

The Incompetent Antagonism of Wit: A Study of *Hamlet* and *Catch-22*

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Abstract

Unique among other rhetorical devices, wit can appear complex and banal simultaneously. The clever language can express thought equal to the weight of lengthy discourse in a few words, often with amusing effect. However, despite the complexity of the device, wit only offers a momentary chuckle or clarification of events, easily forgotten in a larger context. This dichotomy of wit operates the plot and theme in many literary texts. Intelligent protagonists employ the device to remedy their problems, believing that the complexity of the response ensures its effectiveness. However, because wit consists of only words, the device falls short of enacting change that action or direct discourse could more appropriately handle. This paper examines the role of wit in *Hamlet* and *Catch-22* to determine how characters rely on wit to affront their problems but succeed only in amplifying them.

Keywords: *Catch-22*, comic, *Hamlet*, humour, narrative, wit

As one of the more slippery words in English, wit can easily coalesce with similar terms such as humour and the comic. Moreover, the word possesses several meanings that have exchanged primary use throughout history. For the noun wit, the *Oxford English Dictionary* offers thirty-four entries, one of which mainly clarifies the word's sense in literature:

That quality of speech or writing consists of the apt association of thought and expression, calculated to surprise and delight by its unexpectedness [...]; later always concerning the utterance of brilliant or sparkling things in an amusing way. (Oxford University Press, n.d., paras. 3-4)

For a more detailed distinction between wit and similar terms, we should look to literary studies, in which language forms a more prominent base for discussion. Drawing on amusing language in several literary texts, especially the famous lines of Shakespeare's recurring character Falstaff, A. Haire Foster argues that wit stands apart as active language from related devices of absurd: "the difference between wit and comic is easy: wit is made, the comic is found. Wit is the arrow, the comic is the target" (1956, p. 3). Falstaff exhibits traits that subscribe to Forster's definitions of all three terms. The character ridicules Bardolph with witty quips for his large nose in *Henry IV Part I* and assumes a passive, comic role to the witty designs of others in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Forster posits in his discussion on the three terms that the comic and humour have no difference in their contemporary meanings. In wit, however, Forster (1956) recognises several unique attributes among the other notions of amusement, offering the active device more prestige: "However, wit is a weapon and a toy; it is a weapon of unlimited range. What is the lowest can assail the highest; despotism can always be tempered with epigrams. It can be an effective weapon against injustice and incompetence in high places" (p. 7).

Forster's perception of wit as a weapon recalls the negative qualities of the device found in other definitions. Here, however, the subversive power of the language appears much more effective, limiting the power of tyrants and rectifying injustices. The celebratory language of the passage demonstrates considerable faith in wit, suggesting that the device can surmount any obstacle. Forster offers an aggrandising description of wit but, more importantly, distinguishes the device's effect from those of the comic and humour.

William Hazlitt similarly perceived wit as a device that projects humour and comedy on objects external to a speaker. Hazlitt, however, maintains that wit does not merely ascribe humour to otherwise unentertaining objects but reveals the hidden absurdity within them: "Humour describes the ludicrous as in itself; wit exposes it by comparing or contrasting it with something else. Humour is, as it were, the growth of nature and accident; wit is the product of art and fancy" (1903, p. 15).

The intellectual quality of wit becomes especially manifest in Hazlitt's description, indicating that the device reveals humour in objects that otherwise may go unnoticed. According to Hazlitt, we may only judge a remark as witty if someone consciously and creatively demonstrates the amusing qualities of an object. A too-obvious fancy belongs under the inferior classification of humorous. Hazlitt's requirement for wit to expose concealed amusement lends significant esteem to the device as an intellectual pursuit.

However, Hazlitt also qualifies his belief in wit's power with an addendum to his definition, noting that the device's effectiveness has a finite range. He claims that although wit has the unusual property of concealed absurdity, the device fails to offer greater insight into matters of

seriousness. Once wit crosses the boundaries of examining frivolity, the language either loses its classification as wit or falls short of unearthing hidden truths. He asserts that wit hovers among the insignificant, a verb choice that suggests indirect and unstable movement, demonstrating the mere playfulness that he perceives in the device. The limitation wit to matters of fancy distinctly contrasts with Forster's faith in the device as an instrument capable of political or social change. In Hazlitt's eyes, only the foolish would apply wit to dire situations that demand more meaningful discourse or action.

In *Literary Wit*, Bruce Michelson (2000) discusses various pieces of scholarship to determine the effect of wit in literature, explicitly inquiring not just into wit but literary wit, which he believes offers greater insight and stronger appeal than its colloquial namesake. He argues that literary wit contributes to the intensity of a literary work despite its apparent frivolity. Michelson's perception of wit as a transcendent force that can find multiple layers of meaning in any context opposes Hazlitt's device restriction. Examining the variety of authors renowned for flippant languages, such as Oscar Wilde and Mark Twain, Michelson argues that the economy and resonance of literary wit, especially in epigram, undermines the value of lengthy discourse, providing claims that are difficult to refute.

In *Wit and its Relation to the Unconscious*, Sigmund Freud (1916) provides an extensive analysis of the social functions of wit and how the device reveals subconscious desires, maintaining that wit allows for the expression of inhibited desires to defy social rules, which in turn results in a pleasurable sensation. If one wishes harm on another, the rules of society forbid the person to act physically on this desire, forcing him to seek a more acceptable means of attack. "Violent hostility, no longer tolerated by law, has been replaced by verbal invectives," says Freud (1916, p. 149). The economic and linguistic qualities of wit establish the immediate accessibility of the device as a means to act against society's rules. Freud argues: "From the beginning, its [wit's] object is to remove inner inhibitions and thereby breaking the social norm still hinder wit, but if one can experience enough pleasure in merely conceiving the language, the potential for more pleasure will surmount the fear of disapprobation, prompting enough courage to speak the words" (1916, p. 164). Once uttered, wit psychologically satisfies the egocentric desire to act against the social norm as much as it is a physical act of defiance.

While Freud's differentiation of wit from humour and comic contributes to our understanding of the concept, his analysis most strikingly presents a less than laudatory portrayal of the device. Unlike Forster or Michelson, who imbue wit with a nearly infinite potential linguistic power, Freud depicts the device as a choice secondary to the action. Wit, according to Freud, serves as compensation for those who cannot speak in genuine discourse or cannot act to correct a problem.

This paper analyses two works of literature that explicitly demonstrate the inability of wit to alleviate dire circumstances: William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*. In these texts, each of the protagonists erroneously believes that wit will improve difficult situations when it exacerbates them. In *Hamlet*, the Wittenberg-educated prince attempts to revenge his father's murder not with sharp metal but with a less effective sharp tongue, not realising that his cleverness will initiate his tragedy. In *Catch-22*, the text that offers the most complex relationship between a character and wit, the protagonist Yossarian draws on the narrator's language in his inefficacious search for asylum from the war. At the same time, the machine of modernity continues its distortion of society. Characters in each of these texts demonstrate a faulty reliance on wit, amplifying the problems that they intend to mitigate.

Hamlet and Revenge in Wit

In a study of wit in literary texts, one would have difficulty consulting Shakespeare, whose plays offer considerable wit in their portrayal of humanity, shaping modes of elevated consciousness in many characters. In *Much Ado About Nothing*, Beatrice and Benedick vilify their past love affair in exchanges of witty insults, ironically revealing their fate as each other's true love. In *Measure for Measure*, Francisca reminds Isabella of her ascetic duties as a nun in witty, circular language, exemplifying Shakespeare's perception of the Catholic clergy's absurdity for participating in inane self-denial. Wit features just as prominently in Shakespeare's tragedies as in his comic plays. The fool in *King Lear* offers humorous commentary on his master's senility with Iago's quips in Othello flavour the villain's diabolical plotting.

Scholars have crafted numerous theories to explain the purpose of witty exchanges and interludes in Shakespeare's dark plays. Some speculate that wit provides temporary relief from the tension of tragedy or that passage of wit grants more credibility to horrific scenes that follow. These theories work if the play breaks away from the main plot to engage in witty discourse but fails to lend a greater understanding of *Hamlet*, in which Shakespeare depends on wit almost constantly to drive the plot and enhance the characters.

The wit in *Hamlet* features so prominently that it contributes to the development of the tragedy. To understand how the device operates in the text, we must consider how the protagonist relates to the oppositional qualities of the language. As a Wittenberg-educated scholar, Hamlet highly regards the ingenuity necessary for wit, either failing to understand the limits of mere language or perceiving more vital forces that prevent him from the real action. The prince first expresses his indignation for his mother's hasty remarriage in only a few lines of hushed wit, feeling obligated to keep the peace, but later tries to avenge his father's death through the unhindered strength of his language. However, Hamlet's method of vengeance succeeds only in altering Claudius into the prince as a possible threat. The witty antagonism with which Hamlet addresses the ills of Denmark's royal family poses several characters against him, initiating his tragedy. The prince only recognises a more appropriate response when he sees the determination with which Fortinbras' army marches to Poland, but when Hamlet assumes a similar resolve, his belated change cannot stop the development of the play's disastrous end.

Thus, we can divide Hamlet's response into three distinct phases: the beginning of the play, when Hamlet uses sparse and quiet wit to criticise the alacrity with which the court discontinued mourning his father; the scenes after Hamlet returns from England, when he abandons wit for a more fitting heroic response. This part of the paper will analyse some of these sections to determine the role of wit in fashioning the tragedy of the melancholic Dane.

Before Hamlet encounters his father's ghost, the prince feels frustrated from his mother's sexual relations with his uncle and the general lack of mourning in Denmark, but remains silent because he feels compelled to maintain order within the family and the Kingdom. "It is not, nor it cannot come to good/ But break my heart, for I must hold my tongue," he says (Shakespeare, 1599/1992, 1.2.158-9). Hamlet's wit, therefore, appears sporadically and then only blunted. Shakespeare introduces Hamlet with a line that characterises his cleverness but qualifies the prince's wit to show his restraint. When Claudius refers to Hamlet in court as "my cousin Hamlet, and my son—" the prince responds "a little more than kin, and less than kind", demonstrating his resentment towards his new family structure (Shakespeare, 1599/1992, 1.2.64-5). Although Hamlet offers his wit as an aside to the audience, attacking Claudius

indirectly, the line predicts that Hamlet will respond with similar wit throughout the play. Hamlet's skill with words becomes more pronounced shortly afterwards when Claudius asks his nephew why the clouds of mourning still hang over him. "Not so, my lord, I am too much in the sun", puns Hamlet (Shakespeare, 1599/1992, 1.2.6-7). Although Hamlet says this line directly to Claudius, he qualifies it with the differential address of "my lord". At this point in the play, Hamlet resents the forgotten memory of his father but restrains his comical inclination to maintain peace in the family.

However, after the ghost informs Hamlet of his uncle's crime, the prince unleashes the full force of his verbal assault. The prince's scholastic background encourages his value of wit, but determining why the prince forsakes enforcing his words with action remains challenging to understand. A variety of theories could explain Hamlet's aversion to bloody vengeance. Stephen Greenblatt (1983) argues that since the ghost represents a craving to alleviate the pain of fellow men in the afterlife, the prince satisfies his duty to Old Hamlet by merely remembering him. In both its speaking scenes, the ghost frequently utters the imperative "remember me", as if its suffering derives not from its horrible death but the fear of being forgotten. While the influence of the ghost seems to fade as the play progresses, just as memories of our departed loved ones fade, Hamlet absorbs the memory of his father into himself. Phrases at the end of the play, such as "I am Dead", liken Hamlet to his spectral father and his final words, "the rest is Silence", suggest the amelioration of pain (Shakespeare, 1599/1992, 5.2.315-340). In the context of the play, the reiterated expression, 'I am dead' has an odd resonance: "these are the most appropriately spoken words by a ghost. It is as if the spirit of Hamlet's father has not disappeared; his son has incorporated it", asserts Greenblatt (1983, p. 229). Hamlet restrains himself from enacting absolute vengeance because neither he nor the ghost indeed demands it. Therefore, in Greenblatt's argument, the prince employs wit to rectify Denmark's problems because he feels no obligation for bloody action.

Hamlet demonstrates his witty assault on Claudius's legitimacy when he speaks to the King after murdering Polonius. In a tangential and convoluted explanation of how a dead king's remains can find their way into a beggar's stomach, Hamlet ridicules Claudius's authority through an implicit comparison between his uncle and the hypothetical King who must serve a vagabond. In addition to using verbal wit to attack Claudius, Hamlet also contrives witty schemes to bring the King to justice. These plans have such prominence in the play yet seemingly have so little justification that T. S. Eliot famously argues that they derive from Shakespeare's failure to establish events that correlate with the general mood (1919/1975, p. 48). Hamlet relies heavily on wit to attack Claudius throughout the play, and actors often interpret dialogue as not inherently witty.

Hamlet also uses nonsensical wit when he speaks with his fellow friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. The prince engages in parleys with them in many passages of the play but extends the acridity of his wit to threaten his schoolmates in the scene following the murder of Polonius:

Hamlet: To be demanded of a sponge, what replication should be made by the son of a king?

Rosencrantz: Take you me for a sponge, my lord.

Hamlet: Ay, Sir, that soaks up the King's countenance, his rewards, his authorities. But such officers for the King best service in the end: he keeps them, like an ape an apple, in the corner of his jaw, first mouth'd, to be last swallowed. When he needs what you have glean'd, it is but squeezing you, and, sponge, you shall be dry again.

Rosencrantz: I understand you not, my lord.

Hamlet: I am glad of it, a knavish speech sleeps in a foolish ear.
 Rosencrantz: My lord, you must tell us where the body is, and go with us to the King.
 Hamlet: The body is with the King, but the King is not with the body. The King is a thing—
 Guildenstern: A thing, my lord?
 Hamlet: Of nothing, brings em to him (Shakespeare, 1599/1992, 4.2.12-29)

Hamlet speaks to his schoolmates in seemingly senseless wit to negate his guilt for killing Polonius and prevent them from knowing his actual plan, but in the end, the prince's wit here provides no more means to vengeance than similar language in other passages.

Hamlet's witty dialogue with male characters has no consistent theme other than intricately convoluted language, but when Hamlet addresses the female agents of Claudius, his wit specifically ridicules their chastity. Disgusted with his mother's betrayal of his father's memory, Hamlet attacks all women for failing to resist sexual impulses. Within the intricacies of his wit, Hamlet makes subtle sexual advances toward his love, Ophelia, just before the play within a play:

Hamlet: Lady, shall I lie in your lap?
 Ophelia: No, my Lord.
 Hamlet: I mean, my head upon your lap?
 Ophelia: Ay, my lord.
 Hamlet: Do you think I mean country matters?
 Ophelia: I think nothing, my lord.
 Hamlet: That's a fair thought to lie between maid's legs.
 Ophelia: What is, my lord?
 Hamlet: Nothing. (Shakespeare, 1599/1992, 3.2.105-14)

Hamlet suggests sexual solicitation, implying that Ophelia would readily accept, punning on the Elizabethan euphemism "nothing" to mean a woman's genitals. However, faithful to her subservient position, Ophelia responds to Hamlet's caustic wit with demure naivete.

Some of the play's most famous witty passages occur in the final act, enhanced by the generally dark atmosphere. For instance, although Hamlet certainly demonstrates his bloody approach to vengeance during his duel with Laertes, the prince teases the attendant Osric with witty banter just before the match:

Osric: I know you are not ignorant—
 Hamlet: I would you did, Sir, yet, in faith, if you did, it would not much approve me. Well, Sir?
 Osric: You are not ignorant of what excellence Laertes is—
 Hamlet: I dare not confess that, lest I should compare with him in excellence, but to know a man well were to know himself.
 Osric: I mean, Sir, for his weapon, but in the imputation laid on him by them, in his meed, he's unfellow'd
 Hamlet: What's his weapon?
 Osric: That's two of his weapons—but well. (Shakespeare, 1599/1992, 5.2.127-37)

Hamlet's twisting of Osric's language, even before the attendant can finish his sentences, recalls the earlier wit that Hamlet has used to baffle his enemies. However, instead of using wit

as an act of hostility, Hamlet employs clever language here in playfulness, merely poking fun at Osric for his admiration of Laertes. Moreover, since Osric comes from a lower station than Hamlet, ridiculing the attendant does not carry the same audacity as deriding the King. Hamlet may mock Osric, but the prince's language does not share the same gravity of wit in earlier scenes.

A similar interlude occurs when Hamlet speaks with the crass and riddling gravedigger. Hamlet takes an inferior stance to another's witty convolution, unlike any other dialogue in the play.

Hamlet: Whose grave's this Sirrah?
 First clown: Mine, Sir [...]
 Hamlet: I think it be thine indeed, for thou liest in't
 First clown: You lie out on't, Sir, and therefore 'tis not yours; for my part, I
 don not lie in't, yet it is mine.
 Hamlet: Thou dost lie in't, to be in't and say it is thine. 'Tis for the dead, not
 for the quick; therefore thou liest.
 First clown: 'Tis a quick lie, Sir, 'twill away again from me to you.
 Hamlet: What man dost thou dig it for?
 First clown: For no man, Sir
 Hamlet: What woman then?
 First clown: For none neither.
 Hamlet: Who is to be buried in't?
 First clown: One that was a woman, Sir, but, rest her soul, she's dead.
 (Shakespeare, 1599/1992, 5.1.110-27)

Although Hamlet tries to assert his dominance by addressing the clown with the derogatory "sirrah" and punning his meaning of "liest", the gravedigger reverses Hamlet's scholastic dominance with facetious responses and a pun on the prince's use of "quick". The mockery of Hamlet's words so infuriates the prince that he abandons his cleverness for a series of basic questions, which the gravedigger subverts into witty answers. The prince later expresses his disgust for the clown's insolence in a witty comment that affirms his cleverness: "The age is grown so pick'd that the toe of the peasant comes so near the heel of the courtier, he galls his kibe" (Shakespeare, 1599/1992, 5.1.130-2). Nevertheless, Hamlet never bests the gravedigger in their witty dialogue. The clown possesses a considerable verbal skill for a character who has no name and speaks almost entirely using state-of-being verbs.

Reconciling the passage with this phase of the play presents several problems. The dialogue occurs in a part of the play primarily devoid of wit, but the passage also has the peculiarity of inverting Hamlet's usual linguistic dominance over other characters. Robert Wilcher argues that the reversal of Hamlet's role confirms that the prince has forsaken his ineffective means of vengeance for a position more appropriate for a hero: "the very mode of duologue reinforces the growing sense of restored order and sanity in the world of Hamlet as the prince drops his aberrant role as a jester and assumes his proper comic and social relationship as straight-man to the familiar rustic clown" (1982, p. 99). Hamlet's frustration with the clown's wit and his assertion of aristocratic authority indicates that the prince realises the inefficacy of mere language, opting for a more practical method of finding justice.

Wilcher, however, also finds evidence in this scene that contradicts the appearance of Hamlet's change. While speaking with Hamlet, the gravedigger discovers Yorick's skull and offers it to the prince, who grieves for the end of the jester's jollity as he looks upon the remains. "Where

be your gibes now, your gambols, your flashes of merriment, that were wont to be set the table on a roar?" asks Hamlet (Shakespeare, 1599/1992, 5.1.176-8). Wilcher interprets this lament as a comic apostrophe to a dead object, proof that Hamlet retains some of his former wittiness and that his complete transformation has yet to occur: "Hamlet's lapses into the fool role [...] reveal that Hamlet has not yet found the complete stability that will only come when he moves from the fool's helpless detachment to the action of the 'sweet prince' and 'soldier' (1982, 100).

Whenever Hamlet assumes a more dynamic posture, the prince changes too late to avoid a disastrous, bloody end. Hamlet's witty schemes and suggestions alert Claudius that the prince could threaten his position, prompting the King to contrive arrangements for his ward's end. Through his antics, Hamlet also leads other characters down paths that threaten his safety. Hamlet drives Ophelia towards insanity and then death, which, with the murder of Polonius, incites Laertes' desire for revenge. Hamlet's inclination for wit prolongs the act of justice and worsens the ills in Denmark to such an extent that only death can provide an absolution.

Only Horatio survives the carnage at the end of the play. Since typically only virtuous characters remain after the purging of sin in a tragedy, Shakespeare suggests that Horatio's method of coping with the ills of Denmark proves more substantial than Hamlet's. Like the prince, Horatio studies at Wittenberg, which has conditioned him with a similarly enhanced faculty for language. Shakespeare introduces Horatio with a witty line, as the author does with Hamlet, when Barnardo presumably responds to strange noise during his watch with the inquiry, "What, is Horatio there?" the student answers facetiously, "A piece of him" (Shakespeare, 1599/1992, 1.1.18-9). If Hamlet's introduction with a witty line predicts his response throughout the rest of the play, then Horatio's initial words should act similarly. However, Horatio demonstrates a response drastically different from the prince's ineffective wit, assuming a more pragmatic reaction to events in the play.

Just as Laertes' demand for immediate, bloody vengeance characterises him as a foil to Hamlet, Horatio similarly enhances the depiction of Hamlet's position through a contrast of behaviour. While Hamlet still laments over his mother's sexuality, Horatio seems aware of greater ills in Denmark, especially in his contemplation during the first scene. "In the gross and scope of mine opinion. / This [appearance of a ghost] bodes some strange eruption to our state," he says (Shakespeare, 1599/1992, 1.1.68-9). When Horatio meets the apparition, he shares Hamlet's suspicion of its true nature but considers it may be the root of Denmark's disturbing atmosphere. "If thou art privy to the country's fate, / which happily foreknowing may avoid, / O speak!" says Horatio (Shakespeare, 1599/1992, 1.1.133-5). The imperative with which he addresses the ghost, and the isolation of the final line demonstrate Horatio's feeling of urgency.

Horatio's more reasonable response also qualifies Hamlet's wit throughout much of the play, emphasising the portrayal of its effectiveness. When Claudius storms out after viewing his act of murder in the play-within-a-play, Hamlet celebrates the craft of his deed with Horatio, who does not share the prince's jubilation:

Hamlet: O good Horatio, I'll take the ghost's word for a thousand pound. Didst perceive?

Horatio: Very well, my lord.

Hamlet: Upon the talk of the pois'ning?

Horatio: I did very well, note him. (Shakespeare, 1599/1992, 3.2, 271-5)

Horatio uses short sentences, repeating the banal phrase “very well” to indicate his understanding and lack of excitement. Horatio has the same capacity for wit as Hamlet but restrains himself when that language provides no benefit. Since Horatio recognises the need for a practical approach to resolving Denmark’s ills, even if he comes from too low a station to enact change, the scholar serves as a model character to contrast with Hamlet, escaping death at the end of the play because through his greater awareness he takes no part in the family quarrel.

Hamlet’s failure to initiate vengeance for his father’s death derives from the value of his language. The prince does not understand that wit consists of mere words and cannot replace the physical act of vengeance. Although Hamlet realises his folly toward the end of the play, his epiphany comes too late to reverse the tragedy in progress. Hamlet’s faith in the exercise of wit instigates his doom.

***Catch-22* and Evasion Through Wit**

Plays offer writers a matchless opportunity to explore the nature of wit because the texts entirely consist of spoken dialogue, encouraging the creation of characters who can drive the plot through words alone. As seen in *Hamlet*, the course of action may not follow what the characters intend with their words, but dramatic movement develops from their verbal interaction.

However, the opportunity for plays to examine the role of wit does not exclude other kinds of texts from investigating the device. Some of the most provocative performances of wit unfold in novels and poetry. Renaissance poets and early novelists crafted works with remarkably clever language that still receive attention from scholars today. However, the wit in these texts differs from similar language in plays because it conforms to the discourse of a single authorial voice. Since most novels and poems feature a central narrator who focuses on work philosophy, the explorative aspects of wit must correlate to his thoughts. This understanding of wit places a significant burden on the speaker to manage the device in conjunction with the text’s characters, plot, and theme. Additionally, the centrality of the speaker imposes a more passive role on the characters, who act as objects for the narrator to comment upon in witty language. This relationship of an active speaker to dependent characters mainly manifests itself in Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22*.

In the novel, Heller demonstrates the distortion of modern society through his depiction of bureaucratic corruption during the Second World War. The Air Corps base on the island of Pianosa serves as the core setting of the novel, through which other failings of society become manifest. Like *Hamlet*, *Catch-22* features wit that displaces action or direct discourse, serving as an ineffectual remedy for the senselessness of the modern world. However, unlike *Hamlet*, in which the protagonist uses his clever language to confront his problems. Heller’s novel depicts a protagonist who relies on the narrator’s wit to ameliorate his circumstances. Wit in this text has a greater distance from the action emphasising its indirect nature. Although Yossarian demonstrates sensitivity to the inhumanity that surrounds him, he avoids danger by hiding in the hospital or the beds of the acquiescent women while the narrator makes his witty assaults. Yossarian, however, cannot find veritable safety from the inane law of *Catch-22* by mere invasion because he acts in the same manner as the nonsense that threatens him. Yossarian’s failure to respond appropriately continues until the speaker adopts a more sombre tone, exposing the truly horrific nature of modernity. Only at this point does Yossarian recognise a proper heroic role and flees to Sweden as a symbolic means to combat the menace

of his world. This section will analyse Yossarian's reliance on the narrator's wit and the consequent realisation of its uselessness that prompts more fitting desertion.

To understand Yossarian's reluctance to stand against his society, we must first recognise the narrator's use of wit to assault the insane system. The clever language of the narrator provides the only resistance to the logic of *Catch-22* for more than half of the novel. We function primarily to describe the senselessness the Americans are fighting in the Second World War. One early sentence particularly illustrates the narrator's disdain: "All over the world, boys on every side of the bomb line were laying down their lives for what they had been told was their country, and no one seemed to mind, least of all the boys who were laying down their young lives" (Heller, 1961/1995, p.19). The awkward circularity of starting and ending with the same notion of dying soldiers reflects the absurdity of the sacrifice. The narrator emphasises the loss through his reminder of the soldier's youth, referring to them as "boys" and using a superfluous adjective in "young lives". The passive construction of "had been told" suggests that the cultural morality of this sacrifice comes from nowhere and serves an unknown purpose. Although the language in this sentence hints at the morbid aspects of war, its witty construction approaches the horror playfully, using irony to devalue patriotism indirectly.

The narrator attacks not only the insanity of war but also almost every other twisted aspect of modernity, such as religion, McCarthyism and medicine. The description of Major Major's father derides the glowing dependency of agriculture on the government by inverting clichés that traditionally describe the hard work of farmers:

The more alfalfa he did not grow, the more money the government gave him, and he spent every penny he didn't earn on new land to increase the amount of alfalfa he did not produce. Major major's father worked without rest at not growing alfalfa. On winter evenings, he would remain indoors and did not mend his harness, and he sprang out of bed at the crack of noon every day to make sure that the chores would not be done. (Heller, 1961/1995, 104)

The simple, paratactic sentences impart an ironic wholesomeness to the character's torpidity. While most of the verbs for which Major Major's father is the subject have a negative before them, the narrator describes the reward from the government with a positive verb, emphasising the injustice of the system. Moreover, the twisting of common phrases of praise for agricultural workers recalls the ideal of difficult labour from which Major Major's father abstains, augmenting the denigrating depiction of his character.

A passage of similar wit also censures the overwhelming pervasiveness of Milo Minderbinder's capitalism. As in the previous section, the narrator's portrayal of Milo inverts traditional aphorisms of heroism to ridicule the character's marketing savvy:

He had flown fearlessly into danger and criticism by selling petroleum and ball bearings to Germany at reasonable prices to make a good profit and help maintain a balance of power between the contending forces. His nerve under fire was graceful and infinite. With a devotion to the purpose above and beyond the call of duty, he had raised the food price in his mess halls so high that all officers and enlisted men had to turn over all their pay to him to eat. (Heller, 1961/1995, 456–7)

To illustrate modernity's erroneous praise for Milo's tyrannical capitalism, the narrator refers to selling at "good prices" to make a "good profit", using the double meaning of the word

“good” to indicate both a large amount and a noble pursuit. So many phrases are connected in single sentences that they almost run on incoherently, reflecting Milo’s marketing skills’ overwhelming and unstoppable power. The narrator criticises Major Major’s father and Milo in these passages, but, as in his description of war, the witty playfulness never goes beyond whimsicality to illustrate the detriment of the characters to society.

Although the narrator relies heavily on wit, he also frequently resorts to other devices of the absurd in his satire. If, as Forster and Hazlitt indicate in their definitions, wit reveals hidden deficiencies while humour shows blatant absurdity, the narrator resorts to a combination of wit and humour in his assault. The unpretentious style of the narrator’s wit veers toward humour regardless of comparison. Two passages that ridicule Colonel Cathcart for manipulating the war to advance through the ranks illustrate the speaker’s different levels of amusing language. The first comes from the narrator’s direct description of Cathcart, while the second is taken from a dialogue in which the Chaplain and colonel discuss the establishment of prayer meetings before missions:

He [Cathcart] was someone in the know who was always striving pathetically to find out what was going on. He was 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, 1961/1995, 233-4)

The Chaplain felt his face flush. “I’m sorry, Sir. I just assumed you would want the enlisted men to present since they would be going along on the same mission.”

“Well, I do not. They have got a God and a chaplain of their own, have not they?” (asked Cathcart).

“No, sir.”

“What are you talking about? You mean they pray to the same God we do?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And He listens?”

“I think so, sir.”

“Well, I’ll be damned.” Remarked the colonel, and he snorted to himself in quizzical amusement. (Heller, 1961/1995, 240-1)

In the first passage, the narrator projects absurdity on Cathcart through the intricate manipulation of language. The contradictions of being both perceptive and oblivious and authoritarian and obsequious situate him between two opposite poles of idiocy, illustrating the personal tension of Cathcart and enhancing the denigrating depiction of his character. The narrator loads his description of the first characteristics with adjectives, making the later contradictions more unexpected. The second passage, in contrast, demonstrates the colonel’s absurdity without much effort from the narrator, who merely recounts the dialogue. However, the humorous depiction of Cathcart’s naivete illustrates as much ineptitude as the more skilful language. Wit and humour equally demonstrate the foolishness of the colonel. Despite the more active approach of wit, however, the depiction of Cathcart’s absurdity does not deter him from his pursuit of power that endangers the lives of his subordinates.

Wit pervades *Catch-22* to such an extent that it resonates in the novel’s structure. The narrator leaps from one episode to another without considering continuity or chronology. The most important action has already occurred when the novel begins with Yossarian in the hospital. Arranging each chronologically, the narration even defies conventions of cause and effect

(Merill 1986, p.140). For example, the narrator indicates that Snowden is still alive during the mission to Bologna, yet Yossarian exhibits paranoia in this scene, characteristic of his behaviour after Snowden's death. Even the chapter titles that supposedly indicate a discussion focus often fail to identify the subject matter. The irregular structure resembles the unusual language played in wit and serves the same function.

Despite the complexity and amusement of the narrator's wit, the language can only comment on the dysfunction of modernity, failing to initiate any change. The beginning of the novel symbolically captures the ineffectiveness of wit within the text:

It was love at first sight.

The first time Yossarian saw the Chaplain, he fell madly in love with him.

Yossarian was in the hospital with a pain in his liver that fell just short of jaundice. (Heller, 1961/1995, 7)

The initial lines contain a fragment of quizzical wit, playing on the cliché of falling in love at first sight. Yet without explaining this introduction, the narrator digresses to the main story, withholding the reason behind Yossarian's adoration for several pages. This beginning foreshadows the futility of wit in the rest of the novel. Wit yields to the substance of narration, providing amusing observations that prove as senseless as the system that the device assaults. Because the narrator can only demonstrate the errors of the modern world without correcting them, a character within the text must act against the system to effect change. However, Heller assigns the duty of combating the law of *Catch-22* to a protagonist whose interest in self-preservation leads him to evade the problems through immature actions. More than any other character in the novel, Yossarian recognises the dangers of his society. "They're trying to kill me", Yossarian confides to Clevinger, who only rebukes his friend's paranoia (20). However, the errant captain only responds to the threat in short-term and ineffective means of avoiding his missions. In a futile effort to cancel the mission to Bologna, Yossarian moves the bomb line on the intelligence tent map and arranges for Corporal Snark to pour laundry soap into the squadron's dinner (Heller, 1961/1995, 149 and 155). Yossarian's ability to fake a liver ailment and see everything twice allows him to escape to the hospital frequently. The errant captain also often finds solace in the arms of sensuous women, particularly those of the coy Luciana or the voluptuous Nurse Duckett. Yossarian sleeps with a squat maid in Snowden's bed (Heller, 1961/1995, 203). Although Snowden is still alive simultaneously, the act disregards the young gunner's horrific death, which the reader has already been informed of. Yossarian's evasion of his duties as a protagonist is unfortunate because the reader looks to him to ameliorate the injustices of their shared society. However, because the surrounding wit identifying more serious problems lends its whimsicality to Yossarian's evasiveness, the protagonist's actions seem less significant in comparison, allowing the reader to empathise with him.

Arguably, Yossarian is aware of the narrator's wit and feels that he only needs to protect himself until the device conquers the system. Claiming that a character knows about the fictional constructs of his world certainly presents problems, but the complacency with which Yossarian avoids his enemies suggests that he recognises an alternative force acting for him. Yossarian demonstrates his satisfaction in evasiveness by delighting in Milo's cuisine: "None of the officers in the squadron had ever eaten so well as they regularly ate in Milo's mess hall, and Yossarian wondered awhile if it wasn't perhaps all worth it. However, he burped and remembered that they were trying to kill him, and he sprinted wildly out of the mess hall" (Heller, 1961/1995, 25). Although Yossarian's indifference to the war is brief, his comfort indicates his lack of exertion to rectify his problems. Perhaps reminiscent of the flak that

surrounds him during his missions, a burp reminds Yossarian that his chief concern is survival. Throughout the more significant part of the novel, Yossarian generally perceives no problem in his evasiveness but senses a deficiency in his actions on rare occasions. This awareness becomes most apparent after Yossarian destroys the communication system in his plane to avoid flying to Bologna.

Yossarian only adopts a similar attitude when he can no longer rely on the narrator's wit to attack his enemies. Toward the end of the novel, the narrator removes the wit from his observations, forcing Yossarian to assume a more proper heroic role. The narrator, however, does not entirely remove this wit at a single point in the novel but intermittently abstains from wit until the device vanishes from the text. The Chaplain's realisation of Nately's death exemplifies the exchange between wit and more direct discourse.

The narrator's abstinence from wit pervades most prominently in the delineation of Yossarian's wanderings through the streets of Rome. Heller aptly names the chapter of this description "The Eternal City", recalling the city's importance in fashioning Western civilisation to enhance the disdain for its modern decrepitude. As in the depiction of the Chaplain's grief for Nately, the simplicity of the sentences emphasises the passage's directness and marks a distinct departure from the earlier wit.

Merrill argues that the erratic and repetitive structure of *Catch-22* contributes to the need for Yossarian's desertion. While the novel's scenes initially seem amusing, they become more genuinely horrific as the narrator refrains from illustrating their absurdity. He argues, "this is why one of the funniest novels is finally not very funny, for Heller arrests the reader's laughter and exposes the complacent beliefs he has shared with Yossarian" (Heller, 1961/1995, 150). In this sense, the narrator's initial wit provides an ineffectual placebo for the protagonist and the reader. Yossarian carries us along with his earlier beliefs, first allowing us to accept his evasiveness. However, we also make a reversal similar to Yossarian's when he realises true heroism at the novel's end.

In *Catch-22*, Yossarian depends on the narrator's wit to attack his enemies, evading his duties as a protagonist with actions as equally asinine as the society he lives in. However, the narrator's wit can only comment upon the errors of modernity, failing to provide any means to alleviate them. Yossarian must recognise a proper heroic action to deliver a meaningful assault. When the narrator finally changes his tone, Yossarian realises the horrific aspects of his world, encouraging him to take appropriate action against it. Deserting Sweden, Yossarian takes a symbolic stance that undermines the senselessness of modernity.

Conclusion

Despite its ability to reveal absurdity, wit fails to rectify any of the problems in each of the texts that we have examined. Hamlet's witty parleys against his enemies only alert Claudius to the prince as a potential threat, initiating the protagonist's tragedy. For Yossarian, wit takes the front against the insanity of the modern world while the errant captain evades his responsibilities in the beds of hospitals and sensuous women. In these two cases, the indirectness and banality of wit prevent the device from enacting positive change, proving more integral to the mode of language than the amusement and complexity that lend it such attractiveness.

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