A LINGUISTIC STYLISTIC POINT OF VIEW ON JOSEPH HELLER'S BLACK HUMOURIN CATCH-22

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Abstract: Joseph Heller's darkly comic novel, Catch-22, is a celebrated anti-war novel, which centres on the antihero Yossarian and draws upon Heller's own experience as a bomber pilot in World War II to provide a black humourish look at war, bureaucracy and the maddening logic – or lack thereof – of both.
Heller has learned from Beckett, Camus and Kafka and his style resembles the style of these writers but he is clearly himself a novelist who may be looked upon as one of the most interesting black humourists.
His distinctive form of black humour is made up of grotesque details, brutal and shocking images, pathological communication patterns, which are expressed at a linguistic stylistic level by means of obsessive repetition of key words and phrases, enumerations, nonsense, non sequiturs, play upon words, mingling of the denotative meaning with the connotative one or circular reasoning.

Keywords: black humour, linguistic stylistics, nonsense, non sequiturs, play upon words.

More commonly described as the "humour that deals with unpleasant aspects of life in a bitter or ironic way"[1], black humourbecame the American people's way to express their feelings of disillusionment and hopelessness. Indeed, this is the central theme that emerged in Joseph Heller's novel, *Catch-22*. In this novel, Heller depicts, by means of black humour, the senselessness of war, particularly the act of enlisting young men in combat, individuals who have no idea about, nor belief in the war they were supposed to be fighting. This central moral conflict of the book may also be seen at the linguistic level as well.

In order to effectively convey how black humour operates, it is essential to determine the core idea behind the rule that is Catch-22:

"All over the world, *boys* on every side of the bomb line *were laying downtheir lives* for what *they had been toldwas their country*, and no one seemed to mind, least of all *the boys* who *were laying downtheiryoung lives*. *There was no end in sight*. *The only end in sight* was Yossarian's own, and he might have remained in the hospital until doomsday had it not been for that patriotic Texan... The Texan wanted everybody in the ward to be happy but Yossarian and Dunbar. He was really very sick."[2]

From a linguistic stylistics point of view, the first thing that strikes the reader, due to its force of assertion and to the obvious contradiction with the context of war, is the use of the noun *boys* and of the phrasal verb *to lay down*; boys are not usually supposed to fight in a war and, more than that, they are not supposed to lay down their lives in a war.

[1]I., Hassan, *Contemporary American Literature*, Library of Congress Catalogue Card NUMBER 72-81701 83, 1978, p. 33
[2] J., Heller, *Catch-22*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1989, p. 18

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One may very easily make a connection here. Stoic philosophers associated logic with grammar and rhetoric, all these three disciplines constituting the classical trivium, As a consequence of this trivium, one may make an association between logic and the rhetoric used in the above excerpt: a basic rule in logic states that if A is like B and B is like C, then A is like C. When applying this rule from logic to the fragment above, one may notice that the noun *boys* is repeated twice in connection with the phrasal verb *to laydown*; *boys* may then be associated with *to lay down* and, in its turn, *to lay down* may be associated with *sacrifice*; hence, in the context of war, *boys* may be associated with *sacrifice* and, going further than this, *boys* are synonymous with *death* in the context of war. The absurdity of war is further developed when the author uses the adjective *young* together with the noun *lives*, as if the noun *boys* used in relation to war and sacrifice was not enough. The adjective *young* here may even be considered a pleonasm when used in association with *boys*, meant to stress the overall idea, that of the absurdity of war.

It is also very interesting to notice here the use of the passive voice, *they had been told*, without an agent. The deliberate and masterful use of the passive voice, without an agent, is utilised in order to lay the emphasis on the absurdity and paradox of the situation and of war. The effect obtained is that of impersonality. No one really knows who is responsible for the *boys* who are sent to fight in this war or why they fight in it but, nonetheless, they do fight and do lay down their lives.

The use of the passive voice without an agent matches perfectly the ironic tone of the statement *for what they had been told was their country*, the use of the Past Tense Continuous (*were lying down*), which lays the stress on the duration of the action, and increases its absurdity, and the use of the Past Perfect, which indicates an action that happened in a long-distant past, thus doubling the effect of the paradox expressed in this excerpt.

There are also two other means of emphasis used here, which add more substance to the paradox and absurdity of war: the superlative *least* and the possessive adjective *their*, used twice.

In order to prove the perfectly balanced stylistic structure of the fragment, the flawless argumentation of the author and the absurdity and black humourof the situation, after repeating the statement *boys were laying down their lives* twice, Heller continues by repeating the statement *There was no end in sight* twice. The only modification is the replacement of the modifier *no* with the modifier *only*. This statement also emphasises the hopelessness of the situation, which is, nevertheless, softened by the use of the modifier *only*, which represents a dim ray of hope because, otherwise, all the other pronouns in the text are either negative or express a negative idea.

At a conceptual level, this passage illustrates the underlying principle behind Catch-22: "a rule which allows you no way out, when another rule apparently does allow a way out."[3]

Catch-22is a rule that has two claims, which oppose each other, and it renders the oxymoron expressed by the syntagm black humourperfectly. In the same way that the noun humour, which has a positive connotation, does not apparently match the adjective black, which obviously has a negative connotation, Catch-22 claims that a man is insane when he willingly engages himself in numerous flying missions, while a sane man would not want to go on missions. However, there is no way out of this predicament: men who do not want to go on missions would plead insanity, only to be told that if they are truly insane, they would not mind doing flying missions. Insane or not, these young men are indirectly forced to engage in

[3] N., Warburton, *Thinking from A to Z*, Taylor and Francis, New York, 2003, p. 31

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combat and fight for a war they do not have any idea about. Also, the paradox expressed by the rule that is Catch-22 can be understood by means of the incongruity theory of humour stated at the beginning of the chapter. Only through this theory can this illogical paradox be understood and assimilated by the reader.

One of the means of expressing black humour in *Cath*-22arises from stylistic devices such as repetition and enumeration.

In the excerpt: "The colonel was gorgeous. He had a cavernous mouth, cavernous cheeks, cavernous, sad mildewed eyes. His face was the colour of clouded silver. He coughed| ||quietly, gingerly||, and dabbed| the pads slowly at his lips with a distaste that had become automatic." (p. 23), the author introduces repetition as a means of achieving black humour. Heller uses the adjective cavernous three times in order to stress the discrepancy between the statement *The colonel was gorgeous* and what follows.

Heller uses two embedded binary structures on the words level: the first binary structure is He coughed and (...) dabbed, while the second structure is added after coughed: He coughed quietly, gingerly.

The sentence structure here also matches perfectly the double level of interpretation that is necessary in order to grasp the full meaning of this excerpt: on the surface level, there is the reversal of expectations, the repetition, the binary structure on the words level, while, on a deeper level, the reader is challenged to find a unifying thread, on the one hand, for this fragment and for the author's use of reversal, and, on the other hand, for the whole novel.

Another example of reversal is the following sentence: "Doc Daneeka was Yossarian's friend and *would do just about nothing in his power to help him*." (p. 41) In this sentence, the assertion *Doc Daneeka was Yossarian's friend* is clearly contrasted with *would do just about nothing in his power to help him*.

Like repetition discussed above, enumeration is also a stylistic device used in *Catch-22* in order to reveal its black humour. There are numerous instances of enumerations in *Catch-22*, each of them meant to emphasize the black humour and absurdity of the respective situation. Also the words usually used in such enumeration add most often than not an ironic tinge. The subsequent excerpt is such an example:

"The colonel had really been investigated. There was not an organ of his body that had not been *drugged* and *derogated*, *dusted* and *dredged*, *fingered* and *photographed*, *removed*, *plundered* and *replaced*. *Neat*, *slender* and *erect*, the woman touched him often as she sat by his bedside and was the epitome of *stately sorrow* each time she *smiled*. The colonel was *tall*, *thin* and *stooped*." (p. 23)

One may notice here an enumeration of past participles that take the form of three binary syntactic structures on the words level: *drugged* and *derogated*, *dusted* and *dredged*, *fingered* and *photographed*. After using three binary syntactic structures on the words level, the enumeration from this sentence climactically ends with a ternary syntactic structure on the words level: *removed*, *plundered* and *replaced*. The next two sentences also contain ternary syntactic structures on the words level, *neat*, *slender* and *erect*; *tall*, *thin* and *stooped*. By using three binary syntactic structures and then three more ternary syntactic structures, Heller proves the symmetry, circularity and flawlessly balanced structure of his black humour.

The exaggeration employed in this excerpt and the opposition between the verb*smiled* with the noun *sorrow* (reinforced by the use of the adjective *stately*) are also clear indicators of black humour in the above-quoted fragment.

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Another stylistic device, which is all-pervasive in *Catch-22*, is the play upon words, which also expresses black humour at work in the story. The play upon words, by means of its double meaning, serves perfectly Heller's goal of instigating within the reader a desire to analyse the duality of morals and double standards and to foment a perspective of war. Further on, we shall quote just two examples of such puns:

"Yossarian*lost his nerve* on the mission to Avignon because Snowden *lost his guts*." (p. 234)

Guts here is both literally true – because Snowden has shrapnel destroy his intestines – and metaphorically true – because Yossarian loses his courage, which has a metaphorical association with the word *guts*.

Another illustrative example is:

"Yossarian could run into the hospital whenever he wanted *because of his liver and because of his eyes*; *the doctorscouldn't fix his livercondition* and *couldn't meet his eyes* each time he told them he had a liver condition." (p. 212)

The pun here is created by means of the nouns *liver* and *eyes*. From the first sentence, the reader may infer that Yossarian has two medical problems: a liver condition and an eye-related problem, since the nouns *liver* and *eyes* are linked with the help of the coordinative conjunction *and*. In the second sentence, though, the reader's expectations are defeated when the author uses two idioms, one with a proper meaning (*the doctors couldn't fix his* liver) and the other one with a figurative meaning (*the doctors couldn't meet his eyes*). Also notice the abundance of repetitions (*because of, liver condition*) used in such a short fragment, which is obviously ironic.

Pathological communication patterns such as absolute literalness, mistaking the map for the territory, the alleged superiority of doctors over human communication, circular reasoning or non sequiturs seem to govern the entire novel.

In a number of instances throughout the novel the connotative and denotative meanings are mingled, and divesting words and expressions of their extra meanings renders communication sometimes grotesque, even impossible. Here are some examples in which absolute literalness puzzles and amuses the reader at the same time:

"'*I'd give everything I own to Yossarian*', Milo persevered gamely in Yossarian's behalf. 'But since I don't own everything, I can't give everything to him, can I?'" (p. 384)

"'In what *state* were you born?' 'In *a state of innocence*'" (p. 440)

Or

"'Now, where were we? *Read me back the last line*.' '*Read me back the last line*', read back the corporal, who could take shorthand. 'Not *my last line*, stupid' the colonel shouted. 'Somebody else's'. '*Read me back the last line*', read back the corporal. 'That's *my last line* again' shrieked the colonel, turning purple with anger. 'Oh, no, sir, corrected the corporal, 'That's *my last line*. I read it to you just a moment ago.'" (p. 80)

In the first example, the sentence *I'd give everything I own to Yossarian*, which is just an expression and a way of speaking and which should be interpreted as such by taking into account its connotative meaning, is taken literally by Milo, giving rise to amusement.

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In the second example, the noun *state*, which in the question is used with its denotative meaning, i.e. an organized political community, living under a government, is understood by the interlocutor with its connotative meaning, i.e. a mental or emotional condition, thus leading to a pathological communication pattern.

The third excerpt resembles the dialogue of the absurd that Beckett makes use of in his plays. Here, the meanings are again mingled and the repetition of the sentence *Read me back my last line* three times and of the syntagm*my last line* also for three times is one more proof of Heller's perfect symmetry in his style. This fragment is like a dialogue between either deaf or stupid people and the repetition here has a great force of assertion. It is used to emphasize once again not only the absurdity of the situation, in particular, but also of war, in general.

Another pathological communication pattern in the novel is the mistake of the map for the territory. The dictum *The map is not the territory* suggests the frequent lack of differentiation between signifier and signified. In Heller's novel the fighter pilots violate this principle when they treat the ribbon on the map as the cause, rather than the effect of their dangerous bombing missions: "In the middle of the night Yossarian knocked on wood, crossed his fingers, and tiptoed out of his tent to move the bomb line over Bologna" (p. 123)

The alleged superiority of doctors over human communication is also a pathological pattern, which is thoroughly presented in the following excerpt:

"'I'm not Fortiori, sir', he said *timidly*. 'I'm Yossarian.' 'You're who?' 'My name is Yossarian, sir, and I'm in hospital with a wounded leg.' 'Your name is Fortiori' Major Sanderson contradicted him belligerently. 'And you're in the hospital for a stone in your salivary gland.' 'Oh, come on, Major' Yossarian*exploded*. 'I ought to know who I am.' 'And I've got an official Army record here to prove it', Major Sanderson retorted." (p. 307)

Here, the superiority of the Army doctor over human communication is, in fact, another reiteration of the absurdity and incongruity of Catch-22. Heller proves once more that war is only a means of stultifying people by reducing them to mere names in an Army record. Yossarian is the only character in the book who dares contradict and question Catch-22. In this fragment, the adverb *timidly* used in the first sentence is replaced further on with the verb *exploded*, showing Yossarian's revolt against being treated like just a name in a record and not like a person with a distinct identity.

Circular reasoning is a type of formal logical fallacy in which the proposition to be proven is assumed implicitly or explicitly in one of the premises. Here is an example of circular reasoning in *Catch-22*: "'*Don't contradict me*', Colonel Cathcart said. 'We're all in enough trouble.' '*I'm not contradicting you*, sir.' 'Yes, you are. Even that's a contradiction.'" (p. 142) Such an argument is fallacious because it relies upon its own proposition *I'm not contradicting you* in order to support its central premise. Essentially, any answer to the imperative *Don't contradict me* would not be good.

Non sequitur is Latin for *it does not follow*. It is most often used as a noun to describe illogical statements and it represents a logical fallacy where a stated conclusion is not supported by its premise. The following excerpt is an example of non sequitur:

"The chaplain had sinned, and it was good... Common sense told him that telling lies and defecting from duty were sins. On the other hand, everyone knew that sin was evil and that no good could come from evil. But *he did feel good; he felt positively marvellous*. Consequently, it followed logically that *telling lies and defecting from duty could not be sins*." (p. 372)

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Here, the conclusion *telling lies and defecting from duty could not be sins* is clearly not supported by the argument given: *he did feel good; he felt positively marvellous*. It is also worth noticing the use of the emphatic *did*, meant to stress the supposed correctness of the premise.

The most pervasive theme of the novel is insanity. Madness is, of course, a consistent motif in black humour and constitutes the basis on which the theory of incongruity is built in the novel. The logical order of daily existence has somehow gone awry, leaving the black humorist "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"[4]

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 itself is insane. The structure of the novel moves systematically to a demonstration that the latter is the case. Yossarian represents the incongruous character that reinforces once again the novel's black humour.

Yossarian is *mad* only in terms of his inability to accept the absurdity of war and his compulsive desire to remain alive. Yossarian is analysed 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*. *Miserydepresses* you. *Ignorance depresses* you. *Persecutiondepresses* you. *Violencedepresses* you. *Slumsdepress* you. *Greeddepresses* you. *Crimedepresses* you. *Corruptiondepresses* you. You know, *it wouldn't surprise me if you're a manic-depressive*!" (pp. 297-8)

This paragraph portrays an upside-down world in which the normal values of society are reversed. From the very first sentence of the paragraph, Major Sanderson states that what he is about to enumerate are *conventions* of society. In the next two sentences, Heller uses the adjectives *morbid* and *deep-seated* in order to stress the assumed outrage of the infringement of the conventions, although, in a normal world, any person would fear death. In the next two sentences, Heller uses enumeration as a stylistic device. In one sentence he uses a quadruple syntactic structure made up of nouns (*bigots*, *bullies*, *snobs* or *hypocrites*), while in the other sentence he uses a quintuple syntactic structure (*robbed*, *exploited*, *degraded*, *humiliated* or *deceived*) made up of past participles. Afterwards, Heller uses the obsessive repetition of the verb *to depress* (8 times) in connection with nouns like m*isery*, *ignorance*, *persecution*, *violence*, *slums*, *greed*, *crime*, and *corruption* which, again, in a normal world, usually depress people. Therefore, the conclusion *it wouldn't surprise me if you're a manic-depressive* is obviously not supported by the preceding arguments since they do not have truth value, giving rise to a non sequitur.

In this fragment, just like Swift in *A Modest Proposal*, Heller uses non sequitur in order to make the reader reflect upon the situation depicted and realise its awkwardness.

The grotesque details, the brutal and shocking images are also a constitutive and fundamental part of Joseph Heller's black humour. The following passage is but one of many deaths which take the reader completely by surprise. They appear in the middle of a

[4] A., Kernan, *The Cankered Muse: Satire of the English Renaissance*, YaleUniversity Press, New Haven, 1959, p. 21

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paragraph, sometimes in a subordinate clause, almost by the way, and convey an awful contingency, a callousness of God, nature and human depravity. Here is a passage having a very high rhetorical power that depicts Snowden's death minutely, by giving every single detail of his agony. The images are very plastic and, by his use of language, Heller determines the reader to get involved emotionally in this nightmarish situation:

"Snowden was wounded inside his flak suit. Yossarian ripped opened the snaps of Snowden's flak suit and heard himself scream wildly as Snowden's insides *slithered* down to the floor in a *soggy* pile and just *kept dripping out*. Another chunk of flak more than three inches big had shot into his other side just underneath the arm and *blasted* all the way through, drawing *mottled* quarts of Snowden along with it through the *gigantic* hole in his ribs it made as it *blasted out*. Yossarian screamed a second time and squeezed both hands over his eyes. His teeth were chattering in horror. He forced himself to look again. Here was God's plenty all right, he thought bitterly as he stared - *liver*, *lungs*, *kidneys*, *ribs*, *stomach* and *bits of the stewed tomatoes* Snowden had eaten that day for lunch." (p. 429)

Heller's choice of words is very careful; all the words used in this description have a great force of assertion and are very strong from a rhetorical point of view.

Verbs like *to slither*, *to blast*, *to drip out* or adjectives like *soggy*, *mottled*, *gigantic* used in connection with a human being are morbid and repellent. The same effect is obtained with the enumeration Heller makes of Snowden's organs, at which Yossarian stares: *liver*, *lungs*, *kidneys*, *ribs*, *stomach*. The enumeration reaches its climax when Heller introduces, among the human organs that are exposed because of the wound Snowden has in his stomach, *the stewed tomatoes* he had eaten for lunch. This time the incongruity is no longer ironic or funny but morbid and grotesque.

By means of all the above-mentioned stylistic devices, Heller's black humour may be interpreted as a form of subversion, a rebellion that seeks to not only criticise and expose but also abolish the military's propaganda and manner of handling conflicts.

With Heller, counterpointing the pathetic and the comic within the same experience by demonstrating their object from more than one angle brings about a cathartic response from the part of the reader.

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