

What's the Catch? The Nexus of Absurdist Humour, Incongruity, and Characterisation in Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*

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Abstract Joseph Heller's novel *Catch-22* (1961) details the absurdity of war and extensively makes use of humour to do so. Yet the structural role this characteristic humour fulfils has rarely been explored in depth. In this article, I focus on a specific type of humour, namely absurdist humour, which is traditionally defined as a form of humour where resolution of the underlying incongruity cannot be obtained. Drawing on cognitive theories of humour and on the concept of characterisation categories, the article goes on to describe the close-knit relationship between absurdist humour and characterisation in the novel. The analysis highlights the structural importance of absurdist humour both for the narrative structure of the novel as well as for a reader's understanding and interpretation of *Catch-22*. The article illustrates that resolution can be achieved, contrary to the generally espoused viewpoint in humour studies, and that it is realised at the moment of interpretation. Understanding the mechanisms of absurdist humour, then, benefits our understanding of Heller's classic as it forces readers to more closely consider the message conveyed by the novel.

Keywords Literary absurd · Absurdist humour · Cognitive literary theory · Characterisation categories

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Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* is widely considered as a prime example of absurdist literature but also as a thoroughly humorous book.¹ Sanford Pinsker, for instance, describes *Catch-22* as 'a classic of American humor' (2000: 609). The novel tells the story of Captain John Yossarian, a United States Air Force bomber, and his fellow airmen who are stationed in Pianosa, Italy during the Second World War. The events, actions and characters in *Catch-22* are depicted in such a way that they emphasise the harsh realities of war and underline the absurdity of the military and political apparatus that perpetrates it. The novel, then, portrays an absurd world where 'everything is rationalized but nothing makes sense' (Hilfer 1993: 115).

That the novel can be simultaneously categorised as absurdist and humorous is indicative of the strong link between these two concepts, something which several humour theorists have already remarked upon (McGhee 1979; Oring 2003; Chafe 2007). Much like humour, the experience of the literary absurd is often a direct result of the reader's inability to immediately reconcile literary text and experience (Safer 1989: 94). Events in the fictional world do not unfold as expected nor do they seem to respect the rules of (logical) causality, leaving no recourse but to interpret the text as absurd while generating humour at the same time.

Catch-22's humour has at turns been described as satire (Nagel 2010), black humour (LeClair 1975), grotesque humour (Ramsey 1973), and the list goes on.² These variegated and often generic labels already hint at the 'complexity of any attempt to codify the humor of the novel' (Nagel 2010: 48) and its humour, in the broadest sense, is generally treated as a localised phenomenon. There is, however, a specific type of humour prevalent in *Catch-22*, namely absurdist humour, which not only gives the novel its particular flavour but also proves essential to the narrative structure of the novel, certainly in terms of characterisation. This, in turn, significantly impacts the reader's understanding of the novel, an effect that is largely realised by a recurring tendency to oppose conflicting scripts such as, for instance, SANITY and INSANITY and the many role reversals permeating the novel, specific strategies which have hitherto remained underexposed.³

In humour theory, absurdist humour is generally considered as a specific type of humour where the incongruity between two or more data-sets remains unresolved, at least on the level of the literary text itself. This explanation is not entirely satisfactory, certainly when considered in the context of the literary text. By integrating the *General Theory of Verbal Humor*'s notion of script oppositions (Attardo 2001) with Ralf Schneider's concept of categorisation (2001), the present article illustrates how absurdist humour impacts characterisation and ultimately interpretation as it requires a higher level of cognitive processing on the part of the reader that goes "beyond" the text, drawing on and playing with the reader's

¹ See among others Carpenter (2003), Craig (1997), Hidalgo Downing (2000a, b), Merrill (1986), Pinsker (2000, 2009), Rutherford (1982), Waldmeir 1964), Way (1968), Ritter (1973).

² See also Carpenter (2003), McDonald (2008), or Vos (1973).

³ In her essay "Joseph Heller: At War with Absurdity" (1973), Jean Kennard emphasises the caricatural quality of the novel's cast of characters who are frequently introduced in such a way as to 'provide the reader with irreconcilably opposite traits', which can frustrates a reader's expectations (264–265), but she does not expand on the humour this technique generates and its structural role in the novel.

knowledge and assumptions forcing them to continuously revise, recontextualise and reinterpret what they know or think they know.

Studying the interplay between absurdist humour and characterisation enhances our understanding of the novel and could also lead to new ways of describing the different levels of cognitive processing involved in the resolution of incongruity, which lies at the heart of the humorous experience. Considering absurdist humour in *Catch-22* in terms of script oppositions and therefore in the context of schema theory proves fruitful because, as Neal Norrick says, 'schema conflicts on a single level suggests (the possibility of) conflict resolution on some other level' which in turn generates humour (Norrick 1986: 230). In *Catch-22*, illogicality and irrationality are ingrained in the novel and the resulting incongruity is repeatedly foregrounded by the characters and their actions. *Catch-22*'s characteristic absurdist humour serves as a literary strategy and highlights the characters' behaviour and personality, proving instrumental in conveying the major themes of the novel.

The Incongruity of Humour

The field of humour studies is highly diversified, but within this conceptually rich area of research three broad categories can be distinguished: sociological, psychological or psychoanalytical, and cognitive theories of humour, with the latter focussing on the notion of incongruity. In his recent book *Riveted* (2014), cognitive scientist Jim Davies makes the claim that 'incongruity is the essence of all humor' (127). And although not all humour theorists would agree with that statement, it is difficult to deny that incongruity theory has proven very influential in linguistic and literary studies of humour. One of the leading cognitive theories of humour today is Salvatore Attardo's *General Theory of Verbal Humor*. It postulates that humour follows from the resolution of one or more incongruities. The term incongruity, here, describes an experience where certain objects, events, or actions do not conform to our expectations of them (McGhee 1979: 6–7). Take for instance the following description of Lieutenant Natelly by Yossarian: 'Natelly had a bad start. He came from a good family' (Heller 1995: 14). This short fragment is taken from the opening pages of the novel when, generally, readers will still be unfamiliar with the fictional world of *Catch-22*. Yossarian does not hold a very high opinion of Natelly because, as we will learn later on, his goals are diametrically opposed to those of the young Lieutenant. Natelly desperately wants to fly more missions so he can continue his (seemingly unsuccessful) courtship of an Italian prostitute, whereas Yossarian wants to get back home as quickly as possible. The Captain, here, intimates that Natelly was at a disadvantage because he was born into an affluent family, which seems incongruous as it implies a causal link between having a 'bad start' to life and coming from a 'good family', a connection that is likely to defeat the expectations of most readers.

In other words, every humorous experience is caused by the incongruity, what Attardo calls a 'script opposition', between an object or a situation as it is described and the default representation of that object or situation stored in our memory. We then have to try and resolve that script opposition by successfully integrating conflicting sets of information, even though resolution cannot always be obtained,

says Attardo (2001: 18–22, 25). In the example above the incongruity can initially be resolved by attributing to Yossarian the belief that Nately's upper-class family has no idea how the "real world" works and has passed on their ignorance to Nately himself. This is confirmed when we later learn that his family enlisted him so that he could meet other men of high standing and learn to behave like a gentleman. The idea that he might actually have to go to war and fight never even occurred to them.

However, a definition that describes humour strictly in terms of incongruity and its possible resolution ultimately proves unsatisfactory as it can be construed to imply that any and all occurrences of incongruity must perforce lead to humour, which is certainly not the case (Billig 2005: 175; Hamilton 2013: 27). Attardo does not explicitly deal with this issue, preferring to skirt around it. In order to differentiate between incongruity that leads to humour and incongruity that does not, Elliott Oring introduces the term 'appropriate incongruity' which is the 'perception of an appropriate relationship between categories that would ordinarily be regarded as incongruous', thus establishing a link between juxtaposing concepts (Oring 2003: 1–2). But what makes a joke a joke, according to Oring, is that 'the engagement of the incongruity and the search for its appropriateness' must be '*spurious* rather than *genuine*' (Oring 2003: 5). A somewhat similar idea is expressed by philosopher John Morreall who believes that humour 'involves cognitive and practical disengagement from what is going on around us' (Morreall 2009: 32). What both Oring and Morreall are hinting at here is the importance of the context for the interpretation of humour. Not only for recognizing the incongruity but for its possible resolution as well. When reading literary texts that context does not only encompass information provided by the text itself but also the knowledge supplied by the reader him- or herself.

Yet when a humorous literary text makes us laugh, we are generally aware of the fictional nature of the text. And in that context it can certainly be considered as disingenuous. But that does not mean that our experience of the text's humour is spurious or that we are disengaging ourselves from possible personal repercussions as a consequence of our reading. Is it not an often cited quality of literature that it can affect our "real-world" personalities, our emotional responses? Absurdist literature proves no exception in that respect. There must be something more at work here, something that triggers our response to absurdist humour in absurdist literature. In order to find out what that might be, we need to look at the relationship between incongruity and our experience of absurdist humour in more detail.

Davies feels that incongruity is so intriguing to us because it causes us to feel (slightly) confused while at the same time it hints at the possible resolution of that very same confusion. Incongruity hits a kind of 'sweet spot' between an utterance being so confusing that we cannot make sense of it and being too ordinary and therefore too boring (Davies 2014: 113–114). Davies goes on to say that people, as a rule, have the tendency to search for familiar patterns, to 'perceive things in terms of the categories we're used to' (2014: 122). Humour is something that allows us to break free, if you will, of the patterns and categories of everyday life. It enables us, requires us even, to see things in a different way, which in turn causes enjoyment (Palmer 1994: 57–58). Humour has the same effect in *Catch-22*, especially in terms of characterisation.

Categorisation and Characterisation in *Catch-22*

Reading is a highly complex process and the same holds true for a reader's engagement with literary characters. Characters in a novel, or in any other literary text for that matter, cannot be understood as nothing more than fictive representations of real people or as a 'paradigm of traits described by words' (Jannidis 2013: 13). In order to describe the interaction between a reader and a literary character one needs to account for information provided by the literary text and the context, and for the knowledge that the reader brings to the table. Cognitive theories of characterisation attempt to do just that and try to describe 'in detail the cognitive and affective operations of information processing'. They posit that literary characters are best considered as 'text-based constructs of the human mind, whose analysis requires both models of understanding text and models of the human psyche' (Eder et al. 2010: 5). When readers try to understand and interpret the actions and motivations of literary characters, they, largely, rely on knowledge that comes from outside the text. Generally, stories give the account of actions of characters and to truly understand a story, readers have to be able to match characters' desires, intentions and motivations on the one hand with their actions on the other hand. Readers then expect characters to undertake certain actions, based on motivations they have attributed to these characters (Schneider 2001: 608).

This suggests that characters and a reader's interpretation of them are highly dependent on that reader's contextual knowledge at the time of reading. So when readers think about or construct a mental image of literary characters, they draw on both textual information and on their own schematic knowledge concerning 'human nature; social categories; prototypes and stereotypes; knowledge of patterns of social interaction; groups and roles' (Eder et al. 2010: 14). This social knowledge is supplemented by what Eder et al. describe as 'media-specific knowledge', which pertains to the specificities of the medium through which the message is conveyed. In terms of a literary text, such media-specific knowledge refers to knowledge about literary genre, intertextuality, or 'modes of narrative' (Eder et al. 2010: 14). *Catch-22*'s canonical status as a classic of absurdist literature, for example, can influence how readers expect its characters to behave, as absurdist texts have a propensity for defying logic, 'societal norms' and even 'literary conventions' (Bennett 2015: 25). But that would in no small amount depend on their familiarity with absurdist texts such as *Catch-22*.

Research in the field of social psychology has illustrated how 'social interaction leads to the formation of categorical and schematic structures of knowledge that create stability and reliability in dealing with others' (Schneider 2001: 612). Categorising people, as based on previous experiences, facilitates our response to other people's actions. What is interesting is that our interaction with literary characters is not all that different: 'readers routinely and unreflectively use characters' behavior to link them to particular categories' (Gerrig 2010: 361).

Patrick Colm Hogan, for instance, categorises literary characters as either 'socially normative'—characters that conform, to a high degree, to certain 'social categories and their associated norms'—or 'individualistic' characters, characters

that do not fit neatly into any preconceived category and usually go against reigning social norms (Hogan 2010: 144–145). The distinction Hogan makes, here, reveals an important aspect of a reader's interaction with literary characters. Readers have a heightened sensitivity to any kind of behaviour that they perceive to be different from the norm for a member of a specific category, and they judge and evaluate literary characters accordingly (Gerrig 2010: 365). So, when readers construct a mental model of a literary character, they start from their schematic knowledge in a top-down process that relies on categorisation. This does not mean, however, that these categories and their membership are unchangeable. As we gather more textual information, it might prove harder to satisfyingly match character to category. If such is the case, rather than make use of a top-down process, readers will rely on a bottom-up process where individual pieces of textual information are incorporated in the mental model of the character in a process called 'personalization' (Schneider 2001: 617–619).

Schneider distinguishes three different types of categorisation: one based on social categories, one on literary categories and a third one based on text-specific categorisation. Social categories equate to the function a literary character fulfils in the story, such as a doctor or a soldier, and is more strongly linked to our real-life knowledge and context. Literary categorisation, says Schneider, occurs when a reader identifies, or partly recognises, in a character 'features of a literary stock character', such as the wise mentor in a *Bildungsroman* or the damsel in distress. Readers will then draw on their schematic knowledge and its predetermined character slots. Text-specific categorisation, finally, occurs when a literary character is described, usually by the narrator, as having a trait so central to his or her personality that we expect and predict that character's behaviour to reinforce this personality trait (Schneider 2001: 619–620). While 'non-expert' readers are most likely to engage in social categorisation, all three strategies can be employed simultaneously. In fact, 'categorization effects can be increased if social, literary and text-specific categorization act in combination and accumulate their respective categorization potential' (Schneider 2001: 623). Of course, many more categories than these three can be discerned. One could, for example, differentiate between abstract categories such as characters with agency as opposed to those without it. However, a reader's experiences are rarely restricted to such abstract notions of literary character and readers have the tendency to fill in their mental representations of characters more concretely, provided the text itself allows for such a strategy. Schneider's three distinct categories are well suited to literary analysis as they account for both the reader's input and textual information and how these two interact.

As I have already stated, categorisation is not a static nor an unchangeable process. New information provided about a character can possibly lead to the character no longer fitting a specific category. If so, then the mental model of the corresponding character has to be modified or amended through a process of 'individuation'. Individuation, says Schneider, is a fairly common process, as a character that would never change throughout a story could be considered uninteresting, unless, of course, this solidity of character is a deliberate strategy, for example, to invoke a comic effect (Schneider 2001: 624). However, if the new

information provided about a character is in direct contrast to the expectations engendered by category membership, then a process of 'decategorization' ensues: 'The impact of decategorization on the reader is considerable, because it is generally the case that information about events or people that does not match expectations leads to a rise in the level of awareness—a process that can be assumed to function in real life as well as literature' (Schneider 2001: 624). As we will see, the process of decategorisation is something that readers of *Catch-22* will have to contend with frequently. Finally, categorisation can also be 'blocked' by using certain strategies. Literary characters can be introduced into the narrative without any explicit commentary on the part of the narrator, or quite the opposite by providing contrasting descriptions of a character, whether it be by the narrator or other characters that make up the story world (Schneider 2001: 625). I will now turn to the novel itself to demonstrate how incongruity and categorisation generate the absurdist humour so characteristic of *Catch-22*.

Contrariety and Absurdist Humour in *Catch-22*

Catch-22 relates the (mis)adventures of US Air Force Captain John Yossarian and his motley crew of fellow airmen during the Second World War. As a lead bombardier stationed in Italy, Yossarian is tasked with flying dangerous missions over enemy territory. In an attempt to make the newspaper headlines, however, the new squadron commander continues to increase the number of missions the crew has to complete in order to be rotated back home. As this conflicts with Yossarian's ambition to 'live forever or die in the attempt' (Heller 1995: 36) he diverts most of his energy to concocting various schemes and plans to avoid having to go up in the air. As we follow him on his adventures we are introduced, sometimes only briefly, to a vast host of characters with an often absurd backstory that is revealed to the reader through the repeated intertwining of past and present that makes up the meandering structure of *Catch-22*.⁴

According to Joseph Waldmeir, Heller creates an absurd world where there seems to exist no logic by 'the ancient comic device of portraying the preposterous as normal, [...], and Heller is superb at the creation of this kind of comedy' (Waldmeir 1964: 192–193). But while literary critics generally agree on *Catch-22*'s absurd and (darkly) comic nature, the humour itself has seldom been the main focus of literary analyses. One exception is Laura Hidalgo Downing's article 'How to Do Things With Contradiction: Exploring Humour in Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*' (2000a). Hidalgo Downing draws on Werth's (1999) Text World Theory (specifically on the notion of text coherence) and on Apter's (1982) notion of cognitive synergy to describe how contradiction and contrariety give rise to humour. Hidalgo Downing, however, focuses almost exclusively on 'realisation humour' as opposed to 'content humour'. Content humour 'has to do with humour which arises from details of incidents in the plot, situations or characters in a novel'. Realisation humour refers to 'the humorous effect [...] produced by the choice of language to

⁴ On the structure of *Catch-22*, see among others Merrill (1986), Craig (1997), or McDonald (2008).

represent a situation which in itself need not be necessarily comic' (Hidalgo Downing 2000a: 119). The present article predominantly explores how absurdist humour is the result of characters' actions and how these are responded to in the fictional world and how absurdist humour in turn impacts the literary characters in the novel.

The previously cited example of the young, rich and good-looking Lieutenant Nately introduces but one among the plethora of characters that populate the fictional world of *Catch-22*. The protagonist of the novel, however, is Yossarian. His actions reveal him to be a man who loves to be contrary and who continuously flaunts our schematic expectations engendered by this fictional world, set as it is on an air force base in Italy during World War II. These expectations frame our reading. One of the first things that comes to mind when talking about the military is its hierarchical command structure and its strict insistence on discipline, especially during war time. In terms of Schneider's process of social categorisation, we can assume, at least initially, that Yossarian fits neatly into the category of a military officer, and as such embodies such "virtues" as obedience, responsibility and respect for the chain of command. Within that frame it seems almost unthinkable that he succeeds in (temporarily) delaying the mission over Bologna simply by sneaking out one night and moving the bomb line up over Bologna on the map, especially without any real personal consequence:

They captured Bologna during the night, sir. Is the mission canceled?' 'What are you talking about, Black?' Colonel Korn growled. 'Why should the mission be canceled?' 'Because they captured Bologna, sir. Isn't the mission canceled?' 'Of course the mission is canceled. Do you think we're bombing our own troops now? (Heller 1995: 149).

Yossarian is a man in full pursuit of his own objectives, however incompatible they may be with those of the military. His contradictory nature does not only become evident from his actions but is also highlighted by the extra- and heterodiegetic narrator. The reader is told, for instance, that Yossarian stops playing chess with the artillery captain in the hospital because 'the games were so interesting they were foolish' (Heller 1995: 9). When something is interesting readers might generally assume that such an activity is also pleasurable and therefore worth pursuing. But the narrator explicitly attributes Yossarian's decision to stop playing chess to the fact that these games were always so interesting that the activity itself became foolish, and consequently no longer worthy of his time. A quality that most readers would consider as something positive is now equated with something negative and serves as the motivation for Yossarian to quit playing chess altogether. This incongruity highlights the illogical rationale of his actions and strikes us as absurd.

Another example is Yossarian's attitude towards all-round American good guy Appleby. When everyone on the base loves Appleby, Yossarian hates him, at first glance for no apparent reason. But comparing these two in terms of characterisation categories reveals that they are antithetical. Appleby always follows orders, asks no questions and thrives within the strictures imposed by the military and bureaucratic apparatus governing the world of *Catch-22*. He excels at idle pastimes such as playing table tennis but fails to grasp the greater scheme of things and never asks

any critical questions of his superiors. Appleby neatly conforms to the ideal of the "good" American soldier: he 'was a fair-haired boy from Iowa who believed in God, Motherhood and the American Way of Life, without ever thinking about any of them' (Heller 1995: 22). Yossarian, at least initially, belongs to the same character category as Appleby. The more we learn about Yossarian, however, the less he seems to belong to that category. He is often insubordinate and not afraid to question his orders or even ignore them altogether. Through the process of individuation, as described earlier, readers become increasingly aware that Yossarian's behaviour does not fit their expectations and he is decategorised. This process is exacerbated by the fact that Yossarian's social role as an air force officer is not really developed in the novel. His independence and individual traits are continuously foregrounded, in stark contrast to Appleby who is nothing but a mindless soldier.

Contradiction is something that is deeply ingrained in Yossarian's character. At this point, a first disparity can be noted between social and text-specific categorisation as defined by Schneider. Because Yossarian is consistently characterised as contrary, we can come to expect such behaviour. These expectations can then conflict with those engendered by Yossarian's role as an air force officer. This predilection for contradiction, seemingly inherent to his character, can be extrapolated to a more abstract level as well, as the contrast between a man of action and one of inaction. Consider the following excerpt where he reflects on the officers' club that was built by the soldiers, excepting himself of course, and where he likes to spend much of his time:

Actually, there were many officers' clubs that Yossarian had not helped build, but he was proudest of the one on Pianosa. It was a sturdy and complex monument to his powers of determination. Yossarian never went there to help until it was finished; then he went there often, so pleased was he with the large, fine, rambling, shingled building. It was truly a splendid structure, and Yossarian throbbed with a mighty sense of accomplishment each time he gazed at it and reflected that none of the work that had gone into it was his (Heller 1995: 22).

The incongruity between the inordinate amount of pride and sense of achievement Yossarian feels for this building and the fact that he has not contributed to its construction is striking. In terms of the General Theory of Verbal Humour, readers are faced with a script opposition between ACHIEVEMENT and NON-ACHIEVEMENT, a contradiction that is mirrored at the level of the aforementioned characterisation categories. It is interesting to note that both scripts are linked through a sense of pride associated with the club's (non-) realization. In this case, the text itself does not help us resolve the incongruity and this excerpt can thus be considered as an example of absurdist humour. But within the context of the novel as a whole, this short and funny sequence takes on additional meaning. It is Yossarian's goal to fly as few combat missions as possible, to remove himself from danger and ultimately from the war itself. The NON-ACHIEVEMENT becomes something worth aspiring to, namely the preservation of human life. The distinction between the opposing scripts becomes blurred at the level of interpretation as NON-

ACHIEVEMENT becomes an achievement itself and comes to stand for its opposite, just as inaction and action are conflated. The contrariety that is so typical of both Yossarian's personality and his actions are a continuous source of humour in *Catch-22*.

Role Reversals and Absurdist Humour

Another source of absurdist humour is the incongruity between the narrator's endorsement of entrepreneur extraordinaire Milo Minderbinder's personality and the physical description of that same literary character. Milo is a pilot who is excused from combat duty and put in charge of the mess room because of his uncanny business acumen and who will go to any length to secure a profit for his syndicate—of which every soldier on Pianosa is a member, whether they know it or not. For Milo war is simply business and he does not factor in the value of human life when making decisions. He is described as having 'a face incapable of subtlety or guile', 'the face of a man of hardened integrity'. Yet at the same time his features suggest otherwise. The two halves of his moustache never meet, he has 'disunited large eyes', and 'damp nostrils heading sharply off to the right, always pointing away from where the rest of him was looking' (Heller 1995: 79). The dichotomy of Milo's character is foregrounded by Milo himself:

'That would have been most unjust,' he scolded firmly. 'Force is wrong, and two wrongs never make a right. It was much better my way. When I held the dates out to him and reached for the bedsheet, he probably thought I was offering to trade.' 'What were you doing?' 'Actually, I was offering to trade, but since he doesn't understand English, I can always deny it.' 'Suppose he gets angry and wants the dates?' 'Why, we'll just hit him over the head and take them away from him,' Milo answered without hesitation (Heller 1995: 83).

But again, it is only in the context of the entire novel that it reaches its full humorous potential. The narrator's portrayal of Milo as an honest man of great integrity combined with his facial features betraying his duplicitous nature are reinforced by his increasingly despicable actions. At first glance one would think that the narrator singles out Milo as the butt of a running joke with the reader. But he is never truly held accountable for his antics, not even when he bombs his own forces at behest of the Germans. For Milo there is always a justification, no matter how absurd:

Milo, of course, had been the big feather in his cap, although having his group bombed by Milo's planes had probably been a terrible black eye for him, even though Milo had ultimately stilled all protest by disclosing the huge net profit the syndicate had realized on the deal with the enemy and convincing everyone that bombing his own men and planes had therefore really been a commendable and very lucrative blow on the side of private enterprise (Heller 1995: 264–265).

What initially was true for Milo becomes truth in the fictional world as well. The distinction between friend and foe first disappears and is, ultimately, switched. The Germans take on the role of allies and the US air force becomes the (temporary) enemy. These role reversals confound the process of character categorisation for readers. As the story progresses, more information on these characters is presented to readers, which consistently conflicts with expectations engendered by the category membership they were initially assigned, resulting in the process of decategorisation. Decategorisation, then, plays an important part in *Catch-22*, both in terms of its humorous and absurdist quality, as it routinely makes the extraordinary ordinary.

The officers at Pianosa, for example, are ordered to go and watch a troupe of performers in order to boost the performers' morale, rather than the other way round:

'These people are your guests!' he shouted suddenly. 'They've travelled over three thousand miles to entertain you. How are they going to feel if nobody wants to go out and watch them? What's going to happen to their morale?' [...]. 'Now, men, don't misunderstand me. This is all voluntary, of course, I'd be the last colonel in the world to order you to go to that U.S.O. show and have a good time, but I want every one of you who isn't sick enough to be in a hospital to go to that U.S.O. show right now and have a good time, and *that's an order!*' (Heller 1995: 34–35).

Even more absurd are the two enlisted men, Gus and Wes, who, after originally working as mechanics in the motor pool, are chosen to run the medical tent. We know next to nothing about these two former mechanics, only how they diagnose their patients. They use a rigid system, irrespective of what actually ails the soldiers. If a sick soldier has a body temperature exceeding 102 °F he is sent to the hospital. If it is below 102 °F he gets a laxative and is sent packing. The clearly incompetent Gus and Wes are put in charge of the medical tent because the air base's doctor, Doc Daneeka, is loath to do any actual work. Drafted into the service just as his practice in the United States started to take off, he wallows in self-pity and refuses to ground Yossarian. As he explains, 'It's not my business to save lives' (Heller 1995: 217). He comes to regret handing over running the medical tent to Gus and Wes, however, when they subject him to their tried and tested diagnostic method. They end up turning him away when he feels sick, as they have now assumed a level of medical authority that supersedes even that of Doc Daneeka himself. These literary characters no longer fit the categories readers have intuitively assigned them and they are subsequently decategorised. The text, however, does not offer any succour and we are unsure what to make of these characters. The absurdity of the reversal of this hierarchical order in the examples above is exacerbated by the acceptance of such events by the characters populating the fictional world of the novel. And this lack of response only serves to emphasise and heighten the incongruity, thus triggering the humorous experience. This in turn forces us not only to adjust our mental representations and indeed our expectations but also to recontextualise and reinterpret what we know, or think we know.

Incongruity, Characterisation and Absurdist Humour

The absurdist humour of *Catch-22* is not only limited to the incongruity between the reader's expectations, prompted by the process of social categorisation, and characters' actions as described in the text. Aarfy is an incompetent and thoroughly self-absorbed lead navigator on Yossarian's crew. He is consistently described by the narrator as a thoroughly stand-up guy. He even has the bloated face of a cherub (Heller 1995: 359). The way the narrator portrays Aarfy, at least for a large part of the novel, invites readers to construct a text-specific category of 'the good guy', certainly within the topsy-turvy story world of *Catch-22*. Based on this category-membership, readers formulate certain expectations concerning Aarfy's future behaviour and actions. Gradually, his actions reveal him to be anything but a 'good guy', as evinced by the following passage:

'Back in school we were always doing things like that. I remember 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. We kept them trapped in bed there for more than ten hours. We even smacked their faces a little when they started to complain. Then we took away their nickels and dimes and chewing gum and threw them out. Boy, we used to have fun in that fraternity house,' he recalled peacefully, his corpulent cheeks aglow with the jovial, rubicund warmth of nostalgic recollection (Heller 1995: 298).

The contrast between Aarfy's initial portrayal and his later actions is made all the more poignant by the jocular tone in which he recounts his sordid adventures. When he rapes the maid working in the officer's apartment and then throws her out of the window, even the other characters are appalled by his deeds. Yossarian takes Aarfy to task and says that they will throw him in jail and might even sentence him to hang. Aarfy does not believe it, they won't arrest him, 'not good old Aarfy' (Heller 1995: 519). When the military police arrive moments later, the reader might reasonably expect the murderer to be apprehended. The M.P.s, however, arrest Yossarian for being in Rome without a pass, apologizing to Aarfy for the inconvenience. In the world of *Catch-22*, it seems, lacking the correct documents is a more heinous crime than rape and murder and Aarfy is not held accountable for his actions. In Aarfy's case, text-specific categorisation is made untenable by the incongruity between the rhetorical choice to portray Aarfy as a convivial, avuncular character and his sociopathic behaviour. The absurdity of this contrast generates humour, certainly initially, but, says Robert Merrill, also causes readers to 'look back with horror at what they were laughing at', just as Heller intended (Merrill 1986: 150; Hunt 1973: 242).

Another significant source of humour in *Catch-22*, according to Hidalgo-Downing, stems from characterisations where 'two opposite properties are attributed to a single entity'. This technique also plays an important part in the process of decategorisation. After assigning a particular category to literary

characters, readers are then presented with additional and conflicting information making the initial category membership untenable. One such example that has proven most indicative of the role absurdist humour plays in *Catch-22* is the interplay between the opposing scripts of SANITY and INSANITY (see Hidalgo Downing 2000a; Pinsker 2009; Ramsey 1973). The following passage describes a conversation between Dr. Stubbs and Dunbar, Yossarian's best friend who shares his desire to fly a few missions as possible, about Yossarian:

'Yossarian? Who the hell is Yossarian? What the hell kind of a name is Yossarian, anyway? Isn't he the one who got drunk and started that fight with Colonel Korn at the officers' club the other night?' 'That's right. He's Assyrian.' 'That crazy bastard.' 'He's not crazy,' Dunbar said. 'He swears he's not going to fly to Bologna.' 'That's just what I mean,' Dr. Stubbs answered. 'That crazy bastard may be the only sane one left' (Heller 1995: 138).

Similar scenes can be found at various points in the novel such as in the description of McWatt, who 'was the craziest combat man of them all probably, because he was perfectly sane and still did not mind the war' (Heller 1995: 74). McWatt, a pilot who accidentally kills a fellow soldier when he flew too close to the ground trying to scare Yossarian, ultimately ends up flying his plane into the face of a mountain. Another example is the "definition" of the catch-22 itself:

Yossarian looked at him soberly and tried another approach. 'Is Orr crazy?' 'He sure is,' Doc Daneeka said. 'Can you ground him?' 'I sure can. But first he has to ask me to. That's part of the rule.' 'Then why doesn't he ask you to?' 'Because he's crazy,' Doc Daneeka said. 'He has to be crazy to keep flying combat missions after those close calls he's had. Sure, I can ground Orr. But first he has to ask me to.' 'That's all he has to do to be grounded?' 'That's all. Let him ask me.' 'And then you can ground him?' Yossarian asked. 'No. Then I can't ground him.' 'You mean there's a catch?' 'Sure there's a catch,' Doc Daneeka replied. 'Catch-22. Anyone who wants to get out of combat duty isn't really crazy' (Heller 1995: 56).

All three examples above are presented to the reader as making perfect sense, at least in the fictional world of *Catch-22*. When readers try to interpret these scenes by bringing to bear their own referential framework, consisting of their knowledge and experience of the real world (i.e. schemata), they seem logically irreconcilable. Is McWatt crazy or sane? Is Yossarian, for that matter? This conflict between fictional and experiential world is somewhat mitigated by the many repetitions in *Catch-22* that engender their own expectations, providing readers with intratextual schemata. The oppositions, however, remain jarring enough to draw our attention and generate humour. Humour, Hidalgo-Downing points out, 'consists of a dynamic, continuous process which involves the disruption of the fictional world as it has been previously established in the discourse' (2000a: 123). Yet, in the context of *Catch-22*, I would in fact argue that the absurdist humour stems from the fact that disruptions are summarily dismissed, if acknowledged at all, and are considered to be nothing out of the ordinary. This stands in stark contrast to our own reading

experience, which is heavily influenced by interplay between individuation and decategorisation, owing to the continuous reversal of the reader's expectations and schemata.

According to the stylistician Paul Simpson, the incongruity that readers experience when reading absurdist literature is not only caused by the strange actions and the aberrant behaviour of the literary characters themselves. Another important contributing factor, specifies Simpson, is that these actions are almost always received without any surprise and considered to be normal within that fictional context, which exacerbates the incongruity (Simpson 2002: 42). It is, then, the response, or rather lack of one, to the many incongruities pervading the novel that triggers the humorous experience. One need only think of the ineffectual Major Major Major, the hapless squadron commander who was 'promoted by an I.B.M. machine with a sense of humor', who spends his time forging documents, who avoids his responsibilities as commander and is bullied by his subordinates (Heller 1995: 107). Or the parade-obsessed and grossly incompetent Lt., and later General, Scheisskopf who court martials Clevinger because the latter had the temerity to tell the truth when under explicit order, of the Lt. himself, to do so. At the tribunal, Scheisskopf acts as the aggrieved party, defence attorney, prosecutor and one of the judges (Heller 1995: 94). Consequently, he simultaneously fits four social categories which should be impossible as the requirements for category membership are antithetical. However, such absurdities are readily accepted and even seem to be the norm in *Catch-22*.

Conclusion

The examples discussed here—and many more can be found in the novel—clearly reveal the mechanisms underlying *Catch-22*'s characteristic and ubiquitous absurdist humour. In this article, I have focused on specific strategies through which absurdist humour is realised: the (repeated) recurrence of opposing scripts such as SANITY versus INSANITY, role reversals and other incongruities owing to the characters and their actions, and, importantly, how these are dealt with in the story world. I have further argued that absurdist humour is tightly woven into the narrative structure of the novel, which becomes especially clear when we consider the close relationship between absurdist humour and characterisation. The absurdist humour is the result of how the characters are portrayed, how they interact with each other, and how they react to events in the story world. When readers can no longer reconcile new information concerning the characters with the expectations generated by characterisation categories these characters will be decategorised, alerting readers to incongruities within the text and paving the way for absurdist humour. The absurdist humour in turn plays a role in defining the characters themselves. Yossarian's contrariety, for instance, is a defining personality trait which is brought to the reader's attention time and again through his various humorous and absurd exploits during the war.

In the absurd world of *Catch-22*, conflicting scripts, like SANITY/INSANITY, become interchangeable. The boundary between the opposing scripts is eroded, as is

the script opposition that started it all. So too is the boundary between the different characterisation categories which readers rely on. The absurdist humour of *Catch-22* highlights the incongruity between the fictional world and its characters on the one hand and the reader's own world on the other hand. It also ensures that readers cannot rely on social, literary and text-specific categories when interpreting the characters. These incongruities set up the humorous potential which is ultimately triggered by the manner in which seemingly aberrant behaviour is responded to. The social interactions between characters in the story world are far removed from the real-world. We are left in doubt as what to make of the characters, their actions and their motivations. The absurdist humour forces readers to let go of the schemata and the characterisation categories they are so used to rely on in the reading process. In turn, absurdist humour also serves as a textual strategy that creates a tension that impacts the reader's evaluation of characters. The absurdist humour makes us laugh with or at characters and their actions when we are not supposed to. As such it not only mirrors the incongruity of the interchangeability of opposites such as good and bad, crazy or sane, but it also proves instrumental in communicating to the reader the major themes of the novel, such as the absurdity of war, the value of life, the hypocrisy of the military and bureaucratic apparatus.

The reflective quality of absurdist humour is also made apparent through the process of characterisation. When trying to make sense of literary characters and their actions, readers rely on specific categorisation categories. In absurdist texts, such as *Catch-22*, these categories offer little or no succour. These incongruities and the resulting process of decategorisation, however, do not mean that the text becomes unintelligible. By routinely subverting and inverting characterisation categories, *Catch-22* reinforces the effect of the absurdist humour and foregrounds the thematic message of the novel, thus, somewhat paradoxically, enhancing our understanding of the text. Furthermore, a detailed analysis of absurdist humour in *Catch-22* reveals that resolution can be achieved, contrary to the generally espoused viewpoint in humour studies. The reader identifies absurdist humour as integral to the narrative structure of the novel, here in terms of its characterisation. The absurdist incongruity that at first made little or no sense can now be understood as a narrative strategy. Absurdist humour does not merely serve as a strategy to shield us from harsh truths or to mitigate the grim realities of war and death, as suggested by Ruderman (1991). On the contrary, it forces readers to take a step back and to more closely consider the message conveyed by the novel. Understanding the mechanisms of absurdist humour therefore ultimately benefits our understanding and interpretation of the novel itself.

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