Bewilderment and Illumination: *Catch-22* and the Dark Humor of the 1960s

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Abstract

It is often hard to deal with certain subjects in a way that would not be offensive or painful. Dark humor is a popular and powerful way to deal with serious issues in a manner that is both edifying and enjoyable. In his novel *Catch-22*, Joseph Heller deals with the atrocities of war, and the subsequent effects it has on people and society as a whole. Heller's novel incorporates the dark humor that became popular in the 1960s, and that was used by this generation to deal with the tensions they faced in the political and cultural realms. There is much that can be learned about America in the 1960s by studying the humor that so aptly reflected the mindset of the culture of this time.

Introduction: *Catch-22* as an Example of 1960s Dark Humor

Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* is one of the most humorous novels of the 20th century. This dark yet humorous novel presents a cynical view of the military and other institutions; a view which many people seemed to share during the mid-20th century. While the novel is somewhat narrowly focused on criticizing the American military and the bureaucracy that supports it, it is still well received by a vast audience. The reason that such a cynical work could be so popular is due to the humor Heller uses to convey his message. *Catch-22* is effective because the reader laughs at the absurdities of war and of the military in general. Even readers who may not feel so strongly against the military and war are made to laugh and want to keep reading. There are three main elements of the dark humor that Heller uses: absurdity, anxiety, and labyrinth imagery. These elements make up the dark humor that is often found in the 1960s as they reflect the culture in many ways, making this type of dark humor an effective tool for authors such as Heller.

The use of humor to communicate a serious message is not unique to *Catch-22*, though the novel proves to be an effective example of how such communication is accomplished. The use of humor in this manner is often referred to as black humor, or dark humor. Dark humor allows people to see a serious subject from a different perspective thus allowing readers more freedom in how they deal with it. It is also less painful or uncomfortable when serious subjects are dealt with in a humorous way. Dark humor deals with a wide range of emotions as it makes people laugh while leading them to a greater understanding of a serious issue.

During the 1960s, many authors started using dark humor as a means of communicating ideas that were actually very important to the culture. Since dark humor became so popular at this time, it is important to study the culture in order to understand why certain elements are so useful in dark humor literature. Historical criticism and authorial intent are of foremost

importance in this study, in order better to understand the literature that was produced during this time. *Catch-22* will be used to provide an analytical study of the different aspects of dark humor inasmuch as it provides multiple examples of the three main elements of 1960s dark humor.

Chapter One: Toward a Definition of Dark Humor

Humor is found in every culture in some form, whether it be literature, theater, or even political propaganda. Dark humor or black humor (these terms are interchangeable) is a specific type of humor which people can use as an outlet during times that are particularly stressful or uncertain. Dark humor has been defined as "writing that juxtaposes morbid or ghastly elements with comical ones that underscore the senselessness or futility of life" ("black humour"). Dark humor novels deal with issues that are specific to a certain time, and seek to help people to cope with those issues. Dark humor really gives two perspectives of an issue: one that shows the serious side and one that shows a ridiculous and exaggerated version in order to make a point about the serious side. Dark humor of the 1960s has its own unique qualities that specifically reflect that culture. When studying the dark humor found in 1960s America, there are three main elements that are found in most of the dark humor novels of this time: absurdities, anxiety, and labyrinth imagery. These three elements make up the dark humor that became popular in the 1960s, which authors used to communicate important ideas during a time of great tension in the United States.

While there are definitions for dark humor such as the one given above, it seems that there is more to dark humor than simply that which "underscores the senselessness or futility of life." In his book *Black Humor Fiction of the Sixties*, Max F. Schulz points out that there has never been a solid definition of dark humor. Perhaps this is because dark humor has much to do with the culture in which it is used, and therefore it is sensitive to a certain period of time. Thus, it is difficult to give dark humor a general definition. Schulz posits that "Black Humor is a phenomenon of the 1960's" (5). He believes that there is a difference between the dark humor found in novels of the 1960s compared to the dark comedies of Shakespeare, for example (5).

The distinct elements of 1960s dark humor set it apart not only from regular humor, but also from the dark humor of earlier times.

In order to try to form a good definition of dark humor, specifically 1960s dark humor, it is important to first define humor in general. It is often hard to define what humor is, and how it works. According to Israel Knox in his article "Towards a Philosophy of Humor," it is hard to determine any one definition that fully explains the concept of humor: "so complex is the nature of comedy and so varied are its manifestations that no theory is wholly adequate and no analysis is exhaustive" (541). Nevertheless, there are some elements of humor that philosophers generally agree upon as being the reasons that people enjoy it. First, humor is enjoyable because it involves intellectual play. In his text *The Psychology of Humor*, Rod A. Martin notes that humor incorporates the "pleasurable sensation of having one's thoughts oscillate back and forth between two incompatible interpretations of a concept" (7). The act of recognizing and assessing the incongruities presented in a joke is mentally stimulating, and therefore enjoyable, which is perhaps the primary reason for the enjoyment that is felt from humor.

Philosophers as far back as Aristotle have studied the idea of humor in order to define it and explain its dynamics. For the purpose of this study, the terms "humor" and "comedy" will be used synonymously. According to Aristotle in his work the *Poetics*, comedy[1] is the "imitation of characters of a lower type" (4). Comedy was considered to be a way to mock those who were viewed as less respectable than the average person. Aristotle notes that this genre had not always been taken seriously, but eventually was used by highly regarded poets such as Homer (7). Aristotle actually credits Homer with being the first to write a satirical poem, at least as far as

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[1] The traditional idea of the purpose of "comedy" is as follows: "The comic artist's purpose is to hold a mirror up to society to reflect its follies and vices, in the hope that they will, as a result, be mended" ("comedy"). Typically, comedies have a happy ending due to the character's recognition of his or her follies and his or her attempts to be reconciled with society. In dark comedy, however, this is not the case, as characters usually remain at odds with some aspect of society.

written evidence can prove (7). Though comedy was used by even great poets such as Homer, Aristotle still seemed to think it was inferior to the genre of tragedy because it was merely a form of "dramatising the ludicrous" (7). Though comedy was not always thought to be as respectable as tragedy, there are actually elements of comedy that make it more of a powerful tool than tragedy is for communicating ideas.

The main purpose of comedy, according to Aristotle, is to mock characters that are ridiculous in order to emphasize what is good and noble. By illustrating the ridiculous, comedy helps the audience learn how things should be by showing how they should not be. Aristotle states that comedy "consists in some defect or ugliness which is not painful or destructive" (9). Thus, the audience should not feel pain or sadness as it might with a tragedy. By mocking characters through the use of comedy, the audience is learning a lesson in a way that is enjoyable. The defects or ugliness that Aristotle mentions are examples of incongruities in characters that are inferior according to societal standards. When people recognize these incongruities, feelings of humor arise. The audience makes connections between what is and what should be, resulting in the mental stimulation that produces the enjoyable feelings of humor.

The process of identifying incongruities is what often produces feelings of humor. According to Otfried Höffe in his book *Aristotle,* jokes are effective because "figuring out the point is both enjoyable and instructive" (40). In his book *The Psychology of Humor*, Rod A. Martin concurs. He further explains the mental process that produces positive feelings from humor:

> To produce humor, an individual needs to mentally process information coming
>
> from the environment or from memory, playing with ideas, words, or actions in a

creative way, and thereby generating a witty verbal utterance or a comical

nonverbal action that is perceived by others to be funny. In the reception of

humor, we take in information (something someone says or does, or something

we read) through our eyes and ears, process the meaning of this information, and

appraise it as nonserious, playful, and humorous. (6)

The mental process of figuring out why something is humorous is the basis of the positive

feelings associated with humor. People enjoy figuring out meaning, and therefore jokes can be a

useful way of communicating ideas for the sake of edification. The idea of jokes being enjoyable

and instructive would certainly be useful to authors such as Joseph Heller who are trying to

engage an audience with a rather harsh message. If people did not find enjoyment in the dark

humor Heller uses, they would probably dismiss his novel as simply being ridiculous and overly

cynical. However, there is a sense of delight that comes with deciphering a deeper meaning in

the words of others, which is one of the main reasons that people enjoy jokes (Höffe 40).

Looking back at Aristotle's idea of comedy, there seems to be much lacking in his

treatment of this topic. Though Aristotle lends a great deal of insight to the idea of tragedy, he

does not offer as much insight to comedy. In his article "Aristotle on Comedy," Leon Golden

offers an interpretation of what he believes is Aristotle's definition of comedy based on the

similarities between comedy and tragedy in the *Poetics* and the *Rhetoric*. Golden states that

Aristotle does give a definition of comedy, and that his definition of tragedy is actually based

upon it:

The first element of the definition of tragedy identifies tragedy as a form of

mimesis, and in the same section of the *Poetics* where this identification is made

(1447 a 13-16), comedy is also explicitly identified as a form of *mimesis*. (286)

The fact that Aristotle indicates that both tragedy and comedy are forms of mimesis means the two genres share similar qualities. These two genres are so similar that they are actually dependent upon one another, in a sense. Aristotle's definition of comedy is found in its relationship to tragedy. Without one or the other genre, it may be hard to give a good definition of either, and so Aristotle builds his theories of both genres upon their relationship to one another.

Given this context, it is interesting that Aristotle discusses the element of catharsis in tragedy but does not attribute it to comedy. Yet, Golden makes the observation that comedy offers a cathartic experience to the audience, just as tragedy does. Catharsis, meaning clarification, produces intellectual clarification to the audience through mimesis (288). Comedy, as a form of mimesis, is intended to provide intellectual clarification as well. It provides intellectual clarification by creating a copy of reality for people to observe and learn from. Aristotle believes that the purpose of comedy is to point out things that are ridiculous, and to do so in a way that does not cause the audience any real grief or pain. Golden points out the basic elements of Aristotle's definition of comedy:

> (1) they must manifest some dimension of unjustified good fortune or of inappropriate and incongruous behavior; and (2) such incidents (which can be described as examples of error or ugliness) must be presented in such a way that they do not generate any painful feelings on the part of the audience but are clearly recognized as forms of the ridiculous. (288)

Though Aristotle does not believe that comedy should bring feelings of pain, he does seem to think that errors of society need to be brought to light. Dark humor is a way to deal with very serious or even tragic errors or events in a way that lessens painful feelings.

While there is a clear distinction between tragedy and comedy, these two genres come together in tragicomedy. Dark humor is closely related to tragicomedy, since it also possesses certain characteristics that reflect both tragedy and comedy. Tragicomedy is characterized as having "a certain gravity of diction, the depiction of important public events, and the arousal of compassion—but never carrying the action to tragedy's conclusion, and judiciously including such comic elements as low-born characters, laughter, and jests" ("tragicomedy"). Tragicomedy is an interesting way of providing intellectual clarification because it incorporates tragic realities but makes light of them so as to deal with them in a way that is not painful.

Comedy not only helps to deal with serious issues in a less painful manner, it also offers multiple perspectives of a situation which makes it even more conducive to edification than tragedy. In his book *The Dark Comedy*, J.L. Styan describes the intellectual benefit of integration of comedy into a tragic play: "Counterpointing the pathetic and the comic within the same experience by demonstrating their object from more than one angle must have the effect of sharpening the awareness of the onlooker" (117). This combination illustrates tragicomedy and how it provides an additional angle from which to view a situation. Tragedy elicits feelings of sadness and despair, whereas comedy elicits feelings of mirth and hope. By combining these two elements, the audience gains more insight as they are exposed to a wide range of emotions.

The 16th century humanist Desiderius Erasmus recognized the fact that comedy provides an interesting perspective from which to view serious matters. In his work *The Praise of Folly*, Erasmus personifies Folly, as "she" tells of her characteristics and why she is so popular. In his introduction to the work, Erasmus discusses how several ancient writers used humor as an edifying element in their works, and how it actually helped make the point in their serious

studies. Erasmus feels that to leave humor for only nonserious matters would be truly

unfortunate:

> Every other profession is entitled to a bit of leisure—what's so terrible if scholars
>
> take a little time off for play, especially if their follery leads to something slightly
>
> more serious? Some jokes can be managed in such a way that a reader who isn't
>
> altogether thick of nose can profit by them—more, perhaps, than from the
>
> pompous formal arguments of certain people we know. (5)

Erasmus believes that scholars should be able to present their arguments in a humorous manner.

In fact, he believes that readers learn more if humor is used to present an argument because "just

as it's the height of triviality to treat serious matters in a trivial way, so there's nothing more

delightful than finding that some trifles have been managed so that they turn out far from trivial"

(5). Erasmus hopes that his readers will recognize the humor in his presentation of Folly, and

therefore learn a great deal because they are captivated by the delivery of this message. If

something is of great importance, it can be treated humorously so as not to bore the scholar's

audience, and so that the audience has the pleasure of figuring out the deeper meaning in the

apparent trivialities.

Folly is certainly a negative characteristic, yet Erasmus lets his audience figure out his

true meaning from the incongruities he presents. In his article "Erasmus' *Praise of Folly* and the

Spirit of Carnival," Donald Gwynn Watson illustrates the similarities between plays of folly and

the Carnival holiday. Carnival is a holiday that originated in the Roman Catholic Church as a

celebration which precedes the Lenten season ("carnival"). Watson makes this connection to

show how both folly and carnival humor, which play upon the "inversion of established order,"

create a sense of freedom from the structure of everyday life (333). Humor is a similar inversion

of established order, which provides an escape from the norm as it presents people and events in a manner that is incongruous to reality. Erasmus's portrayal of Folly is of course an inversion of what she actually is, yet this inversion helps the reader to see the true message.

The idea of an inversion of established order brings to mind the fool in Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*. Erasmus was a friend of More, to whom the introduction to *The Praise of Folly* was actually written. More played upon Erasmus's ideas in his own work with the character of the jester. The jester suggests that all old people should be sent to monasteries and convents in order to relieve the town of the burden of supporting them. Many in the group to whom he was speaking thought he was being serious and actually agreed with his ideas. A few realized that he was joking, and saw the real message he was trying to convey. Some of the jester's audience clearly did not recognize the absurdity in what he was proposing, and so they became bigger fools than the fool himself. Dark humor can result in this sort of misunderstanding if the audience does not recognize the humorous intent behind a statement or joke by recognizing the inversion of truth.

The fact that humor can be used to communicate important ideas and that the "fool" can truly be the wise one brings to question why jokes work the way they do. In his work *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, Sigmund Freud discusses the nature of jokes and how they work to produce humor. It has already been discovered that the act of figuring out a joke produces positive feelings in people, as there is a sense of delight in discovering deeper meaning. Besides this fact, there are many other aspects of joking and humor to be considered, since there are many different kinds of jokes. Freud first distinguishes between jokes that have a purpose and message and those that are merely for entertainment. Freud distinguishes them as conceptual jokes and innocent jokes, respectively. Conceptual jokes have a "definite purpose"

whereas innocent jokes are usually just plays on words and sound (91). Freud notes that this distinction is not necessarily the rule in all cases, though it is accurate much of the time (91). It is possible for an innocent joke to have a deeper meaning, though it may not be as apparent as the meaning behind the conceptual joke. A joke is merely a way of communicating an idea: "the substance of a joke is independent of the joke and is the substance of the thought" (92). The joke is only funny because of the deeper thought behind it. The thought is there without the joke; however, the thought is more effectively communicated through the joke. Understanding the different types of jokes will help clarify how they work to convey deeper meaning.

The main distinction between the innocent joke and the conceptual joke is that the purpose of the former is mainly to bring pleasure to the hearer while the purpose of the latter is to make the hearer contemplate an idea. One way in which ideas are communicated through joking is by first causing confusion, and later revealing the true meaning. Freud refers to the scholar Theodore Lipps who says that jokes serve their purpose when one finds "'sense in nonsense'" (qtd. in Freud 11). Freud describes this idea of "bewilderment and illumination" as being an effective means of communicating with humor, as it is a way of giving meaning to that which appears to be meaningless (12). People experience a sense of delight when they discover meaning and find they are enlightened by something they did not expect to learn from at all.

The sense of discovering an unexpected truth from a joke describes the idea of bewilderment and illumination that Freud mentions. The idea of bewilderment and illumination draws upon the incongruities found in most jokes that reflect truth about a society or situation. In his article "Incongruity in humor: Root cause or epiphenomenon?," Tony Veale discusses whether incongruities in jokes are what cause humor or if incongruities in jokes are the construct of the listener after hearing a joke. Veale explains that there is often a need to go back and

reevaluate the first part of a joke, in order to recognize the incongruity, and thereby recognize the humor in it. In *Catch-22*, for example, flashbacks are necessary because the structure of the novel often leaves the reader bewildered until Heller revisits a scene from a different perspective, illuminating what really happened. This is usually a humorous point in the novel, as the new perspective often explains an event that did not quite make sense earlier.

Bewilderment and illumination often come about due to the use of absurdities, which at first appear to be nonsense, but actually reveal some sort of truth upon further consideration. Dark humor often incorporates elements of the absurd, which is appropriate given the fact that both tend to deal with serious issues in bizarre ways. The absurd is defined as that which calls into question the rationality of human beings ("comedy"). Literature is an outlet through which people can express social discontent in an interesting way, often using absurdities as a way to get the reader's attention and to emphasize a point. *Catch-22* is among several novels of its time period that use absurdity to call into question the sanity of political leaders and social institutions. Heller uses absurdity in his depiction of incompetent military leaders, pointless goals of the military, as well as in the complicated structure of the novel. The reader is bewildered by the absurdities, but ultimately realizes that Heller has a purpose for using them.

Absurdity is not always recognized as an important aspect of humor, but in the 20th century this style became a way for people to use ridicule to make a point. Typically plays are associated with absurdity due to the rising popularity of the Theatre of the Absurd, though the 20th century saw many novels that followed a similar style. In his article "Two Novelists of the Absurd," Joseph J. Waldmeir notes that Joseph Heller and Ken Kesey were two American novelists that "made a conscious effort to transport the novel into the realm of the absurd" (192). Postmodern literature often breaks the "rules" of literature, and so a novel as absurd as *Catch-22*

fits this time period. Not only did it make a point by being unique in its design, but the absurd novel defined the mindset of a generation. Heller and Kesey, as well as other authors from their time, pushed the limits of what was considered normal in order to produce some of the most influential satirical literature of the 20th century.

Though humor and satire were respected tools in the literature of the 20th century, earlier generations did not always regard them so highly. During the 18th century, humor was often seen as "negative and aggressive" (Martin 22). Humor was at this time synonymous with ridicule which was viewed as cruel and therefore rude (22). At one point during the 18th century, ridicule became an effective method for debating, and was actually considered to be entertaining in some contexts (22). Though there may still be some concern over the propriety of a joke in a given setting, there seems to be much more of an accepting attitude towards joking in the 20th and 21st centuries than in the past. Of course, even today not everything is permissible, even in a joking context. Certain jokes that are perceived as racist or sexist, for example, would be unacceptable today; however, it seems that there is less and less that is considered inappropriate, especially in regard to mocking authority. Today, if people see a way to make a point through humor, they take full advantage of it, even if it does offend some.

Humor often makes an audience much more receptive to controversial ideas than if they are presented in a serious manner. According to Karen O'Quin and Joel Aronoff in their article "Humor as a Technique of Social Influence," "humor literature shows that using appropriate humor increases the likeability of the communicator" (349). By using humor, Heller appeals to his audience and is able to criticize much more about society than he would be able to had his novel been written in a serious tone. People enjoy jokes and enjoy the process of comprehension that takes place when figuring out why something is funny. The sheer enjoyment of humor

makes people much more open to the content matter being presented. If Heller were to have written his novel in a serious tone in 1961, people would likely have been put off by such negativity and harsh criticism of respected institutions. While cynicism is still present in the novel, it is masked by a comic façade, making the message in the novel more approachable and more enjoyable to the reader. Humor does not necessarily take away from the serious nature of the message being presented; the message is still there, it is simply presented to the audience in a more appealing manner.

Satire is an effective way to communicate feelings of discontent towards certain social issues. Dark humor is often associated with satire as the subject of a satirical work can be rather serious or grim, yet is being dealt with in a joking manner. An example of this is Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal" written in 1729. To suggest eating young children as means of solving a society's economic crisis is grotesque if considered seriously. In fact, many of Swift's contemporaries did not know how to interpret his essay, and considered it offensive. The fact that even cannibalism can be the subject of a humorous work illustrates the freedom that humor gives a writer. While Swift's proposal is absurd, it makes his point about the problem of unemployment and the economical burden of those unemployed people who have children. Because he used humor, Swift was able to address a serious issue and avoid punishment for speaking out about social matters. Had he written about his disapproval of the country's leadership or its methods of handling such a crisis in a serious manner, he could very easily have been imprisoned or punished in some other way. By making fun of the serious issues at hand, an author is liberated as he or she finds that there is a much better reception of his or her ideas.

While dark humor is certainly a way for authors to speak out against government and social issues, political leaders have taken advantage of its influence as well. Martin notes that

humor became an acceptable means of communicating political ideas not just for the people, but for the political leaders as well: "During the twentieth century, the sense of humor also took on sociopolitical connotations and was used for propaganda purposes" (25). In his book *Radio Goes to War: The Cultural Politics of Propaganda during World War II*, Gerd Horton discusses the sense of unity brought about through humorous propaganda being broadcast over the radio:

> Most important in the context of the war was the comedians' ability to unite the public behind America's war effort…This cohesive role was one of radio comedy's main functions during World War II. People laughed with each other at home and with the live audiences, and listeners knew there were millions of people tuned in to the same program that they were hearing. (136)

Martin points out that Americans saw a sense of humor as a positive contrast to the serious dictatorships that were in place overseas (25). It was considered to be "an American virtue, having to do with tolerance and democracy" (25). There was even a change in the sense of humor of politicians, who began to see humor as a positive attribute, rather than a sign of weakness (25). If a presidential candidate tried using humor in the 19th century, he might have been viewed as weak or incompetent. By the middle of the 20th century a sense of humor became almost necessary for a presidential candidate to gain popularity.

Besides being an effective tool to deal with political situations, humor is also an effective way of dealing with anxiety. The sense of underlying anxiety is another key element in the dark humor of the 1960s. Martin states that humor helps unpleasant or stressful situations seem less daunting by "making light of them and turning them into something to be laughed at" (19). In this way, humor diminishes the threatening appearance of those events that seem to be compromising one's well-being. Heller uses this technique by making war and the military seem

so absurd that one cannot help but laugh at the characters and situations he presents against the backdrop of a life-threatening scenario. Heller's themes were certainly relevant to the time in which *Catch-22* was written, and are also relevant to just about any generation (as war has sadly been all too familiar to just about every time and culture). *Catch-22* was no doubt helpful to the younger generation living in 1961, whose members were dealing with the tensions of the Cold War and whose parents would have experienced World War II first hand.

There are several types of humor that can be considered subcategories of dark humor, each of which can be used to deal with specific types of situations. One of the most notable forms of dark humor (and perhaps most relevant to this topic) is that of gallows humor, which reflects the anxieties of the people using it. This type of humor became most notable during Hitler's dictatorship and immediately after. According to Antonin J. Obrdlik in his article "'Gallows Humor'- a Sociological Phenomenon," gallows humor "arises in connection with a precarious or dangerous situation" (709). Gallows humor is the product of those who are resigned to the fact that they are or will be the victims of a particularly grim situation, and so the only way really to cope is through humor. What makes a sense of humor specifically gallows humor is that it actually jokes about the grim situation as though it were not very serious at all. Dark humor (specifically 1960s dark humor) contains an element of gallows humor as it often deals with situations that are truly grim or life-threatening, such as war.

While there is a lack of a sense of hope for those who use gallows humor, there is still a sense of liberation and hope in dark humor. Martin notes that "by poking fun at the ineptness and stupidity of oppressors, gallows humor can be a subversive activity that allows one to gain a sense of freedom from their power" (49). Though a situation is hopeless, people are able to cope

by allowing themselves to have this image that the oppressing force is inferior by making it

appear ridiculous. Obrdlik illustrates how this was effective during Hitler's dictatorship:

> In one of his recent broadcasts from London, President Beneš of Czechoslovakia
>
> reassured the Czech people that things are going better because the rest of the
>
> world is beginning to ridicule naziism and its leaders, an action which should be
>
> taken as a good sign by the oppressed and as the beginning of the end by the
>
> Nazis. (711)

The fact that the world was beginning to laugh at the Nazi regime ultimately takes power away

from the Nazis. There is nothing fearful about that which is not taken seriously. The humor is

found in how absurd the actions of the Nazis were, which other nations were recognizing and

taking action to stop. In looking back at how anyone could be so brainwashed as to do what the

Nazis did, people may use dark humor to make fun of those who took part in such atrocities. The

Nazi regime became something to be ridiculed, and therefore its power was taken away,

liberating, in a sense, those who were subjected to its oppression.

Dark humor relies upon a specific audience in order for it to truly be appreciated. Schulz,

for example, believes that dark humor in general is a product of the 1960s, and is therefore best

appreciated by that generation. Since dark humor tends to be rather topical, it is usually

necessary for one to have some sort of background information in order to "get" the joke.

According to J.L. Styan in his book *The Dark Comedy*, empathy is an important part of a

spectator or reader's experience with a play or text (252). Styan's main concern is the theatre,

and the importance of the audience being able to interact with and empathize with the characters

on the stage in a tragicomedy. The audience has vicarious experiences through theatre and

novels; however it helps if it is familiar with the situation and the anxieties of the intended

audience (256). For this reason background information is useful to the reader of a novel such as *Catch-22*. In some way, the characters and events taking place need to be familiar. Therefore, gallows humor, though perhaps much more meaningful to a person who is part of the "intended" audience, can still be interesting to an "outsider."

Another interesting type of humor that falls under the category of gallows humor is Jewish humor. It makes sense that Jewish humor is closely associated with gallows humor, given the history of the Jewish people. The anxieties that the Jewish people faced during World War II are certainly appropriate material for the gallows humor that became a part of Jewish humor tradition. Though there is the element of gallows humor, Jewish humor tended to be more self-deprecating than most other forms of humor. In his article "The 'Myth' of Jewish Humor," Dan Ben-Amos discusses the self-critical form of humor that began with Freud. He notes that "in Jewish jokes, Freud suggested, the narrator is also the butt of his story" (112). Jokes that are self-deprecating are somewhat dark in that they usually point out the negative aspects of a person or community. Ben-Amos quotes Martin Grotjahn, saying "aggression turned against the self seems to be an essential feature of the truly Jewish joke. It is as if the Jew tells his enemies: 'You do not need to attack us. We can do that ourselves—and even better'" (qtd. in Ben-Amos 114). The idea that people can make fun of themselves gives them a sense of superiority or at least of safety against their perceived enemies.

Given Heller's own experience in World War II, it seems as though he is mocking himself, as he mocks the institutions of which he was a part. This reflects the self-ridiculing nature of Jewish humor. Heller does not represent his Jewish heritage with *Catch-22*, but rather he ridicules his American heritage as if to let the world know that he is aware of what his nation's bureaucracies and twisted values look like from the outside. By ridiculing American

institutions, Heller may in fact be trying to save them from humiliation. On the other hand, he may have given up on saving the face of America, and really is just trying to make fun of the things about his country that he finds ridiculous.

The final element of dark humor of the 1960s is labyrinth imagery. This idea actually began with European authors such as Jorge Luis Borges and Alain Robbe-Grillet. Surrealist novelists such as Borges and Robbe-Grillet sought a new way to express ideas in a postmodern society. The labyrinth became a standard image in the works of the authors, as they tried to convey the nebulousness of postmodern values and sense of truth. According to Allene M. Parker in the article "Drawing Borges: A Two-Part Invention on the Labyrinths of Jorge Luis Borges and M.C. Esher," the labyrinth is defined as "an intricate enclosure or structure containing a series of winding passages hard to follow without losing one's way" (12). Parker goes on to note that the labyrinth only has one opening that serves as both the entrance and the exit (12). In this way, the labyrinth is a construct in which a person explores different paths, but returns to where he or she began.

Freud's definition of jokes represents the labyrinth image to a certain degree. People are presented with the joke, and then must explore different meanings before going back to the original comment or phrase. The humor comes from exploring ideas, and then coming back to where one began in order to apply what was found. The labyrinth is also a good representation of dark humor, as it is often associated with somewhat dark imagery in stories. Dark humor novels of the 1960s use labyrinth imagery in several ways. The most obvious way in which labyrinth themes are apparent in works such as *Catch-22* for example, is in their structure. Many dark humor novels of the 1960s are written in a way that explores different perspectives or are written

in a way that can be difficult to follow. In this way the labyrinth imagery is not only present in the humor of a novel, but also in its structure or themes.

Dark humor is more complex than humor in general, as it ventures away from that which is simply comical and into the realm of the tragic. Since both comedy and tragedy are meant to be edifying through intellectual clarification, or catharsis, tragicomedy is even more so as it gives two different perspectives. Dark humor models tragicomedy as it depicts ludicrous characters and ideas as well as those that are noble, or at least good, but less than ideal. In dark humor this is conveyed through absurdities, which contrasts the ludicrous and the ideal.

Freud explains how bewilderment and illumination play an important role in joke telling, creating a sense of confusion that makes the enlightenment to follow even more amusing. This of course is dependent upon an audience that can relate to or is at least familiar with the subject of the joke. Ultimately dark humor provides multiple perspectives on an idea and uses bewilderment and illumination to reflect society that in turn reveals a great deal of truth. Through the use of absurdities, people laugh at what should not be, and recognize what should. People can cope with anxiety by turning serious issues into something non-threatening and comical. Dark humor also allows for the exploration of ideas in a labyrinthine manner, which provides several perspectives to an idea. Dark humor is a way to communicate important ideas in a manner that is both amusing and edifying. Novelists of the 1960s realized this and took advantage of a style that not only captured the essence of their culture, but also spoke to it.

Chapter Two: Dark Humor as a Reflection of the 1960s

While some novels are not recognized until years after publication, *Catch-22* was immediately popular when it was first published in 1961. In the preface to the 1994 edition of *Catch-22* Joseph Heller recalls the reviews printed the day after the publication of his first novel. At least twenty-one noteworthy individuals offered praise for this unusual new book, with one critic stating that "it was 'the best novel to come out of anywhere in years'" (Nelson Algren qtd in Heller 1). One of the reasons that Heller's work was immediately popular was that it gave voice to the sentiments of that generation. For reasons cited in the first chapter, the satirical nature of the dark humor found in the novel also aided in its reception. Dark humor became an increasingly popular device in the 1960s, not only in literature but also in television and radio. The dark humor of the 1960s, incorporates the three characteristics of dark humor: absurdities (bewilderment and illumination), anxiety, and labyrinth imagery. With the rapidly growing economy and the possibility of World War III in the near future, the 1960s countercultural generation needed a way to express the anxiety and frustrations they faced, which Joseph Heller encapsulates in *Catch-22*.

In further developing a definition of dark humor, it is important to look closely at the society for which it was written. Schulz makes the distinction that dark humor developed not only in the 1960s, but in 1960s America. The reason he believes this is not only because the dark humor novelists he cites are mainly American, but also because "the American novel . . . is more receptive to the inconclusive exploration of ontological and epistemological questions of being, growth, and knowledge" (14). In other words, the American audience was able to accept works that did not necessarily come to any conclusion about anything. It was acceptable simply to explore the questions of life and knowledge and not give any answers. As the counterculture of

the 1960s began to grow, it became increasingly acceptable simply to question traditional

"truth." The important thing was that people were beginning to question.

The countercultural revolution can perhaps be said to have its roots in the relatively

comfortable lifestyle enjoyed by many middle-class Americans. After World War II, the

improved economic situation provided Americans with many luxuries they did not have before.

Despite the improving economic conditions, there was a growing sense of discontent among

some people, particularly the youth of America. These teens and young adults began to feel that

materialism had become a problem, and they wanted to disconnect themselves from the

corruption they believed it caused within society. According to David Farber and Beth Bailey in

The Columbia Guide to America in the 1960s, these youths wanted to break free from

"mainstream America" and even tried to set up their own political and cultural systems (59).

The views of these youths stemmed from the "beat" generation of the 1950s. People like Allen

Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and William Burroughs rejected society's structures and sought

enlightenment by going against social norms. The beats influenced the culture around them

through their controversial lifestyles and the literature that told their stories. The hippie

generation that followed was largely a product of the countercultural revolution that began with

the beat generation.

The beat generation began in New York City, and would later move across the country to

San Francisco. In his book *The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s*,

Allen J. Matusow notes that the beats had their roots in the "black hipsters" of the 1930s (280).

These were black men in northern cities, many of whom migrated from the south after World

War I. They used drugs, were sexually promiscuous, and were bitter toward the white man

(which can be viewed as "mainstream society") (280). Jazz music was extremely influential to

this group, as it reflected the hipster sense of uninhibited spontaneity. A white man named

Herbert Huncke became involved in the hipster movement while living in Chicago. He took the

drug use and promiscuity to the extreme, using these as an escape from reality. He first coined

the term "beat" in describing his weariness from life (281). Huncke reflected the attitudes of

those who would follow after him, as they too would become weary of the mainstream, seeking

enlightenment and "kicks" in a world they felt was consumed by materialism.

In 1945, Huncke was introduced to many of the people with whom the beat generation is

commonly associated. William Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and John Clellon

Holmes were the writers and intellectuals who became engaged in the hipster movement with

Huncke as they shared some of the same ideals and desires to live in resistance to mainstream

culture (281). These people would be the pioneers of a culture that wanted to discover more to

life than what society offered them. They questioned the norm and pushed the limits however

they could as they became the counterculture that began influencing the youth of America.

Literature was seen as an influential tool for the counterculture. It became an outlet of

expression capable of shaping the minds of generations to come. Many of the beat writers of the

1950s began to change not only the minds of their readers, but also to change the face of

literature itself. Confessional poetry became a popular mode of expression, as well as "stream of

consciousness" writing found in novels such as *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac. Confessional

poetry tends to be autobiographical, and is most often associated with writers such as Robert

Lowell, Allen Ginsberg, Anne Sexton, and Sylvia Plath. Though confessional poetry is very

much focused on the individual writer, the poetry reflects the time and culture in which he or she

lives. In his article "Impersonal Personalism: The Making of a Confessional Poetic," Steven K.

Hoffman explores the characteristics of confessional poetry, stating that it incorporates both

nineteenth and twentieth century elements that simultaneously make this type of literature both personal and universal:

> Contemporary confessional poetry is a phenomenon that synthesizes the
>
> inclination to personalism and consciousness building of the nineteenth century
>
> with the elaborate masking techniques and objectifications of the twentieth, a
>
> phenomenon which, under the veneer of self-absorption unprecedented even
>
> among the Romantics, makes notable inroads into myth and archetype, as well as
>
> social, political, and cultural historiography (688)

Confessional poetry and stream of consciousness writing had a way of turning the author into this sort of myth or legend, while at the same time relying on mostly factual information to tell a story. Much can be learned about the beat culture by reading *On the Road* or the poetry of Allen Ginsberg. These works, among others, tell the story of a generation that started the countercultural revolution.

The confessional writers believed that society corrupted people, and so by focusing on the individual, they were separating themselves from the rest of the world and creating their own subculture. The hippie generation that followed took the ideas of these confessional writers and beat poets and brought them to a new level. Hippies were very much in favor of breaking away from mainstream society in order to live in community with others who believed in the same values. They wanted to focus on their individuality and to escape the restrictions placed on them by the "Establishment." According to Matusow, "Hippies mocked liberal politicians, scorned efforts to repair the social order, and repudiated bourgeois society. In so doing, they became cultural radicals opposed to established authority" (277). Hippies were not liberals, but rather they were radicals who felt that social reform was a lost cause. The only way to live life the way

it was meant to be lived was to break free from mainstream society and discover one's own sense of truth and being.

In many ways the hippie culture of the 1960s was reflected in the dark humor of the time. One of the qualities of 1960s dark humor that can be found in this culture is the idea of bewilderment and illumination. The hippie culture believed it was important to try to reach a greater sense of consciousness, which they tried to achieve through the use of hallucinogenic drugs. In this way, the drugs produce the absurdities that the hippies see, creating a bewildering situation. Afterwards, there is a sense of illumination, as though a greater consciousness has been achieved. The accounts of drug use usually end with people feeling that they have been enlightened. Allen Ginsberg was first introduced to certain hallucinogenic drugs while at Timothy Leary's house in 1960 (Matusow 289). Timothy Leary was a former psychiatrist who had given up on conventional practices in order to experiment with drugs such as LSD as a means by which to help people free their minds (288-289). Ginsberg's experience at Timothy Leary's house resulted in his "discovery" that he was God, and that it was time to commence with a "psychedelic revolution" (289).

The use of hallucinogenic drugs reflects the idea of bewilderment and illumination that was present in the dark humor novels of the 1960s. A good example of bewilderment and illumination in the 1960s culture is found in Ken Kesey and his famous acid test. Kesey got together with the Grateful Dead to put on shows in which the music was so "noisy and frenzied" that it alone defied reason (292). On top of that, free LSD was distributed among the concert goers, leading to an experience that was bewildering to say the least. Kesey believed he was bringing an enlightening experience to these people by exposing them to the chaos of a "cosmic consciousness" through psychedelic music and drugs (292). There are numerous accounts of

people using LSD in the 1960s (as it took a while for it to become illegal). Whether legal or not, many people, such as former psychiatrist Timothy Leary or Ken Kesey, felt that the drug was a powerful tool in helping people transcend their circumstances in order to achieve a greater sense of being (292).

Another way in which the culture was reflected in the type of dark humor that was emerging was the sense of anxiety that was present. There was especially a sense of anxiety brought on by the possibility of war during this time. The 1960s generation was caught between two major wars. Their parents would have experienced World War II (some of the younger generation may have memory of it too, depending upon when they were born) and they were feeling the tension of the possibility of World War III between the U. S. and Soviet Russia (that war never came, but the Vietnam War came in the mid 1960s). The 1960s culture reflected this tension because of how it seemed constantly surrounded by war, or at least the threat of war in the future. When Lyndon Johnson took the presidential office after John F. Kennedy's assassination, tensions continued to grow as he began sending more of America's troops to Vietnam. Dark humor surrounding the war and the military in general arose during this time, in literature as well as television programs. The comedy used in these works reflects the anxiety of the times, and how humor served as an outlet during seemingly hopeless situations.

Labyrinth imagery is the third aspect of the dark humor of the 1960s, which is a recurring theme within the literature and music of the times. While it may not be an intentional theme for all authors, certainly some of the literature of the 1960s incorporates labyrinth themes. Jorge Luis Borges, though a European writer of the 1960s, is one author in particular that emphasizes labyrinth themes intentionally. In one of his works, "The Library of Babel," Borges describes the universe as a library that has infinite volumes which each contain information that directs the

reader to another volume. There is a never-ending series of information that ultimately answers no questions, but rather keeps referring the reader elsewhere until he ends up where he began. Borges' work seems to indicate there is no truth or definite point to life, as he shows his characters faced with endless possibilities of truth that all lead to the discovery of yet another path that can be taken. Ultimately, the labyrinth leads back to the beginning of the journey, perhaps underscoring a sense of futility in trying to discover absolute truth.

The surrealist style of Borges's works would also fit with the absurd qualities of some of the other literature being published in the 1960s. Heller certainly uses absurdities, and also uses elements of a labyrinth motif in the structure of *Catch-22*. It is written in a chaotic form that often goes back to scenes that have already taken place in order to shed a new light on them. The labyrinth in this case represents the idea that there is not one absolute way of looking at a situation or concept of truth, which fits the 1960s philosophy of questioning traditional thinking and having the freedom to explore different paths.

Literature was not the only medium for communicating the need to free one's mind and discover individual truth. The music of the 1960s was also extremely influential to the counterculture in this regard. Psychedelic rock groups like the Grateful Dead created a sort of surreal type of music through its chaotic or "bewildering" style. Of course, part of the surreal experience with the Grateful Dead was due to the amount of drug use associated with their shows. According to David Fraser and Vaughan Black in their article "Legally Dead: The Grateful Dead and American Legal Culture," "the Grateful Dead and drugs have become, for many, virtually synonymous" (22). The chaotic style of "acid rock" (as this type of music came to be known) was in itself a way of pushing limits and making new discoveries in musical style, and the drugs were a way for fans to be more receptive to this new sound.

Another driving force in the music industry during the 1960s was folk rock. At the forefront of this genre was Bob Dylan. Dylan's music was influential because it was personal and reflective, and expressed the anxieties of the culture. His song "Blowin' in the Wind" questions the absurdities of war, while many of his other songs explore his personal life and struggles (Matusow 295). Dylan's music reflected both the concerns of his culture as well as the confessional style of writing that was so popular at this time.

Bob Dylan was not only influential to the culture but also to fellow musicians who were shaping the culture. One of the bands that were greatly influenced by the personal lyrics and truthfulness of Dylan's music was the Beatles. In turn, the Beatles were an extremely influential force in pop culture during the 1960s. Their music not only influenced the culture, but it also reflected it. Some of the songs that they wrote during the late 60s seemed totally nonsensical. Songs like "I am the Walrus" and "Come Together" were, according to John Lennon, nothing more than unrelated, random ideas put together to music (Turner 188). The lyrics to the song "I am the Walrus" are a series of unconnected thoughts and allusions. It is loosely based on a children's rhyme, and Lennon wrote it as a response to hearing that a school teacher was having his English class analyze Beatles lyrics (Turner 187). He wanted to prove that some of his songs had no meaning and were not meant to be analyzed in a classroom. The idea of creating something which has no definite meaning fits in with the hippie idea that anything goes and that people need to free their minds and discover their own truth. "Come Together" was actually first written as a campaign song for Timothy Leary when he decided to run for the office of Governor of California in 1969. His campaign slogan was "Come together, join the party" which Leary said referred to a celebration of life more than a political party (Turner 188). The Beatles spoke

to and influenced the hippie era, not just through their lyrics, but through everything they stood for as well.

One way in which the Beatles continued to be influential was by incorporating Eastern beliefs into their music. After studying in India under the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, the Beatles believed they came back enlightened. Their study of Transcendental Meditation led them to want to focus on more personal matters in their music. John Lennon was particularly interested in "the act of self-exploration and confessional lyrics" in the songs he was writing with Paul McCartney in 1965 (Spitz 586). The Beatles' album *Rubber Soul* was the product of this confessional song-writing, and it joined the ranks of albums of the psychedelic rock genre, which spoke to a generation that used this music as a way to escape from the strictures of society.

All of the confusion and nonsensical nature that seemed to permeate the music industry carried over into some of the literature of the time as well. For this reason, the 1960s generation accepted Heller's novel with open arms. The hippie generation saw Heller's novel as an example of free speech and expression for a worthy cause. According to Stephen Potts in his book *Catch-22: Antiheroic Antinovel*, "the activist readers of the 1960s . . . found their confirmation in the pointed social satires of Heller, Vonnegut, and Kesey" (8). Literature that questioned social norms and pushed the limits of convention helped to motivate those who were bent on making a statement and taking a stand for the purpose of effecting change. Potts contrasts this with the novels of authors such as J.D. Salinger and Jack Kerouac, which were geared toward the more "quietly rebellious college students" who recognized a desire for change, but were not the ones burning draft cards and marching through the streets with picket signs (7). Novels by authors such as Heller, Vonnegut, and Kesey were for the people who were actively trying to change

things, not just sitting around imagining the ideal. These novels were for doers, not just

dreamers.

Many readers immediately assume that *Catch-22* is an antiwar novel, though Heller

claims that this is not the book's main purpose. Heller satirizes many aspects of society, but

"nonetheless, in the eyes of the youth of the time Heller and his novel were most identified with

the antiwar issue" (Potts 8). The fact that Heller was actually a bombardier in the U.S. Army Air

Corps explains his vivid imagery of Yossarian's missions and his overt parody of the military in

general. Heller is obviously concerned about the military, but also focuses on other social

dilemmas he feels need to be addressed.

Timing is an important aspect in considering the reception of a work like *Catch-22*.

Heller could not have planned a better time to publish his novel as political circumstances led to

the Vietnam War, which led many to embrace Heller's cynical treatment of war and other

institutions of the nation (Potts 7). *Catch-22* provided criticism for certain social aspects of

American society during a time when social activists were against anything associated with "the

Establishment" (7). As a college professor, Heller would have been aware of the protest and

debate that went on at many campuses. While *Catch-22* is set during WWII, many people were

applying Heller's ideas to their time, and to the war in Vietnam.

Though Heller's novel clearly has a message that transcends time, he very much draws

upon personal experience to write *Catch-22*. Perhaps Heller's most significant experience that

would have inspired his novel was his military service. As the author of an antiwar novel,

firsthand experience is certainly useful for Heller as he sets the scene for his story. At the age of

19, Heller enrolled in cadet school for the Army Air Corps. He flew sixty-six missions as a

bombardier in WWII before being honorably discharged from the service. Heller seems to be

voicing the general opinion of those who oppose war and see it as absurd through his almost

nonsensical parody of the military.

While *Catch-22* clearly satirizes the military, Heller claims that his novel does not speak

against the importance of a sense of duty to one's country. It almost seems unfitting for Heller to

make such a statement, but during an interview at the United States Air Force Academy he made

it clear that he believed the United States needed to get involved in World War II:

> I believe World War II was a clear-cut issue between this country and Fascism,
>
> represented by Germany and Japan. This country was not in the war until the
>
> attack on Pearl Harbor, and after that attack, I believe . . . all respectful opposition
>
> to this country's participation in the war disappeared, and there was no
>
> controversy about it. (Meredith 50)

Heller may satirize the bureaucracy of the military, but he never specifically protests America's

involvement in WWII. Having fought in this war, Heller seems to maintain a level of patriotism

even though he does not necessarily agree with certain aspects of the military itself.

Though Heller was involved in WWII, he claims that his personal experiences are not

conveyed in the main character Yossarian, who is a bombardier as well. During an interview at

the United States Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, Heller points out that his novel is not

necessarily anti-war or anti-military. The main focus, he says is "individuals in conflict with each

other, about individuals underneath the authority of leaders who were either neglecting or were

indifferent to their responsibility, or who were maybe not up to that responsibility" (Heller qtd in

Meredith 50). Though military and war imagery make up the setting for the novel, Heller only

uses this as one way by which to address the issues of the corruption of bureaucracies in society

and its effects on the people being governed by them. Heller admits that his novel is "irreverent"

and "disrespectful" in order to be honest and to shed some light on issues that were important to society in those days (50).

Because of novels such as *Catch-22*, and also because of the ability to broadcast the Vietnam War on television, awareness was being raised as to what war is really like. Besides television news broadcasts of war activity, Hollywood eventually turned in the direction of war related movies and television series. Hollywood interpretations of war seemed to side with the satirical climate that was so popular. *Catch-22* was filmed as a movie in 1970, and later in that decade M*A*S*H became an increasingly popular television series. People were beginning to realize the full extent of war and were often outraged by it. Many people took an active stance against the war as they felt more harm than good was resulting from United States' involvement in Vietnam. These activists were aided by the visual presentation that was all around them, including the parodies that used dark humor to accentuate the atrocities of war.

M*A*S*H is a good example of how television was used to convey the anxieties of war for the 1960s generation. It was one of America's most popular television shows from 1972 until 1983. Though it aired after the 1960s, it reflected the sentiments of that era. The show ran for eleven consecutive seasons, and the finale was watched by some 106 million viewers (Arango). M*A*S*H was originally a novel by Richard Hooker, published in 1968. It was then turned into a film in 1970, later followed by the television series in 1972. Like *Catch-22*, M*A*S*H is actually not about the Vietnam War, though many people may have thought so. M*A*S*H is about the Korean War, yet the use of dark humor transcends the specifics, and was applied to the feelings that many people had about the war in Vietnam. *Catch-22* enjoyed a similar popularity as over ten-million copies have been sold since 1961. *Catch-22* can perhaps be viewed as an

influence on Hooker's novel and the subsequent movie and television series that influenced a

generation.

Dark comedy began to appear on other types of television shows as well. The values of

the 1960s generation began to be voiced in sitcoms that were aired toward the late 60s and early

70s. *All in the Family*, which aired from 1971-1979, was a sitcom that can be credited as being

one of the first shows to use comedy as a way of making fun of mainstream culture. The main

character Archie Bunker was a closed-minded old man who "denounced some minority or liberal

cause" in each episode (Gilbert 141). Archie repeatedly lost his battles to keep traditional values

alive, as his hippie daughter and son-in-law (along with his unwittingly liberal wife) proved that

his old fashioned way of thinking did not work anymore (141).

Television quickly became one of the foremost mediums for using humor to

communicate radical ideas. Another television show that used comedy to reinforce the ideas of

the counterculture was *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*. This show promoted liberal ideas

by making fun of more conservative values. In her book *Producing for TV and Video: A Real-*

world Approach, Cathrine Kellison notes that "*Rowan and Martin's Laugh-in, That Was the*

Week That Was, and *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* all succeeded in reflecting the chaotic

era of the 1960s with satire and irreverent wit" (31). These television programs used humor in

order to connect with the counterculture and reflect the irreverence that this generation felt

towards political and cultural issues of the 1960s.

Of course not everyone appreciated the irreverence of the television shows and literature

of the times. While many people appreciated and used *Catch-22* as a tool for confirming their

own radical ideas, not everyone was as enthusiastic about Heller's novel. Many critics

questioned the unconventional style and cynical tone of the work, saying that it was pointless and

much too dark. The fragmented chronology and absurd characters left many readers feeling that the novel had no point at all. According to Potts, one major complaint about the structure of the novel was the sudden change of tone and chronology of events toward the end. It was as if a nonsensical story was suddenly trying to be serious. According to an anonymous writer under the pen name Roger H. Smith, *Catch-22* was immoral, artless, and "worthless" (Potts 10).

The fact that *Catch-22* had such extreme opposite reviews attests to its powerful influence in society. People either loved it or they hated it. The social issues that Heller touches on in his book will undoubtedly hit a nerve in most people, either positively or negatively. Issues such as capitalism, the military, and even religion are prominent themes in the novel that everyone has at least some opinion on, since they affect everyone in some way. Heller's use of humor and absurdity do not downplay the importance of these themes. On the contrary, the style that Heller uses serves as a sort of wake up call for anyone who may have felt apathetic about any of the issues before having read the novel.

One of the main issues prevalent throughout *Catch-22* is the reference to the military-industrial complex that became an important part of American culture.   Dwight D. Eisenhower is famous for using this phrase in his farewell address in 1961. He warned the nation not to get carried away by the military-industrial complex, as he believed it could "undermine American Democracy" ("military-industrial complex"). He believed it would be detrimental for the nation to promote the violence and instability of war in order to make a profit by manufacturing weapons of mass destruction as well as other war materials. The United States had already embarked upon an arms race with the advent of the Cold War, which certainly raised the tensions felt by a country that had just finished one war, and was looking at the possibility of another in the near future. People were divided about this issue, as with any issue that concerns the whole

country. Many felt that it was important not only to counter the legitimate threat posed by

communist expansionism but for America to prove that it was just as strong and advanced as its

enemies (particularly the USSR), and so they supported efforts to compete with them in science,

technology, and education (Matusow 9). In this case, the military-industrial complex manifested

itself through the development of spacecraft and war related materials, in order to protect

America's strong image.

The original readers of *Catch-22* in the 1960s were aware of many of these issues and

would most likely have had some opinion on them. For many years, the United States held more

or less an isolationist policy in foreign affairs, though this changed drastically after the attack on

Pearl Harbor in 1941. Some people were uncomfortable with the United States continuing its

strong military, particularly in bases scattered across the globe after WWII. The United States

was using its political and economic strength to provide security and economic growth around

the world (and eventually became viewed as a sort of global "policeman" trying to solve the

world's problems). In the 1960s, the United States began to get involved in Vietnam. The

Vietnam conflict caused a great deal of confusion in the minds of Americans as many were

unsure of the validity of the moral, political, and economic goals that were driving the U.S

government.

The Vietnam War was perhaps one of the most controversial issues of the 1960s, though

towards the end of that decade most people were ready to see the war end as aquickly as

possible. Paul Potter, president of Students for a Democratic Society,[2] declared that the Vietnam

War revealed that America was run "by faceless and terrible bureaucracies. . . that consistently

put material values before human values." (Farber 40). This is strikingly similar to what Heller

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[2] The Students for a Democratic Society was a group of college age students who supported the development of a New Left that would focus on resolving what they thought were the problems caused by "institutions" or the "Establishment" (Savage 262).

seems to be saying in *Catch-22*. This description sums up the idea of the "Establishment" that the counterculture was trying to resist. The Establishment was a term used to define the set of social structures and governing powers that ran the country. It was this authority that the hippies resisted, because they felt the Establishment was corrupt and did not truly care about the people it was governing (40).

Catch-22 was not the only novel that expressed concerns about the "Establishment" or bureaucracies of America during the 1960s. It is easy to see why *Catch-22* was so popular when considering some of the other novels that were written (and well received) shortly after the publication of *Catch-22*. These novels are further confirmation of what was considered important to this generation. Novels such as *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, *The Bell Jar*, and *The Crying of Lot 49* are examples of novels that conveyed the mindset of the counterculture of the 1960s. One common thread that they all share is the way they dealt with the issue of the "Establishment" or "Institutions" of society. The literal image of the institution is found in the mental institutions that provide the setting for all of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and part of *The Bell Jar*. *The Crying of Lot 49* shows the main character in a constant struggle with a conspiracy that controls a large part of society. All of these novels reflect the concerns of society in the 1960s, and use the same kind of dark humor that Heller uses in *Catch-22*.

The image of the "Institution" is very apparent in Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. The story is told by Chief Bromden, a patient in a mental institution, centering around one character who upsets the order and structure of the "machine" that the patients are forced to be a part of. The imagery of being medicated and being in a "fog" reflect Kesey's acid tests, and the way that he tried to find a greater consciousness through the confusion and chaos of LSD. McMurphy, the character whose story Chief Bromden tells, is a catalyst of confusion

himself. By upsetting the smooth operation of the mental institution he helps to "free" the patients, in a sense. He shows them that there is more to life than what the "Big Nurse" tells them. Kesey, like McMurphy, is a voice of the culture, trying to show people that they need to think for themselves and learn that there is more to life than what society tells them. Everyone needs to find their own sense of truth, and not let society govern everything they do.

Kesey continually points out the importance of humor through his character McMurphy. At one point in the novel McMurphy says "man, when you lose your laugh you lose your footing" (68). McMurphy uses humor to try to create a sense of liberation from the stiff rules and regulations of the hospital. By introducing confusion or bewilderment into the hospital, McMurphy ultimately brings illumination to the others characters, especially Chief Bromden, who realizes that he needs to stand up for himself and escape the confines of an institution that does not really have his best interest in mind.

Chief Bromden often has episodes that reflect the labyrinth imagery of 1960s dark humor. At one point in the novel, Chief Bromden does not take the medication that is typically administered before the patients go to bed. As a result, he has hallucinations of the inner-workings of the "machine" that is the mental institution. Kesey uses imagery of "endless machines stretching clear out of sight" and "huge brass tubes [that] disappear upward in the dark" (83). There are men walking in continuous motion along winding catwalks, making sure that the machine is functioning properly. The images of twisting tubes and endless machinery reflect a labyrinthine setting in which Chief Bromden feels trapped and helpless to stop the "machine." Bewilderment and anxiety are clearly present in this scene as well, showing how Kesey incorporates all of the elements of dark humor in his novel.

  The Bell Jar is a good example of the confessional style of writing that was popular in the 1960s. Sylvia Plath's novel is a work of fiction that draws heavily upon her own life experiences. Plath includes elements of bewilderment and illumination and anxiety through the main character Esther Greenwood, who is a representation of the author in many ways. There was a lot of stress and tension in society due to a rapidly changing culture and the constant fear of nuclear war. Plath records her own stresses and tensions as a young woman who is trying to find her place in a bewildering new world.

  Plath's novel reflects the anxiety of the 1960s culture. It also deals with the treatment methods that were being used to help those who suffered from mental illness. Plath recalls her electro-shock therapy, a practice which has since been banned. Despite the gravity of the issues presented in *The Bell Jar*, Plath uses an element of humor to deal with them. In one scene, Esther is trying to find a place to hang herself. Plath presents this in such a way that the reader cannot help but laugh as Esther fumbles around with the cord from her mother's bathrobe, unsuccessfully searching for a place that will accommodate her needs: "After a discouraging time of walking about with the silk cord dangling from my neck like a yellow cat's tail and finding no place to fasten it, I sat on the edge of my mother's bed and tried pulling the cord tight" (159). There is a sense of anxiety and hopelessness in the character of Esther, yet Plath employs humor in telling her story. Esther nonchalantly discusses her failed suicide attempt in an amusing way, showing how bewilderment and anxiety skewed her sense of reality.

  The Crying of Lot 49 by Thomas Pynchon is another instance of the type of literature that was being produced in the 1960s. This novel is an especially good example of the bewilderment and illumination as well as labyrinth themes that are often found in the dark humor during this time. This novel follows the story of Oedipa Maas, who is given the responsibility of executing

her ex-boyfriend's will, which leads to a somewhat nebulous detective story. Oedipa's search is confusing as it is unclear exactly what inspires her to put so much effort into searching for meaning in something that may not have any real meaning to begin with. As Oedipa finds clues she continues a somewhat labyrinthine search that does not seem to lead to any definitive end.

The Crying of Lot 49 amply incorporates the themes of bewilderment and illumination and the labyrinth. Bewilderment is easy to come by in this novel, as the reader needs to try to follow a character who is not even sure where she is going or why. Oedipa believes her ex-boyfriend has set up a sort of scavenger hunt in his will, as she follows what she believes to be clues leading to information about a world-wide conspiracy. Ultimately Oedipa learns about herself, and not the secret network that she is searching out. The illumination comes in realizing that she was searching for the wrong thing, and the labyrinthine imagery is found in the search itself. Pynchon questions the existence of truth outside of the self through his novel, which he writes in a humorous and entertaining way.

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, *The Bell Jar*, and *The Crying of Lot 49* embody the elements that reflect the culture of 1960s America and the humor that was employed by authors and comedians at this time. In *Black Humor Fiction of the Sixties*, Schulz mentions a common trait that many dark humor novels possess: The main character never experiences "social reconciliation" (8). This is true for the three novels just mentioned, as well as for *Catch-22*. Since Schulz believes that dark humor (or black humor) is a product of the 1960s, it would make sense that these novels would not end with the characters becoming a part of society. The 1960s were a time of change and resisting the mainstream culture, and the dark humor novels stayed true to this way of thinking.

Catch-22 falls in line with the 1960s novels that challenged authority and mainstream society. Heller admits that the book is "anti-traditional establishment" and that his use of the military is mainly to show an establishment or institution in that light (Meredith 57). His main character, Yossarian, is more of an anti-hero than a hero, and certainly does not become reconciled with the institutions in his life. As a product of the 1950s-1960s generation, *Catch-22* incorporates dark humor in order to communicate an important message. This dark humor is a product of the 1960s, and reflects distinct qualities about this generation and culture. Absurdities, anxiety, and labyrinth imagery are key elements in the dark humor novels of this time, all of which are reflected in Heller's *Catch-22*.

Chapter Three: Bewilderment and Illumination: *Catch-22* and the

Dark Humor of the 1960s

Catch-22 is one of many novels published in the 1960s which followed a distinct 1960s American dark humor style. Published in 1961, *Catch-22* continues to be one of the most popular novels to come out of this time period. Heller's work encapsulates the elements that make up dark humor—particularly 1960s American dark humor. Writing at the same time as authors such as Ken Kesey, Thomas Pynchon, and Sylvia Plath, Heller is one of many whose works express the mood and the voice of the day (though none seem to present as comprehensive a commentary on the culture as Heller does in *Catch-22*). In a time of such great change and tension in both cultural and political aspects, the 1960s was a time in which people faced a great deal of anxiety and uncertainty. Humor was used in several mediums such as radio and television, but neither of those methods of communication could stand the test of time a well as the novels that were written in this manner. Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* reflects the concerns of the 1960s generation through his use of absurdities to communicate bewilderment and illumination, gallows humor to communicate anxiety, and labyrinth imagery to show the changing times and the uncertainty of a culture that was beginning to question traditional ideals and values.

Catch-22 has become one of the defining works of literature of the 20th century. In his article "Catch-22 as Avatar of the Social Surrealist Novel," Jesse Ritter comments on the absurd qualities of *Catch-22* that reflect the literature and culture of the 20th century: "Much of modern literature is devoted to portraying the Absurd, or the failure of rationalist expectations. Heller's relentless use of radical juxtaposition in *Catch-22* intensifies our sense of the Absurd to the point of hallucination" (82). Heller abandons "rationalist expectations" in order to convey the mindset of the modern culture (82). The absurdities that Heller includes in his novel are ultimately there for a reason. While the reader may feel confused from time to time, Heller brings the ridiculous

antics and absurdities to light in order to produce the effect of bewilderment and illumination

that is a key element in 1960s dark humor.

It seems unlikely that absurdity could deepen one's understanding of serious issues, but

this is exactly what Heller does in his parody of an Air Force pilot in World War II trying

desperately to avoid the dangers of a war run by idiotic bureaucrats. The humorous antics and

ridiculous characters are present in the novel for more than just laughs; they are elements used by

Heller to convince his audience of absurdities in society. In his work *Jokes and their Relation to

the Unconscious*, Sigmund Freud refers to the scholar Theodore Lipps who says that jokes serve

their purpose when one finds "'sense in nonsense'" (qtd. in Freud11). The absurd antics of

Heller's characters along with the disordered structure of the novel may at first seem like mere

nonsense; however, *Catch-22* has proven to be one of the most influential social satires of the

twentieth century. Through the use of dark humor and absurdity, Heller clearly demonstrates his

ideas regarding certain institutions which guide modern society.

Dark humor has been an increasingly popular mode of writing since the early to mid

twentieth century. Authors such as Vonnegut, Kesey, and Pynchon fall under this category, as

the unifying threads of social criticism and absurdity group them together. The use of dark

humor often brings with it a surge of both positive and negative reviews. It is hard to ignore the

absurd, especially when it takes a definite stab at some aspect of society. For those who

appreciate *Catch-22*, it is usually because Heller's style evokes such a strong response. The

complicated structure of the novel as well as Heller's use of dark humor affords him a great deal

of freedom in the content matter he deals with, as he carefully tangles a web of social criticism

around one authoritative catch that influences the characters and events of *Catch-22*.

When asked about the use of dark humor in *Catch-22* during an interview with Dale Gold of *Washington Post Book World*, Joseph Heller responded, "I don't like the term 'dark humor.' I like to think of it as sour sarcasm or ugly satire. I don't like comedy for the sake of comedy" (56). Heller clearly believes that humor is best used as a way to deal with issues that are of great importance. He does not want to simply make people laugh with his novel; he wants to make people think.

The idea of finding truth in humor is an integral part of *Catch-22*. Freud discusses the theory that says "the comic effect of jokes comes from 'bewilderment and illumination'" (16). Bewilderment is a major comedic tool in *Catch-22* which reflects the popular attitude toward war of the generation for which Heller was writing. The actual Catch-22 itself is an example of bewilderment and illumination that illustrates the absurdities of war. When Yossarian asks Doc Daneeka to ground him from flying any more missions, he finds he is caught in the tangled "logic" of the infamous catch:

> There was only one catch and that was Catch-22, which specified that a concern for one's own safety in the face of dangers that were real and immediate was the process of a rational mind. Orr was crazy and could be grounded. All he had to do was ask; and as soon as soon as he did, he would no longer be crazy and would have to fly more missions . . . Yossarian was moved very deeply by the absolute simplicity of this clause of Catch-22 and let out a respectful whistle. (46)

The circular reasoning behind the catch reflects the circularity of Heller's fragmented story, which is structured in a much more deliberate way than it is often given credit for.

As the 1960s were a time of a countercultural revolution, it is fitting that Heller's novel should itself be somewhat "countercultural" in its form. It does not conform to typical literary

conventions as the reader is brought from one scene to another in the middle of chapters and as the chapters themselves are given in almost a backwards chronological order. This use of discontinuity in Heller's novel is in itself an example of bewilderment and illumination as the structure of the novel helps to communicate his ideas more effectively than if it were presented in a more orderly fashion. In his article "Spindrift and the Sea: Structural Patterns and Unifying Elements in Catch 22" Clinton S. Burhans, Jr. refers to the structure of *Catch-22* as "an ingenious fusion of time planes into the simultaneity of existential time" and how "Heller has done something in each chapter to link it to the preceding chapter" (240). Heller's chronology ties in the technique of bewilderment and illumination as the reader is presented with "foreshadowing flashbacks" that reveal humorous explanations to events that have already occurred in the novel (240).

The flashbacks in *Catch-22* add a dramatic effect to the novel which intensifies events or situations as the reader gains more knowledge as he or she goes along. An example of the foreshadowing flashback is found when Yossarian appears at formation naked and refuses to wear his uniform after a particularly disastrous mission. The reader finds out that his uniform is in the laundry because it was covered in blood when the tail gunner, Snowden, was killed during this mission. It is not until the end of the novel that the reader is told the details of Snowden's tragic death, which in turn explains much of Yossarian's own fear and desperate attempts to get out of flying more missions throughout the novel. In this case, discontinuity appears in a slightly different way as the humor of Yossarian's actions is brought about by the bewilderment instead of the illumination, since his naked protest is not quite so funny when one finally realizes the devastating reason behind it.

Heller uses discontinuity in a number of ways in his novel. According to Gary W. Davis in his article "'Catch-22' and the Language of Discontinuity," "Heller sees . . . linguistic and intellectual discontinuities reflected in our social systems and institutions as well" (71), which he in turn portrays in his novel. The most obvious example of this is found in Milo Minderbinder. Milo is a direct criticism of capitalism as he finds a way to make an enormous profit during war time, as he buys and sells goods from around the world and uses the planes and men of the U.S. military to aid him in his endeavors. The idea of discontinuity comes into play as Heller is clearly trying to make a statement about the absurdity of the military-industrial complex that Eisenhower warned about in 1959. According to Heller, making a profit through war is a gross discontinuity.

Heller demonstrates how Milo's actions become truly absurd when he is willing to put the men of his squadron in danger in order to make a profit. Milo Minderbinder tries to convince everyone that his business endeavors will benefit them as well, though his actions seem far from having everyone's best interest in mind:

> The life jackets failed to inflate because Milo had removed the twin carbon-dioxide cylinders from the inflating chambers to make the strawberry and crushed-pineapple ice-cream sodas he served in the officer's mess hall and had replaced them with mimeographed notes that read: "What's good for M&M Enterprises is good for the country." (307)

Heller actually echoes the beliefs of the hippie generation that "questioned the rampant materialism" in the world (Farber and Bailey). Heller seems to believe that capitalism puts profit and power before people, an idea that resurfaces through several other of his characters.

Throughout *Catch-22* Heller addresses the idea that institutions often put ideals before individuals. In his article "The Sanity of Catch-22," Robert Protherough points out how Heller criticizes bureaucracy, particularly the bureaucracy of the military. General Peckem is the most obvious character that Heller uses to mock a bureaucracy. For example, the general makes lists of personnel to request as though he were simply making a grocery list, and as he gives his men conflicting orders simply to keep them running around in circles looking busy (204). The idea of keeping up appearances and doing things just for the sake of doing something (such as when Colonel Scheisskopf is encouraged to send out memos that the parade that was never going to take place would be canceled for the upcoming week) reduces people to nothing more than pawns in a pointless game.

People are once again made to seem like nothing more than objects or names on a list when Doc Daneeka is reported dead after a plane crash. In the absurd bureaucracy in *Catch-22* it is impossible to deny that Doc Daneeka was on the flight since his name was on the official flight list. Even as Doc Daneeka stood before his commanding officers to explain that he had not been on the flight, and was in fact alive, it was to no avail: "Colonel Cathcart refused to see him, and Colonel Korn sent word through major Danby that he would have Doc Daneeka cremated on the spot if he ever showed up at Group Headquarters" (343). Reality does not matter when maintaining the established systems that govern society are placed before a concern for the people.

The absurdities of the institutions of war are further demonstrated in *Catch-22* through the insensitive attitudes that many of the characters have toward death and war in general. Colonel Cathcart is one such character whose main concern in the war is to form nice bombing patterns for the aerial photographs and to hopefully get his name in the *Saturday Evening Post*.

One way in which he hopes to possibly make news is through what he believes to be his elegantly written death notices that go to the families of those who are killed in battle. One such letter is sent home to Doc Daneeka's wife when he tries unsuccessfully to convince the commanding officers that he is still alive: "Dear Mrs., Mr., Miss, or Mr. and Mrs. Daneeka, Words cannot express the deep personal grief I experienced when your husband, son, father or brother was killed, wounded or reported missing in action" (344). Bewilderment fuels the humor in the situation as Mrs. Daneeka receives letters from Doc Daneeka pleading for help, while simultaneously receiving letters from the War Department telling her—in stunning prose—that as far as they are concerned, Doc Daneeka is dead.

The situation with Doc Daneeka is one of many throughout the novel which shows something to be the opposite of how it should be. Returning to Freud, "a joke is a judgment which produces a comic contrast" (10). Heller uses this technique in the way that various characters of *Catch-22* respond to death. Yossarian seems to be the only one who truly fears for his life, though for this he is told by Major Sanderson, the hospital psychiatrist, that he "has a bad persecution complex" (299). In his article "War and the Comic Muse: The Good Soldier Schweik and Catch-22," J.P. Stern notes that "Yossarian never ceases to be outraged by the astounding fact that men . . . should be seriously adding to the means of their destruction" by willingly complying with the demands of the military (208). Heller shows his readers that Yossarian is really the voice of reason, though the rest of the characters accuse him of being the crazy one.

The antihero characteristics of Yossarian correspond with the antinovel characteristics of *Catch-22*. In order to reach his audience more effectively, Heller needed to break certain rules in the traditional school of literature. Stern makes the comment in his article that "the central theme

(of *Catch-22*) is the preservation . . . of the integrity of a private individual *against*, but also in full contact *with*, the all-but-overwhelming pressures of a world at war," and further, that *Catch-22*'s "humor is never disconnected from [its] realism" (203). Heller's commentary on social issues is meant to be taken seriously, and his use of dark humor helps to communicate his message in a way that "shows" his audience what he wants to say rather than just saying it. After laughing through some of the events in *Catch-22*, it is sobering for the reader to step back and make sense of the nonsense.

The absurdities of *Catch-22* demonstrate not only feelings of bewilderment and illumination, but also those of extreme anxiety. Heller captures the anxieties of the time in which *Catch-22* was written through several of his characters and their absurd situations. He uses gallows humor as a way in which to deal with ideas that would be difficult to face otherwise. The seriousness of war and the dehumanization that takes place in the military are two main issues that Heller addresses with the use of gallows humor, which enables him to deal with these grim subjects in a way that does not cause the reader too much discomfort.

A great deal of the anxiety found in *Catch-22* is a result of the dehumanization of the men in the military. Schulz believes that Heller uses this idea not only to comment on the military, but also to comment on a culture that is more interested in numbers and averages than actual people (97). Schulz sums up the lack of individuality the mid-twentieth century culture seemed to be facing:

> In a society beset by a dissociation between dated ideals and immediate reality,
> between the myth of individuality and the submission to anonymity, between the
> desire to be an instrumental member of a group and the pressure to fit within
> every statistical mean, there unavoidably engenders tension and anxiety [sic]. (97)

The twentieth century saw the rise of technology and a greater emphasis on efficiency; often

neglecting the needs of individuals. The importance of the individual seemed to be fading in

many respects, as a more utilitarian attitude developed because of these advances. One of the

ways that this is most obvious is in the military. The military represents the kind of bureaucracies

that focus on efficiency and productivity as opposed to individuality. Heller uses this institution

to depict a general social anxiety in which the individual was becoming less and less important.

Anxiety is exhibited by many characters throughout *Catch-22*, but by none so much as

Colonel Cathcart. Heller describes Cathcart as "a blustering, intrepid bully who brooded

inconsolably over the terrible ineradicable impressions he knew he kept making on people of

prominence who were scarcely aware that he was even alive" (Heller 188). He was paranoid for

no reason at all, believing that people were paying much closer attention to him than they

actually were. According to Schulz, Cathcart experiences this anxiety because his "ambition to

embody his society's ideals is continually frustrated by his failure to understand its rules" (92).

Cathcart goes along with a system he does not fully understand, whether he realizes it or not. His

lack of understanding causes stress, since he is not sure what is expected of him and never knows

if he is doing the right thing to impress his superiors.

The sort of anxiety that Colonel Cathcart experiences was commonly found in American

dark humor novels of the 1960s. Schulz believes this is because "the world . . . has accelerated its

drift toward fragmentation of experience, isolation of the individual, irrelevancy of the future,

and sense of personal inadequacy" (93). By the mid-twentieth century, society was beginning to

focus on the importance of the "average" instead of the individual, and to focus on being

efficient instead of being personal (94-95). This is depicted in the letters that Cathcart sends

home to the family members of deceased soldiers. The "all-purpose" attitude behind these letters

shows that individuality is not important (at least to the military in this case). In this way, people struggle to maintain a sense of self-worth, much like Cathcart who felt he was always doing something wrong.

Another example of a character who felt anxiety due to a loss of individuality is Doc Daneeka. Not only is the incident in which Doc Daneeka is declared dead absurd, but it also portrays a loss of individuality. The military is not concerned with Doc Daneeka as a person. He was simply a name on a flight list for a plane that crashed; therefore he must be dead, even though he did not actually go on that flight. Doc Daneeka begins to feel the effects of the dehumanization because of the military bureaucracy. Schulz notes that a loss of individuality occurs when "one's sense of self becomes unfixed" (96). Doc Daneeka's sense of self becomes unfixed as he begins to doubt his sanity and even whether or not he is alive. He is dehumanized to the point that he is described in animal-like terms, and begins to disappear as far as the military is concerned: "Alarm changed to resignation, and more and more Doc Daneeka acquired the look of an ailing rodent. The sacks under his eyes turned hollow and black, and he padded through the shadows fruitlessly like a ubiquitous spook" (343). Not only does Doc Daneeka lose his individuality, he loses his sense of humanity to the bizarre reasoning of the bureaucracy running his life (or former life as they would have it).

A loss of individuality also occurs when Yossarian speaks with the psychiatrist, Major Sanderson. Sanderson does not really care at all about Yossarian's problems, preferring to tell Yossarian of his own problems instead. At one point, Major Sanderson calls Yossarian "Fortiori," even though this is not his name. Yossarian tries to tell the Major he is mistaken, but the Major does not believe him: "'Your name is Fortiori,' Major Sanderson contradicted him belligerently . . . '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" (298). The name Fortiori is significant itself as it represents the term "a fortiori" used in logic. It means "an argument to the effect that because one ascertained fact exists, therefore another, which is included in it, or analogous to it, and which is less improbable, unusual, or surprising, must also exist" (Stark 154). In other words, because Yossarian was in Fortiori's bed, he must be Fortiori. It does not matter who Yossarian says he is; his identity has been decided by the Army through their skewed reasoning, and they do not care who he really is.

The soldier in white represents the anxieties of war as he is the image of a faceless, nameless member of a group that is treated as though he is not even a person. The soldier in white is a figure all wrapped in gauze who cannot speak, and has no defining characteristics except for his unfortunate appearance. He resembles an empty shell with nothing more than a hole for his mouth and a system of tubes and jars feeding his hidden body. The description of the soldier in white lacks a sense of humanity. Schulz points out how anxiety due to loss of individuality (or a sense of self) is present in the image of the soldier in white "who is believed by the other patients of the hospital not even to exist beneath his all-enveloping bandages" (95). The patients are actually rather disturbed by the quiet, unimposing new patient on the ward, simply because they cannot figure out who he is, or if he is really even there.

The soldier in white is made to seem like more of an object than a person, reflecting the anxiety caused by institutions such as the military and a loss of individuality in favor of being a useful part of a group. Heller describes the nurses working tirelessly to polish the pipes and jars that pass liquid in and out of the soldier in white, and to whisk his bandages so that they were clean and bright (168). There is no real purpose to what they are doing. They are not helping the man beneath the bandages, but rather focusing on his appearance. Nurse Cramer even begins to

cry as she is "moved very deeply by the soldier in white" (169). Nurse Cramer is really moved

by the idea of patriotism and what the military is supposed to stand for, not by the unfortunate

condition of the nameless man beneath the bandages.

A good example of the lack of humanity given to the soldier in white comes when there

is a discussion about his "purpose." While the nurses change his jars once again, the soldiers

wonder why the nurses just don't "'hook the two jars up to each other and eliminate the

middleman?'" (170). As far as the soldiers can tell, the soldier in white is nothing more than

something through which the fluids in the jars beside him can pass. Not only does this reflect a

loss of humanity and individuality, it also illustrates the absurdity of bureaucracies that focus on

the efficiency of their institutions, rather than the individuals that comprise them. The fact that

the soldier in white keeps reappearing in the novel suggests that this is a point that Heller does

not want his readers to forget.

The idea of taking away someone's humanity is typical of gallows humor used by those

who need to cope with such situations. Dunbar reflects the anxieties of war and the use of

gallows humor since his attempts at saving his own life are more humorous than effective.

Dunbar is afraid of death and is obsessed with self-preservation (much like Yossarian). Of

course, it is not strange that a person would want to protect his or her life; however, Dunbar

becomes anxious and neurotic due to his situations. Dunbar often feigns illness in order to stay in

the hospital and avoid being sent into combat. One of the ways he tries to make his life longer

while he is in the hospital is by "cultivating boredom" (Heller 9). Dunbar would lie in his

hospital bed "increasing his lifespan" by staring at the ceiling and doing nothing (9). Though

Dunbar knows that death is inevitable, he comically tries his best to escape it. Heller uses

gallows humor to underscore Dunbar's sense of anxiety as a member of an institution that treats him as though his life is disposable, and not worth protecting any more than anyone else's.

The idea of a life being disposable and therefore meaningless is exactly what the 1960s counterculture stood against. Of course, in an institution such as the military, utilitarianism comes into play out of necessity. There is no way to be involved in a war and to show concern for each person who is fighting it. People are therefore reduced to numbers, and averages. Schulz talks about the problem of reducing man to averages and means and uses Pynchon's novel *V* as an example. He describes the mid-twentieth century as "the product of a generation of statistician's graphs. It has evolved into a computer society" (94). Pynchon comments on this issue of dehumanization in his novel: "all aspects of life are being geared to a mythical average without flesh and bone, an average that consists of no living object, no actual person" (94). Schulz believes that the result of this is that people substitute logic for the "organizing ratio of average and mean," which results in a loss of focus on individuals (94).

Jesse Ritter discusses the "social surrealist" genre that he sees as a product of the dark humor fiction of the 1960s, and points out how one of its main focuses is to protest dehumanization. Ritter refers to Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* as an example of social surrealist literature that speaks to the importance of the individual:

> As the social surrealist genre develops, its increasingly bitter humor and hallucinatory presentation of reality in no way diminish the objective presentation of social reality. Referring to Thomas Pynchon's "multiple absurdities" in his description of used cars as the battered, castoff egos of their former owners in *The Crying of Lot 49*, Don Hausdorf insisted that "This may be 'Black Comedy' in its

grotesque manipulation of details but it also embodies social protest against

dehumanization." (76)

Ritter believes that the way dark humor presents reality may seem absurd and irrelevant, but as

Hausdorf points out, these absurdities reflect the fact that dehumanization is itself an absurdity.

Catch-22 clearly protests dehumanization, and uses "multiple absurdities" for this cause, to say

the least.

A humorous occurrence of this type of dehumanization is found in Colonel Cathcart's

view of the enlisted men. Cathcart is ultimately only interested in getting his picture in the

Saturday Evening Post for being the exceptional leader he seems to think he is. When talking to

the chaplain one day about how having prayer before missions might help increase his chances

for his few minutes of fame, it does not occur to the colonel that the enlisted men flying the

missions should attend as well. In fact it does not occur to colonel that the enlisted men pray to

the same God he does, and he tries to think of a way to avoid having to include them in the

prayer meetings when he finds out that they actually do: "I'd like to keep them out," confided the

colonel . . . "It isn't that I think the enlisted men are dirty, common and inferior. It's just that we

don't have enough room" (194). Clearly Colonel Cathcart does find the enlisted men to be "dirty,

common and inferior," as he seems to think they are less human than himself; he does not even

want them to pray to the same God as he does.

Chaplain Tappman reflects the anxiety not only of dehumanization, but also of

uncertainty due to the changing ideals of society. The idea of finding one's own sense of truth

was a popular movement in the 1960s counterculture. The chaplain reflects a sort of anxiety due

to a loss of faith and being uncertain how he can help the soldiers. The chaplain begins

questioning his purpose and his faith in God, uncertain about the purpose of life: "It was already

some time since the chaplain had first begun wondering what everything was all about. Was there a God? How could he be sure?" (Heller 267). It is strange for a chaplain to be the one questioning such things, but this only helps to emphasize the concerns of the 1960s culture. By showing someone who has dedicated his life to religion now questioning it, Heller reflects the counterculture who questioned traditional values. There is a sense of anxiety that comes with a loss of faith, as that which was considered to be true is no longer reliable. A sense of purpose or meaning is lost when there is nothing upon which to base one's very existence.

The anxiety of trying to find a sense of purpose in society is found in the character Major Major. Heller aptly describes Major Major as an anxious man who suffers from perpetual mediocrity: "Some men are born mediocre, some men achieve mediocrity, and some have mediocrity thrust upon them. With Major Major it had been all three" (83). Major Major represents the anxiety of a culture that wanted more than to simply fit the standard of what society told them they should be. Major Major has no strong convictions either way, and so simply goes along with being average.

Major Major's conformity goes as far as his enrollment in the Army. He enrolled simply because he was told to enroll. He became a Major simply because a computer mistook his name for his rank. Major Major's life seems to be a series of events that lead to his increasing conformity to society's expectations. The problem for Major Major is that even though he does what is expected of him, nobody likes him: "He was polite to his elder, who disliked him. Whatever his elders told him to do he did . . . Major Major's elders disliked him because he was such a flagrant nonconformist" (85). Of course, Major Major is anything but a nonconformist, which suggests that trying to conform to society's expectations is pointless. In this way, Heller seems to be supporting the counterculture in their nonconformist beliefs as he makes the one true

conformist in his novel one of the most miserable characters. The 1960s were a time when people were being encouraged to explore their own truth and to live life apart from the materialism and corruption of society, but Major Major could not figure out how to do this.

Anxiety due to materialism was another issue for the people in the 1960s counterculture, who wanted to separate themselves from mainstream society in order to avoid corruption. Milo represents the anxieties that 1960s America had about the military-industrial complex. While Milo makes a profit, and even improves some of the conditions for the men on base, he ultimately loses sight of the well-being of the people, and focuses on what is good for business. In her article "Militarism and Grass-Roots Involvement in the Military-Industrial Complex," Nancy Edelman Phillips notes that many people become caught up in the military-industrial complex because they need to feel that "the military stands for something more useful than one had originally thought" (628). By viewing the military as more than simply a fighting machine, it may be easier for some people to cope with their own involvement. Milo reflects this in *Catch-22* as he believes he is providing a great service to the soldiers, and scarcely seems to realize he is involved in a serious war.

Though Milo may believe that his business ventures are for the good of everyone, he ultimately crosses the line and begins to tread on dangerous ground, just as Eisenhower warned America about in his farewell address. At one point in the novel, Milo sends planes to bomb his own military base because this proved to help him economically. Once again people are depicted as nothing more than replaceable "things" as Milo promises to reimburse the government for its losses during his financial venture:

> This time Milo has gone too far. Bombing his own men and planes was more than even the most phlegmatic observer could stomach, and it looked like the end for

him . . . Milo was all washed up until he opened his books to the public and

disclosed the tremendous profit he made. He could reimburse the government for

all the people and property he had destroyed and still have enough money left

over to continue buying Egyptian cotton. (Heller 259)

Heller uses Milo as an example of the dangers of the military-industrial complex, and how it can

easily be a dehumanizing factor as it can turn people into nothing more than expendable goods

for the purpose of generating a profit.

Yossarian, like Milo, directly reflects aspects of the anxieties of the 1960s American

culture, though he does so in a more logical way. Yossarian's rational fear of death portrays the

legitimate fear of a generation that was surrounded by the uncertainty of the possibility of war.

Yossarian is surrounded by death, just as the 1960s culture was surrounded by the threat of war.

Unlike Milo, Yossarian does not try to rationalize war to try to make it a positive enterprise. He

sees it for what it is, and tries to logically argue his way out of missions so that he does not have

to endanger himself. Of course, logic is always overridden by Catch-22, which would be enough

to drive anyone insane.

The idea of mental illness is present in *Catch-22*, as this is a common element that

reflected anxiety in 1960s dark humor. There is a sense of irony in this case as Yossarian, who is

perhaps the most sane character in the novel, feigns mental illness in his attempts to be sent

home. The image of the mental hospital found in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and *The Bell

Jar* is present in *Catch-22* in the form of the military in general and the hospital in particular.

The characters in the hospital along with Yossarian are portrayed by Heller as being far more

mentally unstable than Yossarian, making the hospital seem more like a mental institution.

Anxiety due to the "Institution" or "Establishment" of society is present in the character Appleby. Yossarian tells Appleby that he has flies in his eyes, which must be why he cannot see things the way they really are. When Yossarian informs Appleby of the flies in his eyes, Appleby goes into a panic, questioning his own sanity (Heller 46). Instead of depending upon his own logic and reasoning, he depends on the reassurance of others to confirm that his vision is not obscured by flies. Appleby's anxiety comes from the fact that he does not know what to think unless someone tells him what to think. This represents one of the problems that the 1960s counterculture saw in society, as they strove to spread a message of freeing the mind and thinking for oneself. Appleby is a victim of the institution that controls his life, and is therefore unable to see things as they really are, or to even think for himself.

There is a continual sense of tension between the soldiers and their authorities in *Catch-22*. Similar to the mindset of the 1960s counterculture, the soldiers were subjected to the strictures of an institution that did not care about them as individuals. According to James L. McDonald in his article "I See Everything Twice!: The Structure of Joseph Heller's 'Catch-22,'" Heller "sets two worlds in opposition to each other: the world of those in power, and the world of their victims" (105). This parallel that Heller constructs denotes the importance of the structure of the novel. The soldiers remain victimized by their insensitive superiors, which results in their subsequent anxiety. The parallel of the world of the oblivious bureaucrats and the world of the anxious soldiers reflects the tensions in 1960s society and helps in developing Heller's purposeful, though seemingly chaotic structure.

In order to understand the use of the labyrinth theme in Catch-22 it is important to further define this idea. A labyrinth is defined as "a system of intricate passageways and blind alleys" ("labyrinth"). In many cases labyrinths were underground structures, which added to the

"blindness" one might feel when trying to navigate them. Heller's novel uses labyrinth imagery in both its structure and content. The structure represents the twisting and turning of a labyrinth, as Heller frequently shifts his focus from one character to another, and from one event to another. It can be difficult to keep track of all that is happening in the novel, leaving the reader feeling perplexed. Another way in which *Catch-22* incorporates labyrinth imagery is in the serious subject matter. Labyrinths are often associated with dark imagery, and so the gravity of war and some of the events that take place reflect this.

Though *Catch-22* was relatively popular when it was first published, many people had a difficult time understanding the novel because of its complex structure. Many of these people did not appreciate *Catch-22* because they were not familiar with the new form of the novel that was arising during the 1960s. They lack "knowledge of the contours of twentieth-century fiction . . . a different type of structure and order from that to which the novel-oriented reader may be accustomed" (77). The new novel[3] no longer followed the rules of traditional novels. Even the form of the new novel was important in reflecting the culture, and so there was an element of confusion that readers needed to adjust to.

The structure of Heller's novel is the main element that reflects the labyrinth theme that became popular in 1960s American dark humor. In his article "'Catch-22': Déjà vu and the Labyrinth of Memory," James M. Mellard notes that Heller has taken the "new novel" of Robbe-Grillet and extended it to fit his purposes (109). Mellard goes on to say that Heller uses the labyrinth element of the new novel in order to convey a "delusive experience, hallucinatory quality and disjunctive expression of reality in *Catch-22*" (109). Delusions are not uncommon in

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[3] The new novel is defined as an "avant-garde novel of the mid-20th century that marked a radical departure from the conventions of the traditional novel in that it ignores such elements as plot, dialogue, linear narrative, and human interest" ("new novel").

Catch-22, and the style in which the novel is written reflects the idea of hallucinations or delusions that many of the characters suffer.

The idea of seeing everything twice is a recurring theme in the structure of the novel, as Heller brings the reader back to events that have already taken place, in some cases more than twice. McDonald notes that the structure of the novel seems chaotic, but is actually carefully developed to reflect the "restlessness and rebelliousness of the times" (102). McDonald points out that Heller is a "conscious artist who carefully manipulates the diverse and seemingly divisive elements of the novel to achieve structural unity" (103). Writing a novel such as *Catch-22* would have been no easy feat as it requires a great deal of effort in order to keep the characters and situations straight. Heller actually kept a chart in order to try to keep everything in order, though even he admits that he probably missed some inconsistencies (Meredith 51).

The episode in the hospital in which Yossarian mimics the soldier who saw everything twice represents the confusion of the structure of *Catch-22* which reflects the labyrinth themes of 1960s dark humor novels. Heller's use of déjà vu can be rather confusing, especially during one's first reading of his novel. The reader needs to pay close attention in order to realize the significance of seeing an event from multiple perspectives. Yossarian, of course, only actually sees everything once and is pretending to see everything twice in order to stay in the hospital. The confusion caused by this "illness" results in chaos in the hospital ward, as everyone wants to assign this symptom to a disease in their areas of specialization. In this way, Heller is commenting on the idea of finding one's own sense of truth or meaning in a situation, which was a popular way of thinking in the 1960s. Just as the doctors in this scene explore many different possibilities of what this illness could be, readers (who actually do get to see everything twice)

are charged with the task of exploring the meaning in the fragmented events that are presented to them.

The labyrinth theme in *Catch-22* is most evident in Heller's use of déjà vu. In his interview with the United States Air Force Academy, Heller discusses the importance of Déjà vu in his novel: "There were several reasons for using déjà vu . . . it is the suggestion that things that are happening have happened before and will happen again, unless somebody—an individual or society—makes some effort to break that chain of events" (Meredith 51). Heller uses a labyrinthine structure to show the idea of recurring events, which will only keep happening unless someone puts a stop to it. This reflects many people's feelings about war, especially in the 1960s when it seemed like the Cold War was everywhere.

The déjà vu in *Catch-22* reflects labyrinth imagery in its repetitive structure and the idea that a labyrinth brings a person back to where he or she began. Chaplain Tappman deals directly with the idea of déjà vu as he searches for meaning in his life throughout the novel. The chaplain struggles with questions of his own faith, and finds that his exploration of truth ultimately brings him back to where he started. In one instance, the chaplain begins to question a feeling of déjà vu in having previously met Yossarian. He feels this experience is either an "insight of divine origin or a hallucination" (Heller 268). He cannot decide whether his "insight" is of great importance or merely a sign that he is losing his mind. This uncertainty fits the labyrinth imagery that Heller uses in order to bring to question the idea of the uncertainty of truth that was present in 1960s America.

Déjà vu also serves as a way for Heller to move his story along and to show that there is significance in many of the scenes that he only dwells on for brief moments. Mellard notes that the use of déjà vu may at first seem pointless, but it actually adds a great deal of insight to the

novel: "déjà vu is actually neither simply repetitive or redundant but is rather complexly

incremental and progressive, for the examples of déjà vu of character, thematic motifs, and

events that Heller offers one move inevitably toward completion and resolution" (111). Although

Heller uses a labyrinthine method of revealing elements of his novel, he does so in a way that

brings a sense of completion. In a way this is fitting with the theme of the labyrinth, since

labyrinths come full circle and end where they begin. Heller similarly presents "snapshots" of

information throughout the novel, in order to bring these situations together in the end so that the

reader may have a better understanding of what he meant in the beginning.

In many instances, labyrinth imagery is found in the miscommunication of some of the

characters. Often the conversations can be compared to the "blind alleys" found in labyrinths,

because neither character speaking knows what point the other is trying to make, and neither

character really cares. Heller discusses the issue of miscommunication among his characters:

> The meaning in the book is that the people of different characters or different
>
> sensibilities do not talk to each other, do not understand each other . . . other parts
>
> of *Catch-22* I wrote consciously and deliberately with what might be called the
>
> perversion of language or the manipulation of language in different ways in which
>
> phrases can be interpreted by people who want to use them in that way.
>
> (Meredith 51)

Heller uses a very postmodern element in creating the opportunity for multiple meanings in his

text. Much like the labyrinth theme, there are multiple "routes" that can be taken in interpreting

Heller's meaning. The miscommunication between his characters represents this freedom of

interpretation that fits the 1960s generation that was reading *Catch-22*.

Miscommunication is an issue during Yossarian's first conversation with the chaplain. There is a great deal of repetition and circularity in their conversation, which does not appear to have any point: "You're a chaplain," he exclaimed ecstatically. "I didn't know you were a chaplain." "Why, yes," the chaplain answered. "Didn't you know I was a chaplain?" "Why, no. I didn't know you were a chaplain" (13). This sort of confusing and pointless conversation occurs often between the characters in the novel. The characters do not seem to pay attention to one another, and their conversations turn out to have no purpose. While the conversations may have no purpose, Heller has a purpose in including them in his novel. The idea of miscommunication strengthens the idea of freedom of interpretation, but it also points out the absurdity that results when people no longer know how to communicate.

Miscommunication (or lack of communication) brings to mind the idea of "blind alleys" in labyrinth imagery. The characters often do not pay attention to what is going on or what someone is telling them, and therefore they go along blindly, often ignoring important events. An example of this is found in the character Aarfy, who is one of the pilots Yossarian must fly with, is oblivious to the urgency of the war around him. When his own plane is in trouble, he casually sits back in his seat and lights a pipe. As Yossarian frantically tries to give him instructions to fly them out of trouble, Aarfy replies with a calm "I can't hear you" (147). Even when Yossarian is wounded and bleeding in the back of the plane, Aarfy cannot understand (or "hear," as is his complaint), what is going on, even though it is happening right in front of him. In this way, Heller seems to suggest that there are people who turn a blind eye because they do not want to deal with what is going on around them.

The labyrinth imagery continues with darker scenes such as the flashbacks to Snowden's death. Like a labyrinth, these scenes are interwoven into the text, as though one has

turned a corner in a maze and runs into something unexpected. These darker moments of *Catch-22* serve to remind the reader of the seriousness of war, and the value of human life that seems to be overlooked by so many of the characters. Mellard notes that "through Snowden, Yossarian comes to an awareness not only of the fact of death but also of the possibility of life" (119). Through the traumatic experience of witnessing his fellow soldier die, Yossarian gains a deep appreciation for life, and resentment towards those who make him risk his own. Heller uses labyrinth imagery as he continually revisits the grim scene of Snowden's death. He infuses his novel with this serious event in order to remind the reader that behind the absurdity and humor there is a serious message to be considered.

Heller's use of dark humor in *Catch-22* underscores the mindset of the generation for whom he was writing, yet his novel continues to be enjoyed by audiences today because of the humorous way that he deals with such a pivotal time in American culture. Heller incorporates the style of 1960s dark humor that was popular among writers of that time, which in itself is an interesting way to learn about that culture. Through his absurdities, gallows humor, and labyrinth imagery, Heller creates a fictional world that illustrates the sentiments of the culture in which he lived, and that would be appreciated for generations to come.

Literature has always been an outlet for social commentary, and the 1960s was certainly a time when authors took advantage of this. The 1960s were a particularly interesting time for literature, as the traditional novel gave way to the "new novel" which ignored traditional literary styles. Heller, among other authors, took advantage of this new form of writing that so perfectly fit the counterculture of the day. By studying the dark humor literature of the 1960s, much can be learned about the current behaviors, values, and concerns of that time. Also, it is helpful to have an understanding of the history of humor in order to see how dark humor works.

Since dark humor was such a popular element of the literature of the 1960s, it is interesting to look at the culture to see how and why this humor was being used. The dark humor literature of the 1960s reveals much about a very interesting time in American social and political history, and was quite distinct from dark humor in different contexts. The distinct qualities of the dark humor of the 1960s (bewilderment and illumination, gallows humor, and labyrinth imagery) are an interesting way to view the mindset of a time of great change and uncertainty; a time that certainly questioned the status quo, and which had a far-reaching influence in history.

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