

**Trauma and Literature**  
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**Lecture – 29**  
**Heller’s Catch– 22 – Part 2**

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CHAPTER 1 - THE TEXAN

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 being jaundice. The doctors were puzzled by the fact that it wasn't quite jaundice. If it became jaundice they could treat it. If it didn't become jaundice and went away they could discharge him. But this just being short of jaundice all the time confused them.

Each morning they came around, three brisk and serious men with efficient mouths and inefficient eyes, accompanied by brisk and serious Nurse Duckett, one of the ward nurses who didn't like Yossarian. They read the chart at the foot of the bed and asked impatiently about the pain. They seemed irritated when he told them it was exactly the same.

'Still no movement?' the full colonel demanded.

The doctors exchanged a look when he shook his head.

'Give him another pill.'

Nurse Duckett made a note to give Yossarian another pill, and the four of them moved along to the next bed. None of the nurses liked Yossarian. Actually, the pain in

This is an NPTEL course entitled “Trauma and Literature” on Joseph Heller's novel “Catch-22”. We have already had an introductory session on this novel in terms of locating it in trauma studies and we looked at and we sort of discussed the uniqueness of this novel in terms of what it offers as I work in fiction, in terms of understanding the very human engagement that war trauma.

We talked about the funniness of the novel, the comicality in the novel, the very dark comic quality in the novel which is a tragic comic in quality and how it is a novel which keeps producing paradoxes in a way it represents the suffering, traumatized soldier. It is a novel about PTSD, post-traumatic stress disorder.

There is a very strong presence of war trauma throughout the novel, but unlike “Mrs. Dalloway” and this is where it can be read as very interesting counterpoint to Woolf’s novel. Unlike “Mrs. Dalloway”, Joseph Heller the writer what he does in this novel, it produce the cognitive flatness which almost becomes comic in quality. And what that does it produces the

quality of absurdity in the novel and that absurdity it connects the human subjective realm with the macropolitical realm.

It is to know what it does in terms of the bigger theme, the overarching theme is it makes up the entire event of the war, the ontology of the war; they experience the war as an experience in absurdity. The very first chapter of Joseph Heller's novel "Catch-22"; which is titled "The Texan".

We get introduced to the protagonists of the novel Yossarian and we will see how he embodies the tragic comic, almost carnivalesque quality and we did talk about carnivalesque in the previous session. The carnivalesque quality which is used to represent which is otherwise very dark traumatized situation of horror which is the Second World War, which forms the setting the political, cultural setting, the social setting in this novel.

But as I mentioned, it takes a very different perspective on trauma and it offers the idea of trauma as a farce, rather the farcical quality of trauma, something which is not even tragic anymore and that itself becomes quite tragic. That is not tragic anymore. There is exhaustion of tragedy and exhaustion of sorrow and it is just a production of comicality which is very dark in quality.

That being the narrative method, that being the fictional method, that being the stylistic method, this is chapter 1 of Joseph Heller's novel "Catch-22". The very first line, it was love at first sight. This is the last thing one expects from a war novel, from a novel written about the brutalities of war, from the horrors of the war, one do not expect love at first sight in the very opening sentence.

It was love at first sight. The first time Yossarian saw the chaplain he fell madly in love with him. We get introduced the protagonist of a novel Yossarian and we have an unnamed character that chaplain someone who will be described later. We are told that Yossarian fell madly in love with him. There is a very interesting sense of what kind of love this is.

It is not known whether it is a brotherly love, a love of a comrade in a war or say something else to it, or there is a homoerotic strain to it. But that is the opening line. It was love at first sight. The first time Yossarian saw the chaplain he fell madly in love with him. Yossarian was in a hospital with a pain in his liver that fell just short of being jaundice. The doctors were puzzled by the fact that it was not quite jaundice.

If it became jaundice, they could treat it. If it did not become jaundice and went away they could discharge him. But this just being short of jaundice all the time confused them. It is to see how the comicality is creeping in and it is very funny. But then the funniness of the comicality is produced from medical situation and therein lies the dark comic quality in the novel.

There is a person over here with a certain medical condition but people cannot quite diagnose or put a finger on what exactly is that condition. It is not jaundice, but at the same time it is also not no jaundice. The doctors are not sure if he actually has jaundice. If that was the case, they could treat them and equally they are not sure that he does not have jaundice. Otherwise, they could have just discharged him.

This suspension of being between jaundiced and non-jaundiced is what characterizes Yossarian. As students of literature, students of fiction, we need to pay attention to the coded quality in this comicality over here in a sense that this is a character from the very outset. The character has ambivalence embedded in a very comical way; the character has paradox embedded in him.

It becomes part of the characterization as it well that he can have jaundice, maybe he does not or he does, the doctors do not quite know what he is, how he is or what condition he embodies. He is someone who seems to be suspended in a limbo state between being sick and being fit, that suspension, that liminality, that ambivalence is very much there and that is sort of highlighted at the very outset over here.

If it became jaundice, they could treat it. If he did not become jaundice and went away they could discharge him. But this just being short of jaundice all the time confuses them. "Each

morning they came around, three brisk and serious men with efficient mouths and inefficient eyes, accompanied by brisk and serious Nurse Duckett, one of the ward nurses who did not like Yossarian.”

We have again this combination of opposites, this juxtaposition of opposites. We have brisk and serious men with efficient mouths but inefficient eyes and that sort of tells us something about the culture where the medical culture, the diagnostic culture, these are people who maybe speak a lot, talk a lot, run it a lot, but they are not very efficient in terms of looking.

The mouths are efficient, so they quite loquacious, they are quite talkative. But when it comes to diagnosing the real condition, they cannot have it, therein lies the symbolism of inefficient eyes. The inefficient eyes and they are accompanied by a nurse who is also brisk and serious. The repetition of brisk and serious is interesting because what that seems to suggest is that there is probably some kind of satirical quality to it, some kind of ironical quality to it.

An irony and satire the use is very effective instruments of representation throughout this novel. It is nurse Duckett who does not quite seem to like Yossarian. She accompanies the doctors every morning to sort of check on him. They read the chart at the foot of the bed and asked impatiently about the pain. They seemed irritated when he told them it was exactly the same.

There seems to be some kind of an irritation because cannot quite diagnose him what is the problem that ails and they do not quite know what that is. “Every morning they ask the same sort of questions and that begins to irritate them that there is no movement, there is no improvement; there is no mobility of Yossarian. He just seems to be suspended in that bed forever in an endless state of being. Still no movement? , the full colonel demanded.”

The doctors exchanged a look when he shook his head. Give him another pill. There is also something of a satire on the military medical culture over here and which is seems to be very heavy handed and empirical. There is no engagement with the emotion of the subject, it is just an empirical test and the subject is asked if he is feeling well and or better and depending on the answer just give him another pill.

There seems to be a robotic way, a monotonous, a machinic way of treating patients which is being satirized over here comic effect. This is why I mentioned that this is a very interesting novel to be read as a counterpoint to “Mrs. Dalloway” because in “Mrs. Dalloway” we have a very similar setting and a very similar situation, it is another word while the first one and we have a PTSD veteran, someone who comes back from the war and the entire novel is about the gloom of misunderstanding.

No one seems to understand him. But there is some misunderstanding here, which is produced with comic effect. It becomes interesting, interestingly dialogic with “Mrs. Dalloway”. It could be one of the things that one can think about in terms of an assignment or even a paper and looking at these novels as a counterpoint to each other. Similar settings, similar situations, but men are very different forms of representation okay. “Give him another pill that is all they can say”.

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*'Still no movement?' the full colonel demanded.*

*The doctors exchanged a look when he shook his head.*

*'Give him another pill.'*

*Nurse Duckett made a note to give Yossarian another pill, and the four of them moved along to the next bed. None of the nurses liked Yossarian. Actually, the pain in his liver had gone away, but Yossarian didn't say anything and the doctors never suspected. They just suspected that he had been moving his bowels and not telling anyone.*

*Yossarian had everything he wanted in the hospital. The food wasn't too bad, and his meals were brought to him in bed. There were extra rations of fresh meat, and during the hot part of the afternoon he and the others were served chilled fruit juice or chilled chocolate milk. Apart from the doctors and the nurses, no one ever disturbed him. For a little while in the morning he had to censor letters, but he was free after that to spend the rest of each day lying around idly with a clear conscience. He was comfortable in the hospital, and it was easy to stay on because he always ran a temperature of 101. He was even more comfortable than Dunbar, who had to keep falling down on his face in order to get his meals brought to him in bed. ☺*

*After he had made up his mind to spend the rest of the war in the hospital, Yossarian wrote letters to everyone he knew saying that he was in the hospital but never mentioning why. One day he had a better idea. To everyone he knew he wrote that he was going on a very dangerous mission. 'They asked for volunteers. It's very dangerous, but someone has to do it.'*

Nurse Duckett made a note to give Yossarian another pill and the four of them moved along to the next bed. None of the nurses liked Yossarian. The pain in his liver had gone away, but Yossarian did not say anything and the doctors never suspected. They just suspected that he had been moving his bowels and not telling anyone. We have here is an example of malingering.

Malingering was very important theme, a very important issue around the First World War. An issue was the people who seemed to pretend they had sickness, whereas they did not have anything. This pretention is feigning of sickness, something which was classified as malingering. They talked about malingerers. For example, the First World War the people had shell shock, were gone malingerers and shivers.

They shiver like children, they shiver like little boys, not big men, and they also malingering in a sense that pretends to be safe, but they are not safe. This novel has a very clear case of deliberate malingering, someone who pretends, to be say just to get away from the violence and the sufferings and the dangers of war, the precarity of war. We are told very soon that this is an ideal setting to get free food, he is waited upon.

He does not want to leave because this is a good place to be during the war, a safe place to be, a comfortable place to be during the war. We look at how the notional spaces which are associated with disability, illness, despair, sadness, melancholia, these are turn on the head and so we have commonality over here, funny carnivalesque setting.

The entire medical space over here becomes carnivalesque kind of space, performative space also because we have someone who was pretending to be sick, whereas he is not. This is performance of quality about sickness is something which we need to take into account. He just pretended to be sick, but then his liver pain had gone.

Yossarian was pretending to be sick because he had everything he wanted in the hospital. The food was not too bad and his meals were brought to him in bed. There were extra rations of fresh meat and during the hot part of the afternoon he and others were served chilled fruit juice or chilled chocolate milk. It is quite an indulgence by the world standards. He had free food. The meals were good. The extra rations of fresh meat.

Then he also had in odd afternoons they were served chilled fruit juice or chilled chocolate milk and who would leave a place like this. We can see how the notional associations with the hospital about being a medical space, about being space of surveillance and despair and

loss that has turned on his head. We have the hospital as an emancipatory space, as a liberating space.

A space which liberates the person and makes the person more comfortable. It just becomes the most comfortable setting to be in during the war. Apart from the doctors and nurses, no one ever disturbed him. For a little while in the morning, he had to censor letters, but he was free after that to spend the rest of the day lying around idly with a clear conscience. This is the other important and funny bit which will come up shortly.

His responsibility to censor letters. The letters which are sent by the soldiers to the families, his job was to censor those letters, look for anything problematic and scratch those off and delete those things, so just nothing classified or nothing negative was communicated to the family. Censoring letters was the only job he had to do. Apart from that, he was just free to do whatever he wanted.

We are looking at a very textual activity, a performative activity of sickness, sickness, as a performance over here, and also the textuality of editing letters, censoring letters. Textuality and performativity become very prominent categories of characterization in this novel. We talked about how this is a very postmodern novel.

It has very strong postmodernist strategies of representation which are quite clearly done. He just censors the letters, but apart from that he was free. He was comfortable in the hospital and it was easy to stay on because they always ran a temperature of 101. It was a constant, he always ran his temperature almost is indicated, this seems to be the suggestion that he had the ability to have 101 as temperature.

He would have to stay because it is beyond the limits, it is more than what he is supposed to have. It just becomes a ticket to stay there or ticket to be situated in the hospital, a temperature of 101. He was even more comfortable than Dunbar, who had to keep falling down on his face in order to get his meals brought to him in bed. We are taking a look at a very comical mode of representation.

Someone called Dunbar is there, presumably another soldier who was situated in this hospital and he like Yossarian he also wants to stay here forever. But then he does not have the ticket of temperature to be here. He cannot run a temperature, does not have that ability so to speak. He does something more grotesque, and grotesque is something which is one of the characteristics where it keeps coming up like carnivalesque.

There is a very interesting equation with the carnivalesque and the grotesque and something which will pay attention to. Dunbar does a grotesque act. He just keeps falling on his face from his bed in order to have an injury, just so he has to stay in the hospital because he has injured himself. He does it to get his food delivered to him on the bed.

We can see how human suffering is made sort of a comedy over here, a human suffering is turned into a tragic comic situation with this carnivalesque which is wild, excessive. In the end, it just comes together as a satire, as a strong satire against the absurdity of the war because if these act, these micro acts of human negotiation and human engagement in hospital are absurd inequality.

What these also point to is all come together and become a massive pointer to the grand spectacle of absurdity which is the one in the first place. These micro acts of absurdity they become pointers to the big macro grand after the war, which is the biggest absurd spectacle around the time. Yossarian seems to be better off because he has the ability so to speak to run a temperature 101 constantly.

It is always better than Dunbar, who had to fall on his face in order to get injured in order to get his meals brought to him in bed. After he had made up his mind to spend the rest of the while in the hospital, Yossarian wrote letters to everyone he knew saying that he was in a hospital but never mentioning why. He has made up his mind to spend the rest of the war in a hospital.

We are looking at an interesting enactment of agency, the only agency has a way is to feign sickness and that would enable him to stay in the hospital for the rest of the war through the war unaffected, undisturbed, without danger. He has made up his mind to stay, to see through



the war from the hospital setting. He sends letters to his friends and family mentioning that he is in a hospital but never quite spelling out why.

It becomes ambivalent and gray and people do not quite know why he is there. One day he had a better idea. To everyone he knew he wrote that he was going on a very dangerous mission. They asked for volunteers. It is very dangerous, but someone has to do it. Lying and fabricating and fabulation become very important and very recursive qualities of this character along with feigning and malingering and the rest of it.

But what we can see immediately from the very first page and that is why we are paying some attention to the opening of the novel because that is what carries the sentiment of absurdity, the sentiment of satire that runs throughout the novel. But what we see over here is again the production of paradoxes. He has a liver situation, something to do with jaundice, but it is not quite jaundice.

He cannot be treated because there is no real jaundice, but he cannot be let go because doctors are not sure that he does not have jaundice either. The suspension that ambivalence which is comical in quality, but it is not comic because we are talking about a medical situation over here. That begins now and then we have his identity as a performance.

The sick soldier becomes the performative comical quality over here. That is a very strong counterpoint to the "Mrs. Dalloway" situation where a sick soldier as a tragic hero, someone is getting hollowed out and there is a lot of tragedy over here. In a way Yossarian can be seen as some kind of extension, a comical extension, and a comical sequel to Septimus Smith. Septimus Smith is tragedy and was rated as farce.

Repetition of tragedy until dwindles into something farcical and that dwindling of the tragic hero into this farcical anti-hero is something which we see to the embodiment of Yossarian and total entire novel "Catch-22" which is a tragic comic novel about the sufferings of war. Farce becomes very important instrument, a very important experience, and a very important modality of representation in this novel.

The tragic has dwindled into farce. Septimus Smith the tragic hero has dwindled into sequel over here which is Yossarian the comic anti-hero does no tragedy over here because he is too tired to be tragic in a certain sense and that itself makes it tragic because the grandeur of tragedy, the poetry of tragedy is unavailable anymore.

It is not available anymore because that sort of exhausted run of course so to speak and now all we can do is be farcical and be performative. That is why, the opening is important because it sets the tone for what is to follow in this novel.