

THE ETERNAL CITY – JOSEPH HELLER AS SADIST–

The tonal unity of Heller's *Catch-22*¹ is broken by the grotesque elements of the chapter *The Eternal City*. The author has distanced his protagonist and makes a personal statement which is misanthropic rather than making an absurd statement on the view of the world adopted by Yossarian. The result is that the absurdist genre is destroyed and replaced by a narrative that is sadistic in its basic attitude.

Catch-22 has been widely acclaimed as an absurdist novel and with some justification, for much of the humour and satire of the work is derived from the illogical or ironic twist at the end of a thought progression. The character sketch of Nurse Duckett is an example; she is, among other things:

able, prompt, strict and intelligent. She welcomed responsibility and kept her head in every crisis. She was adult and self-reliant, and there was nothing she needed from anyone. Yossarian took pity and decided to help her. (p.312)

The first mention of 'Catch-22', which Yossarian views with such awe, is a more brutal use of the same technique.

There was only one catch and that was Catch-22, which specified that a concern for one's own safety in the face of dangers that were real and immediate was the process of a rational mind. Orr was crazy and could be grounded. All he had to do was ask; and as soon as he did, he would no longer be crazy and would have to fly more missions. Orr would be crazy to fly more missions and sane if he didn't, but if he was sane he had to fly them. If he flew them he was crazy and didn't have to; but if he didn't want to he was sane and had to... Yossarian saw it in all its spinning reasonableness. There was an elliptical precision about its perfect pairs of parts that was graceful and shocking, like good modern art, and at times Yossarian wasn't sure that he saw it at all, just the way he wasn't sure about good modern art... (pp. 54-55)

At times the humour is derived from grotesque situations, but remains humour because a distance is maintained between the reader and the detailed grotesque. The situation is made humorous the absurdist way in which the material is treated. The Soldier in White episode could never be humorous but for two things - firstly we are told that through Yossarian's and Dunbar's eyes there is no-one inside the cast, and secondly, that the eternal switching of the bottles draining clear

fluid in and out of the cast is too unrealistic to be accepted by a reader as true, so we laugh the matter off. The novel as an absurdist prose work is dealt with briefly and accurately by Kennard ², and the point is made that the absurd is used to express an opinion of the human condition in general - of individual man in conflict with man-made systems. This could well be taken to be a requisite for defining a style as absurdist - that the style should not only depend on a concept being taken to its ultimate illogical conclusion, but that it should be utilized to express some opinion. The novel as an absurdist comment on American society has been dealt with by Frost ³.

The horrifying aspects of Yossarian's night walk through Rome in the chapter 'The Eternal City' have tended to be overlooked by both the above writers, in that these aspects are taken as an extension of the absurdist aspects of the novel. The chapter requires further examination, both in terms of its symbolic meaning and in terms of the structure of the novel. There have been attempts to explain the social/spiritual/symbolic role Yossarian is playing in this particular chapter - Doskow ⁴ explains that Yossarian is a Dante figure moving through Hell:-

Armed by his recent experience in hell and his emergence from it through the recognition of what life means, he has once more achieved the strength to say no to the tyrants in control.

I would suggest that this is quite the opposite of the situation - Yossarian is in Rome with presumably good intent, and comes out of the experience in a numbed state of ignorance. He has experienced without learning. He has gone to Rome, without a leave pass, to save Nately's whore's sister, even if Heller's explanation sounds (deliberately) ambiguous.

"She's just a twelve-year-old virgin, Milo," he explained anxiously "and I want to find her before it's too late." (p.432)

Yossarian wants to say no to the tyrants before he goes to Rome - Milo obviously abuses him on the way saying that 'he was ashamed of him' and that 'Yossarian was making an uncouth spectacle of himself' and that 'morale was deteriorating and it was all Yossarian's fault'. (p.428) On the other hand Yossarian does not appear to have gained knowledge from his experience in Rome, because he tries to convince Aarfy that Aarfy is going to be punished for murdering the Italian girl.

"Don't you realize what you've done?" Yossarian wanted to grasp Aarfy by his well-fed caterpillar-soft shoulders and shake some sense into him. "You've murdered a human being. They are going to put you in jail. They might even hang you!" "Oh, I hardly think they'll do that" Aarfy replied with a genial chuckle... "No siree. Not good old Aarfy." (p.442)

If Yossarian had learned anything from his journey through Hell he would *know* that Aarfy would not be arrested. This is especially true in view of the fact that he already knew that Aarfy had been in a fraternity club where:

One day we tricked those two dumb high-school girls from town into the fraternity house and made them put out for all the fellows there who wanted them by threatening to call up their parents and say they were putting out for us. (p.257)

Yossarian is not changed or enlightened after his night journey, although he may be less resolute about his philanthropic activities.

Heller has succeeded in *The Eternal City* in pushing Yossarian into the background - not by ignoring him, but by adopting a purely narrative form, rather than the dramatic form of dialogue which so dominates the novel. We are shown the scenes with Yossarian in them through Heller's eyes, rather than having the scenes presented through Yossarian's eyes, which has been in the rest of the novel the method of narration. We are seeing the world through Heller's eyes, not through the eyes of the character he has created. Unlike the scenes in which Snowden's death is gradually revealed, the scenes in Rome are presented starkly, as if Heller is personally revelling in disgust at the sadistic description of, for example, 'human teeth lying on the drenched, glistening pavement near splotches of blood kept sticky by the pelting raindrops poking each one like sharp fingernails.' It is as if Heller like Yossarian when he is dressing Snowden's thigh, has 'found excuse to caress the wound with his fingers again and again to convince himself of his own courage.' (p.463)

As no doubt Heller intended, the effect of the chapter is jarring and horrifying, but it is perhaps more jarring than he intended. The reader is suitably shocked by the brutality and the detached method in which it is related, but is also shocked out of the receptiveness to the absurdist, unreal, humourous tone of the novel into a state of revulsion at this grotesqueness. The grotesque in Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, especially in relation to the voyage to the country of the

Houyhnhnms, has been said to detract from the satire, but in *Catch-22* not only does the grotesque detract from Heller's message that 'mobs with clubs were in control everywhere' (p.440) but it disrupts the tonal wholeness of the work, as if the chapter were partially written at a time separate from the remainder of the novel. There is no apparent reason for the inclusion of the segment, and it destroys in part one of the primary unifying factors of the novel and that is the tonal unity. The reader only realises that he is out of the sadist's dream and back into the Yossarian-interpreted world when the absurdist situation at the end of the chapter is unfolded. Having been brought before a genially smiling Colonel Cathcart by twelve M.P.'s, every one of whom seemed 'powerful enough to bash him to death with one blow' Yossarian is told 'We're sending you home.' (pp.443-444.)

There does not appear to be any symbolic interpretation of the chapter that will present a watertight argument for its inclusion in the novel, and there is one minor factual clash in the chapter (significant to a theory that the chapter was written at a time different from that at which the remainder of the novel was written) in addition to the tonal clash already mentioned. It is Sweden to which Yossarian plans to escape, and Sweden is mentioned on a number of occasions as a virtually unattainable paradise (Danby says to Yossarian 'It must be nice to be in Sweden now....The girls are so sweet. And the people are so advanced!') (p.477) yet Heller has Yossarian think, 'Mobs....mobs of policemen - everything but England was in the hands of mobs, mobs, mobs.' (p.440)

The inclusion of the chapter is of little value to the novel as a whole and seems to be merely an excuse for Heller to express his own view of the world; not as he has restricted himself in the remainder of the novel to expressing the view of the world through the eyes of the character he has created. Rather than the absurdist world to which the reader is accustomed in the remainder of the novel, we find that Heller has taken the medium beyond its useful limits, from the humourously absurd to the sadistically grotesque. The novel loses its force as a social comment in this chapter by moving from the specific and individual (with which a reader can to some extent identify) to the general - the novel ceases to be anti-war and anti-system and simply becomes misanthropic. We no longer feel that Yossarian has any moral values of any worth, simply because he is reduced to being another puny individual at Heller's mercy. Heller has spoken in favour of the fascists (whether they be Italian, German or American) rather than support Yossarian, who is the individual who can

stand up against the system. The tonal unity of the novel is damaged by Heller's distancing of his protagonist for the sake of his own narrative intrusion.

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Notes:

1. Heller, J. *Catch-22*. (Transworld Publishers - Corgi Books 1964). All page references are to this edition.
2. Kennard, J.E. Joseph Heller: At War with Absurdity. *Mosaic*, Volume 4, Number 3, pp.75-88.
3. Frost, L. Violence in the Eternal City: *Catch-22* as a Critique of American Culture. *Meanjin*, Volume 30, Number 4, pp.447-453.
4. Doskow, M. The Night Journey in *Catch-22*. *Twentieth Century Literature*, Volume 12, Number 4, pp. 186-193.