

There was Only One Catch:

The Importance of Style and Structure in *Catch 22*

By Michael Rutberg

Two of the most prominent and noticeable aspects of *Catch 22* are its unconventional structure and whimsical style. Although difficult to follow sometimes, Heller uses these odd techniques to emphasize different and multileveled meanings to the novel. The twisted chronology and depiction of events, rapid changes in mood and atmosphere, caricature-like characters, mental references, and bizarre events themselves all contribute to the book.

There are many abrupt changes in mood throughout the book, one of the most striking existing between the riotously funny scene in which Clevinger is tried and the realization that the members of the action board hate him with a vengeance and enmity unequalled anywhere else. Shifts like these can serve two purposes. One is to emphasize both halves by contrast; the funny parts seem more absurd and the weighty parts more starkly serious when placed next to each other. Another is to assert that serious themes can be found in farcical scenes, and vice versa. All in all, they blur the line between funny and serious, sense and nonsense, attempting to break down existing paradigms in the reader's mind.

In many respects, this is the goal of many of the techniques used in *Catch 22*. What is sane becomes insane, what is logical becomes absurd, what is grotesque becomes laughable. All this satirizes the lunacy of war and questions the reason behind human action; is there, in fact, method to our madness? Without many of the mental ideals which *Catch 22* tries to eliminate, there is not: "Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless." (From an essay on Kafka by Eugene Ionesco)

The twisted chronology destroys even the reference of time; without careful study, it is nearly impossible to determine the exact order in which events occur. It also tends to play with one's mind, simulating phenomena such as *déjà vu*, *presque vu*, and *jamais vu*.

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To further explain all these *vu*'s, we will take the example of Snowden's death, a rather pinnacle event in the novel. There are sequential references and foreshadowing to Snowden's death; sometimes the exact narrative or dialogue is repeated (for example: "I'm cold" or "freezing to death in a patch of sunlight"). This causes the reader to wonder if perhaps he has seen this scene before: *déjà vu*.

In the chapter entitled Snowden, when the reader receives all the gory details regarding his death, all of his insides spill out onto the floor. In so doing, he gives Yossarian, and to some degree the reader, a brief flash of insight into the physical nature of man. This flash is a fleeting moment of elusive lucidity, barely thought, almost seen, *presque vu*.

However, one is not used to thinking of humans in such a purely material manner. In actuality, it is quite probable that one has never seen humanity in such a totally unfamiliar light before: *jamais vu*. These three *vu*'s, actually mentioned in the book, play a significant role in allowing the book to imitate thought, which in turn helps to change the reader's mind, reducing preformed conceptions of the world.

Another aspect of the chronology which imitates thought is the fact that events, although not connected in time, are always somehow related. Often they flow together because the narrative makes a reference to a different event in order to elaborate on the subject at hand. As often as not, though, it never returns to the original subject but goes on to yet another, forming a train of thought similar to an actual thought process.

Satire, laid on pretty thick, is another device employed by Heller in order to illustrate the idiocy of war. It is accomplished through two main components: the characters themselves and the things that happen to them.

Many of the characters are in fact caricatures of different army personality types in the army. There is the incompetent General Peckem, who cares more about fighting with General Dreedle than the enemy, the ambitious Colonel Cathcart, who will do anything which has a hope of increasing his rank, and the obsessive Scheisskopf, for whom marching takes precedence above all else. All of these satirize lack of military knowledge and sense of duty in higher officers. Major Major Major Major, promoted purely because of his name, exemplifies the absurdity of officer choice. Ironically enough, the two most influential characters are low in rank: Milo Minderbinder (a cook

Milo Minderbinder

who heads a gigantic black market syndicate) and Ex-P.F.C. Wintergreen, who has access to a mail room and a mimeograph machine.

Events are equally satirical; Yossarian moves the bomb line over Bologna in an effort to keep from flying the missile there, and everyone thinks that it has been captured. This satirizes both the stupidity of those in command and the bitter willingness to try anything to keep from putting one's life at serious risk.

All this satire presents a very cynical view of WWII. The war is, of course, the main reason for all the absurdity. Such a cataclysmic catastrophe caused Heller to not only rank on the war through satire, but also question the very rationalism of human beings. By cutting off the reader's preconceived notions with all the techniques described above, Heller gives one a window into a different realm of thought.

ok - wow.
(an assiduous attempt at understatement)

I envy your clarity.

Please tell me you plan
to continue writing - you have
a gift.

CATCH-22: CHAPTERS PLACES AND EVENTS

- 10 The Grand Conspiracy of LOWERY FIELD, COLORADO
- 5, 10 Wintergreen strikes waterpipe ("oil")
- 18 Yossarian in hospital at Thanksgiving / the man who sees everything twice
- CATCH-22: ARMY AIR FORCE BASE, SANTA ANA, CALIFORNIA
- 8, 18 Scheisskopf's parades / Yossarian and Dori Duz
- 8 Clevinger and Action board
- 18 Thanksgiving / Mrs. Scheisskopf / arguing about God
- 6, 17 PIANOSA, ITALY / 25 missions required Yossarian hospitalized in Africa
with gonorrhea
- 6 Arezzo Mission / Cathcart arrives / Yossarian has 23 of 30 missions
- 9 Major Major becomes squadron commander / a recluse
13 De Coverley makes Milo mess officer
- 9, 11 Great (or Glorious) Loyalty Oath Crusade
- 6, 10 Flight from Puerto Rico to Pianosa / The Splendid
Atabrine Insurrection
- 6, 13, 21 FERRARA MISSION / Kraft killed
- 2, 7 Corporal Snark poisons food
- 12, 21 Decision to give Yossarian medal and promotion
- 12, 14-15 GREAT BIG SIEGE OF BOLOGNA
- 13 De Coverley disappears to Florence
- 6, 25, 38 Fight at officers' club over a ping pong game
- 3, 12 Hungry Joe attacks Havermeyer and Huple's cat
- 1, 7, 12, 21 Corporal Snark poisons fliers for Yossarian
- 12, 21 Yossarian moves bomb line; Peckem gets medal

- 12, 22 COTTON-CORNERING TRIP (Milo, Orr, Yossarian)
- 2, 9, 10, 17 Mudd ("dead man" in tent) dies at Orvieto / 35
missions required
- 2, 21, 24, 35 Milo bombs his own squadron
- 14 Orr ditches at Genoa
- 14 Yossarian aborts MISSION TO BOLOGNA
- 15, 16 Aarfy demoralizes Yossarian on SECOND BOLOGNA
MISSION, Yossarian's 32nd mission
- 16 Yossarian finds, then loses Luciana in Rome
- 17 Missions at 40 / Yossarian to hospital 10 days
17 Yossarian flies 6 missions for 38 of 40
- 4, 5, 17, 21, AVIGNON MISSION / Epidemic of moaning / Snowden is
22, 30, 41 killed
- 9, 10, 21, 22 Clevinger disappears inside a cloud
- 9, 20, 21, 24, Yossarian naked--medal, tree, Milo,
25 chocolate-covered cotton during Snowden's funeral
- 1, 17, 20, 25 * YOSSARIAN IN HOSPITAL SIGNING WASHINGTON IRVING /
the soldier in white / 45 missions required
- 9, 20 Major Major's forgeries; the government
intelligence men
- 3 Yossarian asks Doc to ground him at 47 missions / 50 missions are now
required
- 6 Yossarian talks to Wintergreen at 48 missions / missions have just been raised
to 55
- 9, 13, 17, 25 Yossarian asks Major Major to ground him at 51 missions / Doc says fly

- the 4 more for 55
- 19 **REQUIRED MISSIONS RAISED TO 60**
- 22 **Dobbs first asks Yossarian to OK killing Cathcart**
- 19, 25 **Chaplain and Cathcart discuss prayer during briefings and the 60 required missions**
- 25 **Chaplain misses Major Major but sees Flume in woods; Cathcart OK's Whitcomb's form letters**
- 25, 27 **Cathcart volunteers the men for a second Avignon mission**
- 26 **YOSSARIAN WOUNDED / hospital with Dunbar, Fortiori**
- 28 **Orr downed safely on second Avignon mission**
- 27 **Fortiori sent home / Yossarian back to combat**
- 28, 30 **Orr disappears in sea on another Bologna mission**
- 29 **Scheisskopf joins Peckem's staff in Rome**
- 30
accident, **Yossarian nearly strangles McWatt / McWatt kills Kid Sampson in freak then himself /Cathcart raises missions to 65**
- 31 **Doc "dead" / Cathcart raises missions to 70**
- 32 **"Yo-Yo's" roommates dispose of Mudd's things**
- 33 **Nately's prostitute falls in love with him**
- 34
to **Riotous Thanksgiving Day / Nately, Yossarian, Dunbar, Hungry Joe, Chaplain hospital /soldier in white reappears / Dunbar disappears**
- 35
to 80 **Chief White Halfoat dies / Dobbs and Nately killed/ Cathcart raises missions at Milo's request**
- 36 **Chaplain interrogated / Peckem replaces Dreedle**
- 37 **General Scheisskopf now superior to Peckem**
- 38
pursue **M.P.'s empty Rome enlisted men's apartment /Nately's prostitute begins to Yossarian**
- 39 **Aarfy kills a prostitute / Yossarian arrested for being AWOL in Rome**

40 Yossarian accepts deal / Nately's prostitute knifes him / he is hospitalized

41 Hungry Joe dies in sleep / Yossarian refuses deal

42 Orr is alive / Yossarian runs

* Chapter one opens at this point.