
Masking Horror by Humour: Exploring Parody in *CATCH-22*

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Abstract

In this paper, it will be shown how the traditional war novel is transformed in a bitter, bizarre dark satire with the help of parody, language and treatment of the theme. All these elements create an atmosphere of absurdity in which the characters are almost uniformly treated in extreme exaggeration, making them cartoon-strip characters with activities full of absurd humour. The structural elements like title or epigraph, the story of the novel and the characterization — all help in building up the dark parody turning the war novel into a satiric interpretation of military bureaucracy. It will also be shown in this paper that how an apparently comic novel can actually be interpreted as a serious protest against the bureaucratic institutions stripping human beings off their individuality. And this protest, though gruesome and sombre, ends not in pitch dark pessimism but in somewhat optimistic note.

KEYWORDS: horror, humour, irony, parody, war

INTRODUCTION

In 1960s, dark humour and black satire became popular with novelists who delineated through their literary works how the atrocities of war had its detrimental effects on people. Beneath the facade of satire and comedy, Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* also presents a cynical view of the bureaucratic military system. Apparently humorous, the novel criticizes the futility of the war system and its absurdities. As he masks the criticism under the veil of humour, his readers are to discover for themselves how the bureaucracy of war system makes the trivial a serious issue while not giving an iota of importance to the really concerning matters.

METHODOLOGY

For writing this research paper, Qualitative Textual analysis has been used. While textual analysis refers to a data-gathering process for interpreting textual data, the qualitative methodology refers to the judgment of the structure and content of a text. This paper offers a discussion of the war novel *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller in which he has subtly and effectively made an ironical representation of war and war bureaucracy. In order to illustrate the ironical perspective, a comparative reading with some other war novels has been made.

DISCUSSION

... through a double process of installing and ironizing, parody signals how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequence drive from both continuity and difference. (Hutcheon, 1989)

In regard of this statement, it can be said that in a literary product, postmodern parody serves to both imitate accurately and distort consciously a known text or manners and customs, persons and events. As parody is “a distorted imitation of a known text with conscious and recognizable humour”, so to analyse parody in Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, it is necessary to explore its story, its protagonist and finally compare it with previous war novels.

Hutcheon expounds a broadening of the meaning of the term *parody* in order to cater for the needs of the post-modernist art. Leading the queue, AffonsoRomano Santana claims that the function of parody is to present before the audience what has hitherto beenrepressed. Actually, it offers a novel way to describe the conventional. In this way, *Catch-22* can be regarded as a parody of the traditional war novels like *The Last of the Mohicans* (by J. F. Cooper in 1757), *The Red Badge of Courage* (by Stephen Crane in 1894), *Slaughterhouse -Five* (by Kurt Vonnegut in 1969), *A Farewell to Arms* (by Earnest Hemingway in 1929) etc. *Slaughterhouse -Five, or The Children's Crusade: A Duty- Dance With Death* (1969), a science- fiction infused anti-war novel by Kurt Vonnegut, fashions the author's first- hand experience in the Second World War into an urgent plea, elaborately absurdist yet darkly funny, against butchery in the service of authority. *All Quiet in the Western Front* (1929) by E. M. Remarque, explores the theme of difficulty of soldiers to revert to civilian life after serving the army. In addition, the massive loss of life and negligible gains from the fighting are constantly emphasized In this novel. Nirman Mailer's 1948 novel, *The Naked and the Dead* dwells on the dehumanization of soldiers who are continuously referred to as machines within the novel. Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* (1894) is distinguished from the traditional war narratives in the sense that the story reflects the inner experience of its protagonist (a cowardice soldier fleeing from war) rather than the external world around him. Before the onset of battle, Henry Fleming, the protagonist romanticized war. But confronting the harsh realities of war, he proves to be a coward. *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) by Earnest Hemingway depicts the grim reality of war— the senseless brutality and violent chaos. Hemingway suggests that war is nothing more than the dark, murderous extension of a world that refuses to acknowledge, protect or preserve true love. All these novels portray the horrors of war presenting war as something negative, gruesome, meaningless. But *Catch-22* ironizes the war presenting it as something positive and lucky, as a way out. Before war broke out, Doc Daneeka lived a life full of penury. But just as he was on the verge of bankruptcy, war broke out,

increasing his practice to a high level: *Fortunately, just when things were blackest, the war broke out* (Heller). The assistants of Doc Daneeka had hitherto led monotonous lives which become suddenly exciting : *Nothing so wonderful as war had ever happened to them before; and they were afraid might never happen to them again*(Heller). The war is also something of a positive nature for a highly principled, highly educated man like Clevinger who acts as Yossarian's foil within the story. Milo Minderbinder, the mess manager, also makes the most of the war. He is a war profiteer during World War 2, *perhaps the best known of all fictional profiteers* (Brandes). He is actually a *bittersweet parody* of the American Dream, both a *prophet of profit* and the *embodiment of evil* (Lupack).

While Heller humorously portrayed these 'positive' aspects of war, he simultaneously parodied the 'positive' outcomes of war portrayed in the earlier novels such as friendship among soldiers. Yossarian has no real friends. Though he is surrounded by officers and soldiers, he cannot befriend anybody except Dunbar as he preserves his rationality throughout the novel.

But yet, *Catch-22* is not solely a novel about war but about a solitary man trying hard to retain rationality within an organisation that is devoid of emotion, sympathy or even reason. The military world on Pianosa in *Catch-22* stands as a metaphor for life within any organization. At the core of the novel we find the idea that the individual must always relinquish part of himself to the organisation which swallows him up. In *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon has said *Parody seems to offer a perspective on the present and the past which allows an artist to speak TO a discourse from WITHIN it, but without being totally recuperated by it. Parody appears to have become, for this reason, the mode of the marginalized, or of those who are fighting marginalization by a dominant ideology* ". Yossarian fights hard against the marginalization, he represents those who find life nauseating, frustrating, meaningless.

The grotesque surface of *Catch-22* masks a serious purpose. In an absurd universe, the individual has the right to seek survival. One must not be asked to sacrifice one's life unless everybody else is willing to do so. In an impossible situation, one finally has to honour one's own self. That is why Yossarian concludes that his life is concrete and he is taking a moral decision about the sanctity of human existence. According to Yossarian, life is precious and sacred. Once he has done his dirty share in the war, he has an inviolable right to save himself. The individual must protect himself while the system tries to engulf him mercilessly. Hence Yossarian flies.

Thus Yossarian becomes the parody of a war hero— a non- heroic protagonist, just as the novel is a parody of the previous war novels. As Hutcheon said that parody is a *repetition with difference*, the hero too is a parodic representation of the conventional

familiar war-hero with an intention of escaping war. From the very beginning of the novel, he pretends to be ill with liver problems and the system allows him to remain in the hospital, drawing the reader's attention to the inefficiency of the medical staffs of the system. Yossarian also usurps various names like "Washington Irving" or "John Milton" that creates a serious confusion within the system. Heller's remark *There was nobody else he knew who was as big a coward. Yossarian was the best man in the group at evasive action, but had no idea why*, sets the ironic tone about Yossarian. He is placed as a contrast to Hungry Joes, Milo, Danby, Harvermeyer, Pilchard and Wren who all are good real heroes of war and also who give absurd reason for fighting the battle. These cartoon strip characters undermine the traditional values attached to war in a much more effective way than the cowardice of Yossarian.

The protagonist is a part of the story of the novel. So the ironic presentation of the main character makes the story of the novel ludicrous too. The novel is a through and through irony on bureaucracy and military system. Sometimes the result of parody is simply to arouse amusement or ridicule; while at others it is touching or even horrifying. Heller's parody at the surface level amuses us. But it troubles our mind with a deeper level of consciousness as it brings us face to face with the horror of war as faced by the men of the 256th Squadron. Heller effectively ridicules the bureaucratic system when it fails to distinguish between appearance and reality, when it believes in something because of its appearance and not probing deep into the matter, using common sense and rationality. Examples abound in the novel among which we shall limit our discussion to three incidents — (a) the satin ribbon bombing line, (b) Doc Daneeka's death and (c) the dead man in Yossarian's tent.

When the 256th Squadron is assigned to bomb ammunition dumps at Bologna, a target heavily guarded and dangerous, due to Colonel Cathcart's habit of volunteering his men for dangerous missions, only one officer Sergeant Knight is required to spread panic by requesting for extra flak jackets for the campaign. Wars operate on rumours and misinformation, spreading over the whole squadron while Yossarian just wants to live. While others pray for reprieve, he devises a brilliant plan. The intelligence tent displays an easel map of Italy on which a scarlet satin ribbon shows the farthest advance of the Allied Troops. Bombs are to be dropped only beyond the line. The ribbon is now at south of Bologna. Clevinger remarks to Yossarian that some officers are secretly hoping the bomb line on the map will move to the north of Bologna, indicating that the US army has taken Bologna and their mission will be dismissed. In the night, Yossarian moves the bomb-line up on the map, making the authority believe that Bologna has been captured. Initially, no one bothers to check the reality of the situation; for the authority, if the map says Bologna is captured, then Bologna is captured. Black reports to Korn who reports to Cathcart. He does not refer to any

actual intelligence to check this "line movement", Cathcart and Korn, characteristically, have little idea of the enemy's activity. The army believes its own information and itself and never checks the reality or use rationality of thought. Heller has taken an institutional point of view and exaggerated it, and distorted it so that it shows the absurdity of military bureaucracy.

Doc Daneeka's death is another example of the limited viewpoint of bureaucracy that even surpasses the military zone and intrudes into the civilian life. The initial introducer of the term "catch-22" is Doc Daneeka, who himself falls supremely victim to the system by being bureaucratically (and therefore irrevocably) dead— despite his physical presence— owing to his having been included on paper in the flight-crew of a plane that crashed. To begin with Doc Daneeka is paradoxically a flight surgeon who hates to fly. Therefore, Macwatt falsely put his name to the passenger list to get his flight pay without having to board a plane. Unfortunately, Macwatt buzzes the beach and kills kid Sampson. His plane circles higher and higher and flies into a mountain. Sergeant Knight declares that Doc Daneeka is on the plane too and though Daneeka is standing in the beach, assumes that he has died. According to military logic he was on the plane and has not parachute out and therefore he must be dead. In spite of his bodily presence and earnest endeavour to make people believe in his being alive, according to military procedure, he is officially dead. This incident shows the bleakly humorous possibilities of a man who is officially, though not actually, dead as well as the army's blind devotion to its own rule and regulations no matter what the reality is. His wife receives two letters— one from the War Department informing her of his death, another from the doctor himself pleading to believe that he is alive. But as money starts pouring in from insurance plan and various organization, Mrs Daneeka sticks to believe in the first letter. In the meantime, Doc Daneeka is not allowed to draw his salary or to eat his meals and ironically enough, he has to disappear because of his 'death' on paper work. The whole incident parodies the bureaucratic depersonalization as well as the overwhelming power of the bureaucracy.

The story of the dead man in Yossarian's tent is rather ironic than comic. The blind logic of the army is entirely responsible for the mystery. The dead man is named Mudd. He was never officially part of the Squadron, because he was killed on a mission before he could check in. Upon arrival at the squadron, he entered the operation tent looking for the orderly tent. Even before his name was added to the group, he was sent on a bombing mission over Orvieto. Thus, Mudd becomes the "dead man" in Yossarian's tent— his things remain intact and unmoved in the tent because he, being never enrolled in the squadron, can not be officially dead and his belongings cannot be moved. Mudd's death exemplifies the absurd logic of the administration who does not announce his death because he was not officially "alive" and fighting. The army's

regulations stop it from seeing reality and it does not care for reality. Rather it cares more about its rules and regulations. Rather it would deny Mudd's existence than to admit its shortcomings. The dead man's belongings, not the dead man himself, are in Yossarian's tent. They disturb Yossarian very much, reminding him all the time about the brutal death and careless denial.

The dead man in Yossarian's tent was a pest, and Yossarian didn't like him, even though he had never seen him. Having him laying around all day annoyed Yossarian so much that he had gone to the orderly room several times to complain to sergeant Towser, who refused to admit that the dead man even existed, which, of course, he no longer did. (Catch-22).

Though this extract is revealing and ironic, the whole incident is not even remotely "funny". It exposes the situational horror of war.

Frederick R. Karl writes, *One reason Catch-22, both as novel and phrase, seemed such a penetrating expose of the sixties was that, still in the fifties, it picked up all the paradoxes of affluence, success, media hype, empire building...* (American Fiction, 1983). Heller's satire targets a variety of bureaucrats, the military-industrial complex, and the business ethic and economic arrangements of American society. Humour rising out of the crazy logic of modern warfare hits squarely on the mark. The following passage demonstrates the humour and points out the major cause of Yossarian's problem:

Yossarian looked at him soberly and tried another approach: "Is Orr crazy?"

"He sure is", Doc Daneeka said.

"Can you ground him?"

"I sure can. But first he has to ask me to. That's part of the rule."

"Then why doesn't he ask you to?"

"Because he is crazy", Doc Daneeka said. "He has to be crazy to keep flying combat mission after all the close calls he's had. Sure, I can ground him. But first he has to ask me to."

"That's all he has to do to be grounded?"

"That's all. Let him ask me."

"And then you can ground him?" Yossarian asked.

"No. Then I can't ground him."

"You mean there's a catch?"

"Sure there's a catch", Doc Daneeka replied. "Catch-22. Anyone who wants to get out of combat duty isn't really crazy." (Heller)

The authority thinks Yossarian is a poor failure as he just wants to stay alive for as long a period as he can, not caring at all about the success of the Allied Force. Milo Mindebinder, an eager entrepreneur in charge of running the syndicate alludes to the corruptive, materialistic tendencies mankind possesses. At the age of 27, Milo has

acquired lots of power and wealth. His syndicate has expanded all over the globe increasing routes and net profits. It benefits and makes profit— making every shareholder a benefiter. But eventually the business expansion and soaring profits make Milo immensely foolish:

Milo contracted with the American military authorities to bomb the German held highway bridge at Orvieto and with the German military authorities to defend the highway bridge at Orvieto with anti-aircraft fire against his own attack.(Heller)

Moreover, *Catch-22* parodizes the traditional soldier-figures depicted in earlier literature with the help of its cardboard characters made ludicrous by their inane obsessions. Each lives with a particular contorted view of the war that controls his activity throughout the day. Colonel Cathcart wants to impress his superiors by volunteering his soldiers for particularly lethal missions as he has nothing to fear for himself personally. Major Major is unable to communicate with others because he is superior to them by rank and inferior by war experience. General Peckem is obsessed with tight bomb patterns. These peculiarities serve as a window to peer into the irrationality of the bureaucracy that is full of absurdity.

CONCLUSION

As Frederic Jameson observed "...the general effect of parody is, whether in sympathy or with malice, to cast ridicule", *Catch-22* is full of ridiculous incidents, dialogues and characters to shatter the patriotic veils wrapped round war and army. Although some of these elements are light-hearted, others are gravely serious that leave an uneasy restlessness on the mind of the reader. "Catch-22" shows a new way to present the dominant mood of the contemporary American novel— the universe as something absurd, meaningless and chaotic. It renders the absurd world ludicrous by its parodic tone. And the novel remains ambiguous too with its ending— *it seems to resist the idea that life is meaningless and that is why love is offered as some consolation and why the ending could be interpreted optimistically.* (Maria del Pilar Berruete Rodriguez, "From Horror To Humour: Tracing Parody in Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*").

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