satire. As Northrop Frye points out, unlike a comedy, a satire’s “moral norms are relatively clear, and it assumes standards against which the grotesque and absurd are measured.”¹³ From this point of view, a critical reading of the novel as a satire, indeed *any* reading of the novel, must formulate and describe those norms which are the basis of ethical conflict and which make the satire operative.

In his essay “Notes on the Comic,” W. H. Auden says that “satire flourishes in a homogeneous society with a common conception of the moral law, for satirist and audience must agree as to how normal people can be expected to behave, and in times of relative stability and contentment, for satire cannot deal with serious evil and suffering.”¹⁴

Auden's premises would seem to be viable in dealing with traditional satire but wholly inadequate in describing the mode of *Catch-22*. America is not a homogeneous society; it has no unifying moral law; these are not times of stability; and Heller's satire *does* deal with serious problems. What has happened to the satire of modern America is that the traditional conservative norm has been abandoned in favor of a "radical" one, one not endorsed by the majority of the population.

One of the effects of this fundamental alteration is to create an uneasy humor resulting from the singularity of the normative base. Such humor, often employing scenes of violence or even horror, has been variously described in criticism as "angry" or "black" comedy. The social implication of this device is to call into question the prevailing ethical structure of the society, rather than to use its norms as a point of reference. Heller's method is the inversion of the satirical mode employed by Aristophanes in *Lysistrata*, in which war and society are satirized from the perspective of conservative norms. *Lysistrata* emphasizes that a return to the style of life of the recent past, a style clearly defined historically, would be a solution to the problems, whereas in *Catch-22* what seems to be advocated is a movement forward toward some ill-defined yet positive and brave new world. In intellectual terms, such a stance is tenuous at best, and yet even this amorphous norm is effective in the satire. At this time of social misgiving and disenchantment, *Catch-22* allows its readers to celebrate their ethical superiority over, and distance from, the military machine and bureaucratic structure, which are made to look ridiculous and insane in the novel but seem unassailable and incorrigible in reality.

Modern angry humor, which has its historical foundation in Juvenalian satire, is an attack on the basic principles and fundamental order of society. Such an attack is not far beneath the surface of Heller's novel. The knaves and fools of *Catch-22* are all embodiments of the weaknesses in American middle-class morality. There is a Texan who believes that "people of means—decent folk—should be given more votes than drifters, whores, criminals, degenerates, atheists and indecent folk—people without means" (p. 9). Appleby, whom Yossarian hates and whom Orr smashes in the head with a ping-pong paddle, is "a fair-haired boy from Iowa who believed in God, Motherhood and the American Way of Life, without ever thinking about any of them . . ." (p. 18). Major Major's father is described as a "long-limbed farmer, a God-fearing, freedom-loving, law-abiding rugged individualist who held that federal aid to anyone but farmers was creeping socialism" (p. 82). The humor here results, at least in part, from the revelation of the corruption within the middle-class ethic itself, a theme made even more clear in the description of Major Major, who always did exactly what his elders told him: "He never once took the

name of the Lord his God in vain, committed adultery or coveted his neighbor's ass. In fact, he loved his neighbor and never even bore false witness against him. Major Major's elders disliked him because he was such a flagrant nonconformist" (p. 84).

Nearly every facet of American life is made laughable through either diminution or hyperbole, from Milo's incredible capitalism to the Anabaptist chaplain's Christianity, which is expected to assist in getting tighter bomb patterns. The American economic classes are well represented in Nately, a wealthy but somewhat simple romantic, Aarfy, an economic striver who is the most blind and corrupt character of all, and Dunbar, the son of a poor man who worked himself to death trying to compete within the system. Perhaps this economic theme is most clear in the chapter "Nately's Old Man," in which Nately's father, who never wears anything but Brooks Brothers shirts and knows all the answers, is contrasted with the lecherous old man of the whore house who has no answers at all but professes the life ethic that Yossarian finally adopts: "anything worth dying for . . . is certainly worth living for" (p. 242). The old man is pragmatic and unpatriotic, but he convinces Nately that his father is a "Son of a Bitch" (p. 243). Nately thus moves toward the radical norm, as indeed do Dunbar, Orr, and Yossarian. Even the chaplain, who had always believed in an "immortal, anthropomorphic, English-speaking, Anglo-Saxon, pro-American God" (p. 279), wavers in the faith, develops lust for his wife, comes to sympathize with Yossarian, and finally *lies* to get himself into the hospital (p. 356). It would seem clear that the normative values of Heller's satire are essentially opposed to war, capitalism, bureaucracy, and traditional religion, and in favor of freedom, peace, agnosticism, sex, and life.

The conflict between these two sets of values is related to the most pervasive theme of the novel, that of insanity. Madness is, of course, a consistent motif in satire: as Kernan says, the satirist "typically believes that there is no pattern of reason left in the world."¹⁵ The logical order of daily existence has somehow gone awry, leaving the satirist "alone in the lunatic world to stay its progressive degeneration He becomes the only champion of virtue who dares to speak the truth in a world where the false insolently maintains itself as the real."¹⁶ This assessment of traditional satire goes a long way toward defining the operative norms of modern angry humor — especially in Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and *Catch-22*. From the beginning it is clear that Yossarian's mind is not in harmony with the established thinking around him. Either he is maladjusted to a logical world, or the world is itself insane. The structure of the novel moves systematically to a demonstration that the latter is the case. In the first chapter Yossarian reveals his position when he says to the

chaplain, "insanity is contagious. . . . Everybody is crazy but us. This is probably the only sane ward in the whole world, for that matter" (p. 14). What is sane about them is, of course, that they have opted out of the war by going to the hospital. The Narrator's judgments, which intrude frequently, support Yossarian's perspective: "Men went mad and were rewarded with medals. . . . The only thing going on was the war, and no one seemed to notice but Yossarian and Dunbar. And when Yossarian tried to remind people, they drew away from him and thought he was crazy" (p. 16). But Yossarian is "mad" only in terms of his inability to accept the absurdity of war and in his compulsive desire to remain alive.

Many of the other characters are "deranged" in more destructive ways. In addition to the obvious monomaniacs, Milo and Scheisskopf, McWatt is crazy in that he does not mind the war (p. 59) and flies straight in over a target, and because he risks lives unnecessarily by flying low over Yossarian's tent. The dangerous potential of his acrobatics is realized when he zooms over the raft and slices Kid Sampson in half (p. 331). In *Catch-22*, insanity becomes definable as an inability to recognize the reality of danger. Clevinger is insane because he doesn't believe Yossarian's conviction that "the enemy . . . is anybody who's going to get you killed" (p. 122). Aarfy is also insane in his complacent indifference to danger (p. 147). The resolution of this theme comes when Yossarian is analyzed by a psychiatrist, Major Sanderson, who pronounces him mad. Sanderson says,

"The trouble with you is that you think you're too good for all the conventions of society. . . . 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. Persecution depresses you. Violence depresses you. Slums depress you. Greed depresses you. Crime depresses you. Corruption depresses you. You know, it wouldn't surprise me if you're a manic-depressive!" (pp. 297-98)

A moment later, when Yossarian seeks assurance from Doc Daneeka that "they're not going to send a crazy man out to be killed, are they?" Daneeka responds, "Who else will go?" (p. 299).

It is clear that the military, with its form letter of condolence, its power struggles, its bureaucracy, its bombing of villages to block roads, is the insane factor in the novel and that Yossarian, who really does feel himself "too good for all the conventions of society," endorses a much more humane standard for sanity. By the end of the novel, Kraft, Mudd, Snowden, Clevinger, Dunbar, the soldier in white, Hungry Joe, McWatt,

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Kid Sampson, the old man, Michaela, and Nately are all dead. In such a world, standing naked in formation, walking backward with a gun, and taking off for Sweden may well be the actions of a sane man.

In Yossarian's desertion at the conclusion of the novel, there seems to be little humor. Such a development is within the tradition of Juvenal, whose works move from comic to tragic satire when the protagonist is left alone as the enemy becomes increasingly more powerful.¹⁷ Yossarian's rejection of Cathcart's deal is not only a moral act in itself, but is consistent with the traditional response of the reader to Juvenalian satire. As Ronald Paulson explains, "with Horace the reader's experience is to feel complicity in the guilt; with Juvenal it is to feel repugnance at the evil."¹⁸ Yossarian's rejection of Cathcart and his world allows him to escape the role of tragic victim and to become an agent in his own destiny. He declares himself apart and above the military world, and as he does, the poles of values become distinct and stable. *Catch-22* conforms to Maynard Mack's description of traditional satire: "madness and blindness are . . . the emblems of vice and folly, evil and good are clearly distinguishable, criminals and fools are invariably responsible (therefore censurable), and standards of judgment are indubitable."¹⁹ As a result, the basic assumptions and organization of American society are effectively satirized and, through juxtaposition with idealistic norms, are shown to be wanting in fundamental humanity. It is in this dimension, as social commentary, that Heller's satire develops its most profound themes, themes which emerge with clarity and force from the depth of its angry humor.

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NOTES

¹ Whitney Balliett, *New Yorker*, 37 (Dec. 9, 1961), 248.

² Constance Denniston, "The American Romance-Parody: A Study of Purdy's *Malcolm* and Heller's *Catch-22*," *ESRS*, 14, No. 2 (1965), 42-59, 63-64.

³ Eric Solomon, "From *Christ in Flanders* to *Catch-22*: An Approach to War Fiction," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 11 (1969), 851-66.

⁴ Victor J. Milne, "Heller's 'Bologniad': A Theological Perspective on *Catch-22*," *Critique*, 12, No. 2 (1970), 50-69.

⁵ David Worcester, *The Art of Satire* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1940), p. 77.

⁶ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1957), p. 244.

⁷ Alvin Kernan, *The Cankered Muse: Satire of the English Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1959), p. 23.

⁸ Kernan, p. 18.

⁹ G. B. Mck. Henry, "Significant Corn: *Catch-22*," *Melbourne Critical Review*, 9 (1966), 138.

¹⁰ Joseph Heller, *Catch-22* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1961), p. 365. All subsequent references will be made in the text.

¹¹ Kernan, pp. 30-34.

- ¹²Kernan, pp. 7-8.
¹³Frye, p. 223.
¹⁴W. H. Auden, "Notes on the Comic," *Thought*, 27 (1952), 68-69.
¹⁵Kernan, p. 20.
¹⁶Kernan, p. 21.
¹⁷Ronald Paulson, *The Fictions of Satire* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1967), p.
31.
¹⁸Paulson, p. 30.
¹⁹Maynard Mack, "The Muse of Satire," *New Yorker*, 41 (1951), 85.