

Satire

Joseph Heller who is perhaps one of the most famous writers of the 20th century writes on some emotional issues such as war. He does not deal with these issues in the normal fashion instead he criticizes them and the institutions that help carry these things out. Heller in fact goes beyond criticizing he satirizes. Throughout his two major novels *Catch-22* and *Good as Gold* he satirizes almost all of America's respectful institutions. To truly understand these novels you must recognize that they are satires and why they are.

Catch-22 is a satire on World War II. This novel takes place on the small island of Pianosa in the Mediterranean sea late in the war when Germany is no longer a threat. It is the struggle of one man, Yossarian, to survive the war. Throughout this novel Yossarian is trying to escape the war, and in order to do so he does many improper things.

Good as Gold is about a Jewish man named Gold. It is about Gold's experiences with the government while being employed in the White House. It also deals in detail with Gold's family problems and Gold's struggle to write a book on the contemporary Jewish society.

Throughout these two novels, *Catch-22* and *Good as Gold*, Heller criticizes many institutions. In *Good as Gold* it is the White House and government as a whole, and in *Catch-22* it is the military and medical institutions.

In *Catch-22* the military is heavily satirized. Heller does this by criticizing it. Karl agrees with this statement by offering an example of the satire of both the military and civilian institutions in *Catch-22*:

The influence of mail clerk Wintergreen, the computer foul-up that promotes Major Major, and the petty rivalries among officers satirizes the communication failures and the cut-throat competition Heller saw within both the civilian and military bureaucracies of the 1950's. Even the Civil Rights movement, not yet widespread in the 1950's, is satirized in Colonel Cathcart attitudes toward enlisted men. (23)

Karl summarizes the satirization of the military with this:

The enemy in Heller's book is not simply the chaos of war, but also the deadly inhuman bureaucracy of the military-economic establishment which claims to be a stay against chaos while it threatens human life more insidiously than battle itself. Heller also questions the need for the death and carnage throughout the novel asking if it is really necessary.

Many other institutions are also satirized in *Catch-22*. Bryant points out the extreme variety of institutions that Heller satirizes with this "His satire is directed toward the institutions that make up society, business, psychiatry, medicine, law, the military. . ." (Bryant 228).

Medicine is one of the institutions that is heavily satirized. He does this by portraying medicine as a science that is almost barbaric and not exact. He writes of how the men of the squadron used the hospital as a way out of battle. *Catch-22* itself begins in the hospital where Yossarian is faking Jaundice of the liver in order to avoid battle. Many characters also take this up as a form of staying out of battle. Heller addresses the barbarism of medicine with Dr. Daneeka's aides. He writes of them painting peoples gums and feet violet in order to ward off certain illnesses.

In *Catch-22* Heller also satirizes religion. This occurs in Chapter Nineteen when Colonel Cathcart is aspiring to become a general. In this chapter religion is satirized in a number of ways. The first is when Colonel Cathcart uses it for a social icon to improve his chance of becoming general. Dr. Peek agrees with this by saying ". . . we see a satire on religion used as a matter of social status" (25).

In *Catch-22* there is also one more major satirization it is that of industry and finance. The reason this is true is because of certain things Milo says such as "What's good for the syndicate is good for the country" (Karl 34).

Good as Gold is mainly a satire on the White House and government. Heller portrays the White House as being, "disgraceful," according to Merrill. Merrill believes that this work criticizes politics almost from page one and that it does an excellent job of it in fact he writes "A number of reviewers found that the Washington satire 'brilliant and incisive'. . . (103).

The other device that Heller uses is humor. Catch-22 is so satirical in places that it is hilarious. Mr. Heller's talent and use of comedy is so prevalent in these novels that it caused The Atlantic to write "Mr. Heller's talents for comedy are so considerable that one gets irritated when he keeps pressing" (Phoenix 31). Other critics such as Brustein also wrote that Heller's works are extremely hilarious (228).

Although the novel is funny it uses humor in order to further satirize. Dr. Peek agrees with this statement by saying that "It's [Catch-22] not a flag-waving war adventure, but a novel using humor to discredit or ridicule aspects of our society" (24). Dr. Peek also goes on to comment on the amount of comical dialogue in the novel. He says that it contains a significant amount of this dialogue and that it further adds to the humor (11). Heller even takes his humor as far as naming his characters comically. Dr. Karl points out the comical naming of Major Major which turns into Major Major Major Major with his accidental promotion (11). The attaching of the prefix "Hungry" to Joe's name in the novel is also comical, but Heller does not stop at that he goes as far as naming a character Scheisskopf, the parade crazed lieutenant, which actually means "shithead." (Peek 10).

Not only does Heller name characters comically he makes them act comically. The Loyalty Oath Crusade is an excellent example of this. This crusade is so completely absurd that it is humorous. Another example of the humor in this novel is the parades that Scheisskopf orders. It is not that he orders these parades that is comical it is his how serious he takes them. He comments to himself throughout the novel on how he will improve his parades. These ideas include nailing his marchers arms in the proper place.

Perhaps one of the best examples of a comical character and who acts satirically is Milo Minderbinder. Milo runs a black-market syndicate in which he claims everyone gets the profits. Milo's company acts as everything from a food supplier to a mercenary. The Germans hire Milo to do a number of missions. The one that Heller writes about in particular detail is the mission where Milo bombs his own squadron killing countless lives. Heller writes that Milo claimed responsibility for the act. As one would expect Milo would be arrested, but Heller carries the satire further by having Milo go scott free after he says "it made a huge net profit" (Peek 27).

Another of Heller's comical characters is the character of Peckem. In the novel Peckem along with Colonel Korn plot to take over General Dreedle's command. They do this by placing priority on such things as a perfect bomb pattern which endangers many men's lives. Heller's description of Peckem is in itself comical he describes him as having the "ability to get men to agree" (Peek 20).

Still one further element of Heller's humor is his comical language. The dialogue is extremely comical at times. An example of this is the hearing where Clevinger is being tried. Throughout this entire scene the characters often retort with just one word and even contradict something they said a moment ago. Dr. Peek believes that the squadron sometimes overcomes the officers command of the them by comical language (36).

Heller uses irony throughout both novels in titles and characters in order to satirize. Throughout Catch-22 Heller discusses the theme of reality and appearance. He also discusses the difference between what is said and what is real. This leads to Heller's irony. The best example of this theme of reality is when Colonel Catchart is discussing whether to punish Yossarian or give him a medal (Peek 21). Dr. Peek also believes that the novel juxtaposes scenes in order to great a "ironic perspective" (Peek 10).

In both Good as Gold and Catch-22 Heller names the books ironically. The title of Catch-22 is very ironic because the definition of Catch-22 is that in order to be removed from duty you must be insane. The catch to it is that if you go

to a doctor because you believe that you are insane and you want to be removed from combat duty you cannot. The reason for this is that if you believe you are insane and want to be removed from duty you must be sane because you don't want to fight, hence risking death, any more. Olderman wrote about the catch saying this " Catch-22 is the principle that informs the military-economic machine, giving it power and making war possible in the first place . . . the illogical must be done because the high command [Catch-22] says it is logical" (229).

The title of Good as Gold is also ironic. It is because Good as Gold is the name of the contemporary Jewish novel that Professor Gold writes in Heller's work. The irony of the title means to say that the novel he writes is only as true and good as Gold is himself.

Heller also makes his characters act ironically in both novels. In Catch-22 "Heller treats the senior officers in his book with criticism and scorn. General Dreedle's want to shoot Danby for moaning is an excellent example of his portrayal of senior officers as incompetent, ridiculous characters" (Merrill 16). The pinnacle of Heller's irony and therefore satire is in the characters and situations surrounding the characters of Dr. Daneeka and Mudd. The satire in both these incidents is directed toward record keeping. In Dr. Daneeka's case he is believed dead because the plane he was supposed to be on crashed, yet he is really alive. The opposite is true in the Mudd situation. In this situation Mudd is killed before he signs onto the combat roster so therefore he is treated as being alive while really dead as being alive. This treatment is such as his bags will not be removed from his former tent, and also all of the enlisted men speak of him throughout the book. Dr. Peek also points out one further ironic highlight in the novel, McWatt's death. He believes that McWatt's death is ironic because McWatt had no malice yet he was violently killed (Peek 24).

Good as Gold also has a certain element of irony although it is less apparent. The characters of the White House seem to take their job lightly and do the improper things. The offering of a White House job as high-level as the Secretary of State to Professor Gold by Ralph Newsome, the presidential aide, simply because the president liked Gold's book on him is ironic and a excellent example of satire.

In Catch-22 Heller also portrays characters that hold high level positions in the military as being incompetent and irresponsible. Merrill believes that almost all of the characters in the novel are portrayed incompetent which is according to satiric fashions. He sites the numerous doctors that Yossarian fooled by faking a liver condition. He also cites Gus and Wes, Doctor Daneeka's assistants, as being incompetent for their rushing of people to the hospital for a fever and their painting to ill people's' toes and gums violet (Merrill 18).

It is also obvious in the novel that the military decisions are made in a absurd way and are highly illogical. The prime example of this is in the character Wintergreen who intercepts mail between the generals and doctors thereby allowing him to change orders to his liking. On this subject Burgess commented in his work on contemporary fiction by saying "His approach [Heller's] is not merely satirical it is surrealistic, absurd, even lunatic, though the aim is serious enough to show . . . the monstrous egotism of the top brass" (Burgess 140). This example of Wintergreen and the Burgess quote further show the irresponsibility and incompetence of high ranking officers.

Heller portrays the military in Catch-22 as being exploitative of it's soldiers and society. This is true in certain circumstances such as the tight bomb pattern that Colonel Cathcart deems imperative in order for him to be raised in command level. The military seems to act irresponsibly almost all the time. At one point in the novel the military ordered a whole civilian town destroyed in order to obtain a picture of a tight bomb pattern. This portraision goes farther then a tight bomb pattern it extends to the point of total control of the soldiers in the military. Dr. Peek comments on this saying that ". . . satire against dominating bureaucracy in general as the squadron begins to realize that administrators whose job is to serve them have taken control of their lives instead" (20).

The last device that Heller uses to create satire is in Good as Gold. In this

novel he uses extreme amounts of caricature. This occurs especially in the White House characters. Merrill also points out Heller's caricature of Jewish people as whole by saying that there are no Jews in *Good as Gold* only "caricatures conceived on a level somewhat between sitcom and slapstick" (100).

Heller's two novels, *Catch-22* and *Good as Gold*, in short contain much satire. *Catch-22* contains satire which is deeply integrated into its architecture, while *Good as Gold* is more superficial but still substantial. While *Catch-22* satirizes primarily the military, *Good as Gold* satirizes the White House and government. These two novels contain many devices such as humor, irony, and caricature in order to achieve the desired effect of satire. As Karl points out *Catch-22* had a profound effect on people's views on war and also an impact on war novels of the 1960's and 1970's. If these novels are read as anything but satires they will not be appreciated nor understood totally.

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