

Joseph Heller's Black Humor Creation from the Perspective of Catch-22*

Chengxiao Xiao

School of Liberal Arts
Heilongjiang University
Harbin, China 150080

Public English Teaching and Research Department
Harbin Normal University
Harbin, China 150080

Abstract—*Catch-22* is the war-themed novels representative work of Heller, and is also a realistic black humorous novel created by Heller under the influence of American civilian life in the 1950s. The novel takes the war as the background to describe the scene of war through the perspective of a small potato, and reveals the decadent bureaucracy of the United States and the chaos of the whole social political and economic order. Heller wrote the absurdity into the novel from a multi-dimensional perspective, breaking the single narrative mode and language mode of the traditional novel. The novel uses a great deal of contradictory juxtaposition and ambiguous witty language to juxtapose unconnected things caused by unruly "military regulations", so that the authenticity of the novel gives way to fiction and the plot gives way to language. The language of the novel has become the dominance of the novel world, which makes this anti-war novel have more thought-provoking artistic effect and anti-traditional color than the traditional war-theme novel. It highlights the concern of Heller for human survival and the digestion of the western traditional tragic model.

Keywords—*Joseph Heller; black humor; absurd*

I. INTRODUCTION

Joseph Heller is a representative writer of postmodern novels in the United States. In 1942, faced with the grim situation of World War II, he enlisted in the army and served as a bombing mission. While Heller lived through the brutal war and realized the absurdity of existence in the midst of the diffuse war. On the other hand, Heller was touched by the American civilian life in the 1950s. Therefore, the *Catch-22* (referred to as *Catch-22*) is a black humor novel with the realistic color born in such a war background. The novel goes beyond the scope of war and meticulously portrays the oppression and corrosion of bureaucracy, military means and monopoly economy on people. From the perspective of small potato Yossarian, it reveals the crazy behavior of "there is

only one catch — *Catch-22* — and that it is a normal mental performance for a man to consider his own safety in the face of real and imminent danger", which is called "the epic of the 1960s", with a strong realism.

II. "ASSORTED CHOWDER PLATES": THE JUXTAPOSITION OF ABSURD FIGURES AND ABSURD EVENTS

The background of the *Catch-22* is set in an air base on a desert island. The people and events in the base are beyond the normal morality and rationality. These events are connected and become the epitome of an absurd world. The first figure to be attacked was the upper class officers represented by Colonel Cathcart. Under the banner of "fighting for the motherland" advocated by the government, they seek personal benefits and make war windfall. In order to take credit and seek rewards for themselves, they disregard the lives of soldiers, increase the number of flights, increase the risk factor of flight, and make capital for their personal promotion. Secondly, the novel vividly depicts the face of monopoly capitalists represented by Milo who made a fortune in the war. Milo is the food manager of the flight brigade. He used various means to make exorbitant profits and created the slogan of "everyone has a share" in syndicate. He not only brought officers into the group and used the aircraft that transporting materials to do business around the world, but also helped the enemy army with the patriotic slogan of justice, truth, freedom and fraternity. He signed contracts with both the American army and the German army to extract the kickbacks of bombing fees and defense fees. The most absurd thing was that Milo gave the pilot cotton-wrapped chocolate candy after losing money in the cotton business. However, such a capitalist with blood on his body was popular everywhere. He became a hero who earned income for the army, enlivens the economy and even be crowned mayor and crown prince. The third kind of character is a small potato like Yossarian, who invents various games to paralyze himself in his boring life. He saw through the essence of war and the faces of officers and capitalists, so he dealt with this absurd world with absurd words and deeds. He falsified and flipped through letters of soldiers at will, hides naked in a tree, and only wears leather

*Fund: Research Program of Philosophy and Social Science of Heilongjiang Province (19XWC153), (16WWB02); Heilongjiang Province Economic and Social Development Key Research Project Foreign Language Special Key Project (WY2018010-A); Harbin Normal University's First "Course Ideology and Politics" Teaching Reform Demonstration Project (KCSZ2019005).

shoes every day. As the army doctor said, now the only one with normal mind may be Yossarian.

With the reversal of justice and evil, the confusion between bravery and cowardice, and the dislocation of language, a series of absurd events listed by the author vividly depict the chaos and disorder of the base and highlight the absurd color of life. Living in such absurdity, people no longer have justice, honesty, faith, only grotesque, clumsy and stupid. The characters and events in the *Catch-22* highlight the absurdity of people existence, and the pressure and the dilemma that cannot be extricated caused by such absurd environment on the individual. In commenting on the *Catch-22* of Heller, Sid said, "In constructing the text of the *Catch-22*, we must be wary of forming a clean and coherent thread of various events that does not correspond to the process of reading the novel." Winston further believes that "Black humor novels show us a sky of introspection and reparation, and from which let us get the pleasure of constructing constellations."

III. CHARACTERIZATION OF "ANTI-HERO":

DEGRADATION AND SUBVERSION OF TRADITIONAL HERO IMAGE

The absurdity of the characters in the black humor novels makes the characters have the characteristics of "anti-heroes". They do not have the heroic spirit of the protagonists in the traditional novels, but go to the opposite side of the heroes and become anti-heroes. Pilot Yossarian was greedy for life and fear of death on the battlefield. He tried everything to escape from the flying missions, refused the medal awarded by the military to buy him off, and finally became a deserter in order to survive. The various behaviors of Yossarian are quite different from the traditional definition of hero, but with his keen eyes and superhuman wisdom, he saw through the essence of the war of killing and brutality while holding high the banner of patriotism and justice. This is a black humorous anti-hero declaration of life, which represents the strongest voice of life on behalf of all people in modern society facing survival difficulties. Yossarian is not a hero in the traditional sense, but a survival fighter and existentialist hero. Heller downgraded the traditional hero image and subverted the tradition on the basis of borrowing the text and characters to make it a powerful weapon to create absurd and detached.

The subversion of traditional logic is mainly reflected in the treatment of time, which is the most important tool to help the novel from reality to anti-reality. On the one hand, the realistic time in the *Catch-22* is disrupted, the sequence of events is arranged at will, and there is a lack of tomography and organization; on the other hand, the novel juxtaposes reality with imagination, resulting in a new concept of time and spatial order. The juxtaposition of reality and fiction makes the meaning of reality change completely, and then it moved towards fiction, presenting the essential characteristics of modern life, such as fragmentary, disorderly and even misplaced. When the dark curtain of "*Catch-22*" is unveiled, morality and belief become deception, and anti-morality and anti-belief become the important characteristics of modern heroes. Therefore, the

traditional moral heroes who die in battlefield were replaced by the soldiers who tried their best to escape, and the ideal of dying for the country in the traditional belief was defeated by the strong instinct to live.

On the basis of highlighting anti-hero, the black humor characters portrayed break through the traditional way of thinking, which leads to profound thinking. The people of modern life have no longer followed suit as before, and they realize what the pain of alienation that humanity is suffering from. To this end, they are full of doubts, doubts about the existing institutions and mechanisms, doubts about the ideology that imprisons people's minds, and cast doubt on the language itself. This revolutionary breakthrough of thinking makes the characterization of black humor novels take on a brand-new situation. After retaining the typical characteristics of black and humor, it is no longer content to focus on the characters in reality, but instead focuses on the perspective shifted from epistemology to ontology, set out to build the world of fiction, and highlighted the chaotic order of modern life and the resulting spiritual crisis.

IV. ABSURDITY AND TRANSCENDENCE: BORROWING AND PARODY OF TRADITIONAL LITERARY FORMS

Heller adopted literary borrowing and parody in various places in *Catch-22*. Borrowing refers to the direct transfer of a certain historical figure, event, content of other texts or other figures and things in other contexts to the existing texts. Even behind the serious distortion caused by the parody, the readers can also realize the richer and sharper nature and connotation of the war behind the parody. In *Catch-22*, he points out the theme of human destiny with the Beluga of Herman Melville, and points out the meaning of absurdity in the name of Washington Irving as if he were "God" when Yossarian checks the correspondence, and he also highlights the distance between reality and appearance in the poetry of Edward Robinson to strengthen the absurdity theme. The anti-heroic image of the novel becomes even clearer when Yossarian is compared to the hero Achilles in the epic *Iliad*. All kinds of literary borrowing in the *Catch-22* makes the novel inherit the traditional novel and cultural background on the one hand, display the theme of war clearly in the novel, and reproduce the harm caused by the war to people by means of irony. In this sense, he inherited the characteristics of anti-war novels such as *All Quiet on the Western Front*, *A Farewell to Arms*, and the *Good Soldier Švejk*. However, the difference is that the *Catch-22* at the same time inherits the characteristics of absurd novels such as Sartre and Camus, and writes the absurd into the novel, which makes this anti-war novel have more thought-provoking artistic effect than the traditional war tragedy. The story is full of unstructured facts, juxtapositions of unconnected things, and occasionally ridiculous, exaggerated, and weird words, are both close to imaginary reality and surreal characteristics.

War, a history that has been cursed, praised or criticized by countless works, finally lost its direction in black humor novels. What parody is trying to convey is an absurd experience, a kind of absurd catharsis. "*The Catch-22* is a radical protest novel in the final analysis. It aims at the current power center of the United States from the left, and

the image of power is the bureaucratic system of collusion among industry, military and administration," said Charles Harris. Although the place and the so-called "military rules" described in the novel are fake contents, *Catch-22* has far-reaching influence. It is not only known as "epics of the 1960s", "models of describing the crazy world", but also considered as one of the most important works written by Americans since the Second World War. It is "the first novel in the 1960s representing the new direction of American Literature".

V. REALISM AND FREEHAND: COLLAGE OF REAL AND FICTIONAL WAR FRAGMENTS

Black humor novels have the characteristics of typical western humanistic tradition. The traditional side shows in two aspects of realism and freehand: Realism refers to the background related to historical facts in novels, freehand refers to the description of the complicated psychology of characters in novels. Black humor novels have never been divorced from the reality, which highlights the reflection and worry of author about the living environment of modern people. Heller's ridiculous words about serious and horrible scenes make humor full of grotesque and painful. In the *Catch-22*, he likens the spurt of blood to the melted snow on the eaves, describing the flesh and blood of the soldiers and their vaguely wobbling legs as alive hamburgers. The incapacitated wounded lay in bed wrapped in white plaster and bandages, above him, the liquid in the hanging bottle entered the body from the arm, and the kidney excrement was discharged into the bottle on the floor from the catheter in the abdomen. When the bottles on the floor were full and the hanging bottle was empty, the nurse switched the two bottles and the kidney excrement returned to the body. This is the magical use of realism and freehand. In such a morbid society, people face ugliness, horror and death, and individuals are in a situation of helplessness. This morbidity and distortion of human nature form a collage, which vividly shows the loss of personality and the reduction of rationality in the desperate living environment.

Heller fully mobilized the repetition of short dialogue and boring language, and many short sentences can be seen throughout the novel, such as "jaundice", "that's good", "this is too bad" and so on. Secondly, the whole novel can see contradictions juxtaposition and meaning ambiguity. As General Driddle said, "my only drawback is that I have no drawback." Dr. Denica said, "It's not my business to help." Milo used to say, "I never lie. I only lie when I need it." When asked where he was born, Yossarian said, "on the battlefield, when I was the least sensible." This kind of language seems comical, but in fact, it is rich in philosophy, which makes the theme of the novel more distinct. Through revealing the contradictory content description in the "Catch" directly, it presents a black-and-white reversed, real and false world. In addition, paradox and anti-logic fill the whole novel, causing readers to think. The *Catch-22* conveys the chaos of the real world through witty language, and confuses the boundaries of seriousness and buffoonery, reality and surreality. In the end of the novel, Yossarian's escape is just the evidence that the real people escape from the world under

the control of "Catch-22" and move towards independence and freedom.

VI. CONCLUSION

Heller made it clear: "I'm not interested in the subject of war. I'm interested in personal relationships in the bureaucracy." The absurdity of the *Catch-22* is mainly reflected in the contradiction between social existence and individual existence. When the individual cannot find an outlet in the contradiction, then war and death will become the direct result of the contradiction. The content of the *Catch-22* and all the laughable plots contained in it put rationality into trouble. Black humorous novels raise the absurdity of rationality and all the huge loopholes that exist to the level of ontology, so that the essence of the world is ridiculous, irrational, and even rational, there are ridiculous and irrational things that cannot be ruled out. It is on the basis of dissolving the traditional tragedy mode that the black humorous novels unearthed their own overall characteristics and styles, expressing tragedy emotions with gloomy laughter, miserable laughter, and desperate laughter, and reflecting the absurdity of reality with a multidimensional perspective, and reflect a strong anti-traditional color.

REFERENCES

- [1] David Seed, *The Fiction of Joseph Heller: Against the Grain*, New York: St. Martin's Press Seed, 1989, P45.
- [2] Mathew Winston, *Black Humor: To Weep with Laughing*, in Alan R. Pratt, ed. *Black Humor: Critical Essays*, New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1993, P 263.
- [3] Shi Yanling: *Postmodernist Novel of Joseph Heller*, *Journal of Lanzhou University (Social Science Edition)*, 2000 (28). (in Chinese)
- [4] Stephen W. Potts, *Catch-22: Antiheroic Antinovel*, Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1989, P7.