

**Trauma and Literature**  
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**Lecture – 35**  
**Heller’s Catch–22 – Part 8**

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Rome was in ruins, he saw, when the plane was down. The airdrome had been bombed eight months before, and knobby slabs of white stone rubble had been bulldozed into flat-topped heaps on both sides of the entrance through the wire fence surrounding the field. The Colosseum was a dilapidated shell, and the Arch of Constantine had fallen. Nately's whore's apartment was a shambles. The girls were gone, and the only one there was the old woman. The windows in the apartment had been smashed. She was bundled up in sweaters and skirts and wore a dark shawl about her head. She sat on a wooden chair near an electric hot plate, her arms folded, boiling water in a battered aluminum pot. She was talking aloud to herself when Yossarian entered and began moaning as soon as she saw him.

'Gone,' she moaned before he could even inquire.

Holding her elbows, she rocked back and forth mournfully on her creaking chair.

'Gone.'

'Who?'

'All. All the poor young girls.'

'Where?'

'Away. Chased away into the street. All of them gone. All the poor young girls.'

'Chased away by who? Who did it?'

'The mean tall soldiers with the hard white hats and clubs. And by our \*carabinieri\*.'

This is an NPTEL course entitled “Trauma and Literature” on Joseph Heller's novel “Catch-22”. The novel in terms of looking at how or examining how this could be located as a very important text in the study of “Trauma and Literature”.

The way in which trauma is represented in a pseudo-comic way, in a tragic comic, pseudo-comic, dark comic way where the notion about human loss and suffering is often quite cynical. The cynicism which emerges in the novel is often a cynicism which emerges out of exhaustion, the exhaustion of tragedy or the possibilities of tragedy.

It has a very postmodernist way of representing space and time. It is also the way in which we are studying the text in terms of looking at certain selective passages, which are not necessarily chronological in order. This is Chapter 39, called “the Eternal City”. This is where we come across a combined the phrase “Catch-22”.

We get a sense of what it really is, what really is not under the very interesting ontological play between presence and absence, which we will see as captured by the

phrase “Catch-22” which is also the title of the novel. The reason why it is called Eternal city of Rome, the setting is Rome over here, as we get to see the extent of destruction, the extended tragedy, the extent of suffering that humans have endured subjected to during the war.

We just look at the certain selected section from chapter-39, which is “Eternal City” and this is what we are examining in some details, the description of Rome, the very graphic visual description of Rome as a heavily bombed city, as a heavily destroyed city. Almost everything that has been created or constructed by humankind have been subjected to destruction or are vulnerable to destruction.

It involves loss of lives as well as loss of materials and loss of signifiers of meaning. For instance, if a monument is destroyed or broken down, what disappears it is not just the materiality of the monument, but also the cultural significance which the monument had consolidated for a period of time and it is also a loss in time and off time, not just loss of space and that is something which we get to see.

In the other sections of the novel, we see a very cynical perspective, a very hollowed out perspective on tragedy, and the hollowness or the cynicism emerges out from a sense of exhaustion, is completely exhausted of all the possibilities of tragedy or in the possibilities of redemption. This because tragedy contains within at sometimes a note of redemption.

The tragic hero can redeem themselves, maybe through poetry, maybe through an activity, maybe through a final act of bravery or heroism of whatever the case may be, but there is an element of redemption or redemptive potential in tragedy which may or may not be fulfilled. But this particular novel is actually quite farcical in quality but the very famous saying or quotation by Karl Marx is first as strategy, then as farce.

The repetition of tragedy reduces tragedy into a farce, into a farcical category, which is denied of any hope, any density, any tragic density or any poetic density or any sense of splendor as such and that farcical hollowed out shallow quality, the superficial quality of human suffering is something which we see over here, which ironically and perhaps

paradoxically makes it more tragic that they are not even have the luxury to experience tragedy anymore because it is such a daily routine out of sort of no matter of level.

This is the scene that we studying today and this is the very graphic description of a very heavily bombed Rome. “Rome was in ruins, he saw when the plane was down. The airdrome had been bombed eight months before and knobby slabs of white stone rubble had been bulldozed into flat topped heaps on both sides of the entrance through the wire fence surrounding the field.

The Colosseum was a dilapidated shell, and the Arch of Constantine had fallen. Nately’s whores’ apartment was a shambles. The girls were gone and only one there was an old woman. The windows in the apartment had been smashed. She was bundled up in sweaters and skirts, and wore a dark shawl about her head. She sat on a wooden chair near an electric hot plate, her arms folded, and boiling water in a battered aluminium pot. She was talking aloud to herself when Yossarian entered and began moaning as soon as she saw him.”

The setting over here is a brothel where Yossarian had presumably gone for sexual favors. But then, everyone is just gone, everyone has disappeared, everything is broken in shambles. There is this old woman who was just moaning to herself, moaning the loss of people presumably.

She was boiling water on an electric hot plate, and that even the aluminium pot in which the water has been boiled is a battered aluminium pot. It almost has a very cinematic, filmic quality. We have this visual image about heavily bombed and dropped city. In the middle of a heap of rubbish, in the middle of a heap of broken materials we see an old woman talking to herself, perhaps moaning the loss of people.

Also perhaps becoming irrational and deranged; and boiling water in an aluminium pot. The whole thing takes a very visually cinematic quality. Gone, she mentioned or she moaned even before he could inquire. She gave response to even before he could ask where the people are.

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the field. The Colosseum was a dilapidated shell, and the Arch of Constantine had fallen. Nately's whore's apartment was a shambles. The girls were gone, and the only one there was the old woman. The windows in the apartment had been smashed. She was bundled up in sweaters and skirts and wore a dark shawl about her head. She sat on a wooden chair near an electric hot plate, her arms folded, boiling water in a battered aluminum pot. She was talking aloud to herself when Yossarian entered and began moaning as soon as she saw him.

'Gone,' she moaned before he could even inquire.  
Holding her elbows, she rocked back and forth mournfully on her creaking chair.

'Gone.'

'Who?'

'All. All the poor young girls.'

'Where?'

'Away. Chased away into the street. All of them gone. All the poor young girls.'

'Chased away by who? Who did it?'

'The mean tall soldiers with the hard white hats and clubs. And by our \*carabinieri\*.  
They came with their clubs and chased them away. They would not even let them take their coats. The poor things. They just chased them away into the cold.'

“Holding her elbows, she rocked back and forth mournfully on her creaking chair. Gone. Who? All the poor young girls. Where? Away. Chased away into the street. All of them gone. All the poor young girls. Chased away by who? Who did it? The mean tall soldiers with the hard white hats and clubs. And by our carabinieri. They came with their clubs and chased them away.”

The carabinieri is the Italian word for police and military personnel, who had I mean this is a colloquial way in which it has been used over here. They would not even let them take their coats. The poor things. They just chased them away into the cold.

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'Did they arrest them?'

'They chased them away. They just chased them away.'

'Then why did they do it if they didn't arrest them?'

'I don't know,' sobbed the old woman. 'I don't know. Who will take care of me? Who will take care of me now that all the poor young girls are gone?  
Who will take care of me?'

'There must have been a reason,' Yossarian persisted, pounding his fist into his hand.  
'They couldn't just barge in here and chase everyone out.'

'No reason,' wailed the old woman. 'No reason.'

'What right did they have?'

'Catch-22.'

'\*What?\*' Yossarian froze in his tracks with fear and alarm and felt his whole body begin to tingle. '\*What\* did you say?'

'Catch-22' the old woman repeated, rocking her head up and down. 'Catch-22.  
Catch-22 says they have a right to do anything we can't stop them from doing.'

'What the hell are you talking about?' Yossarian shouted at her in bewildered,

“Do they arrest them? They chased them away. They just chased them away. Then why did they do it if they did not arrest them? I do not know, sobbed the old woman. I do not

know. Who will take care of me? Who will take care of me now that all the poor young girls are gone? Who will take care of me?" This is a very tragic scene which is represented in a pseudo-comic way.

But it is reminded when reading the scene of a poor woman, old woman crying and moaning and mourning about the fact that who is going to take her. This is also how the final image of the first English epic Beowulf ends where we have this death of Beowulf where Beowulf was being about to be is put in his heap is what we put on fire and he is dead. This old woman is saying "who is going to take care of me now?"

There is a sense of an apocalyptic quality at the end of the Beowulf fragment, the end of an era, an order of time is coming to an end and this very symbolically old woman who represents an order of time, who now wants to know who is going to take care of her. It is essentially the voice of time asking about who is going to give meaning, who is going to protect the world order from now on.

We have a similar situation over here except of course there is no grandeur as in the case of Beowulf, we are talking about an old woman presumably in a brothel setting. Yossarian is no hero, he is very much an anti-hero. We talked about that in the last session as well how and the way he is represented. There is a much hollowed out dummy like quality, but he is also a bit of a rogue soldier.

He is a trickster soldier. He is a malingerer as someone who is just feigning to be sick, feigning or performing illness or performing many different kinds of identities which makes the whole ontology of heroic military masculinity into a deconstructed category. The whole novel can be seen as a deconstruction of this idea of this grand heroic military masculinity and that is being constantly parodied over here.

"I do not know, sobbed the old woman. I do not know who will take care of me? Who will take care of me now that all the poor young girls gone? Who will take care of me? There must have been a reason; Yossarian persisted, pounding his fist into his hand. They could not just barge in here and chase everyone out." The strange thing over here is that no one seems to have been arrested; the police has come and chased everyone out.

“No reason, wailed the old woman”. This reputation of no reason is reflective of the unreasonable and the irrational quality of the type spectacle of war. We keep saying how the whole novel seems have elements of absurdist theatre in the sense and everything is performative, but not just that is performative in a way which breaks away any cause of logic, which breaks away any sense of sequentiality and that is something which we see getting repeated out infinitum; no reason, no reason.

This lack of reason, the lack of any rationale for destruction is something which is constantly flagged out. That irrationality becomes the category, the irrationality gets a name and this is the name. “What right did they have? Yossarian wants to know. Catch-22.” The word appears here, “Catch-22”. We can see the context in which it appears is a context of an absence of reason.

“No reason, no reason” and then we have “Catch-22”. It is no reason, a category of irrationality, and a category of absurdity in many ways. “What? Yossarian froze in his tracks with fear and alarm and felt his whole body begin to tingle. What did you say? Catch-22, the old woman repeated, rocking her head up and down. “Catch-22. Catch-22 says they have a right to do anything and we cannot stop them from doing.”

It just becomes an absurdist status quo where anything can be done for no reason. There does not seem to be any rationale for performance of an act. “Catch-22” can be it is like a free floating signifier which can take up any signified and that is the post-structuralist quality of the novel where one signifier can attach itself to several signifiers and signifiers can be mutually contradictory in quality.

“Catch-22” becomes free flowing, subversive, fascistic, consolidatory, and hegemonic; all kinds of meanings can be attached to this “Catch-22”, so becomes this free floating, auto mutating signifier. They have right to do anything and we cannot stop them from doing.

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'Catch-22.'

'\*What?\*' Yossarian froze in his tracks with fear and alarm and felt his whole body begin to tingle. '\*What\* did you say?'

'Catch-22' the old woman repeated, rocking her head up and down. 'Catch-22. Catch-22 says they have a right to do anything we can't stop them from doing.'

'What the hell are you talking about?' Yossarian shouted at her in bewildered, furious protest. 'How did you know it was Catch-22? Who the hell told you it was Catch-22?'

'The soldiers with the hard white hats and clubs. The girls were crying. "Did we do anything wrong?" they said. The men said no and pushed them away out the door with the ends of their clubs. "Then why are you chasing us out?" the girls said. "Catch-22," the men said. "What right do you have?" the girls said. "Catch-22," the men said. All they kept saying was "Catch-22, Catch-22." What does it mean, Catch-22? What is Catch-22?'

'Didn't they show it to you?' Yossarian demanded, stamping about in anger and distress. 'Didn't you even make them read it?'

'They don't have to show us Catch-22,' the old woman answered. 'The law says they don't have to.'

Yossarian wants to know. "What the hell are you talking about? Yossarian shouted at her bewildered furious protest. How did you know it was Catch-22? Who the hell told you it was Catch-22? The soldiers with a hard white hats and clubs. The girls were crying. Did we do anything wrong? They said. The men said no and pushed them away out the door with the ends of their clubs. Then why are you chasing us out? the girls said. "Catch-22", the men said. What right do you have? The girls said. Catch-22 the men said. All they kept saying was Catch-22, Catch-22. What does it mean, Catch-22? What is Catch-22?" This is the phrase which begins to get almost a sinister quality in the novel and this is a point in the novel we see that how the sinister quality and the funny quality are not very far from each other.

There is always a proximity with death that we see, even laughter in this novel for example has always very close and uneasy proximity with death. It is the laughter which comes with the cost of something, laughter out of loss, laughter out of absence, laughter out of death. This is hollowed out laughter which is an exhausted activity. It is not the laughter of fulfilment.

It is laughter of hollowness, laughter of exhaustion. Likewise, "Catch-22" over here becomes a signifier of absurdity, of hollowness, has completely emptied out of all kinds of meanings or possibilities. "Did not they show it to you? Yossarian demanded, stamping about in anger and distress. Did not you even make them read it? They do not have to show us Catch-22, the old woman answered. The law says they do not have to."

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'What law says they don't have to?'

'Catch-22.'

'Oh, God damn!' Yossarian exclaimed bitterly. 'I bet it wasn't even really there.' He stopped walking and glanced about the room disconsolately. 'Where's the old man?'

'Gone,' mourned the old woman.

'Gone?'

'Dead,' the old woman told him, nodding in emphatic lament, pointing to her head with the flat of her hand. 'Something broke in here. One minute he was living, one minute he was dead.'

'But he can't be dead!' Yossarian cried, ready to argue insistently. But of course he knew it was true, knew it was logical and true; once again the old man had marched along with the majority.

Yossarian turned away and trudged through the apartment with a gloomy scowl, peering with pessimistic curiosity into all the rooms. Everything made of glass had been smashed by the men with the clubs. Torn drapes and bedding lay dumped on the floor. Chairs, tables and dressers had been overturned. Everything breakable had been broken. The destruction was total. No wild vandals could have been more thorough. Every window was smashed, and darkness poured like inky clouds into each room through the shattered panes. Yossarian could imagine the heavy crashing

“What law says they do not have to? Catch-22.” We can see how this becomes an absurdist mode of self-protection and self-perpetuation. The law of “Catch-22” says that we do not have to tell what “Catch-22” is. The law of “Catch-22” says that nothing needs to be written about “Catch-22” and the law of “Catch-22” says that with “Catch-22” we can do almost everything.

It becomes an entity phrase, that becomes a very pertinent sinister phrase with which anything, as mentioned anything can be attached to, can be connected to and that becomes an instrument, a political instrument through which subjugation, domination, totalization all kinds of activities can be carried out with that phrase “Catch-22”. “Oh, God damn Yossarian exclaimed bitterly. I bet it was not even really there.

“He stopped walking and glanced about the room disconsolately. Where is the old man? Gone mourned the old woman. Gone? Dead, the old woman told him, nodding in emphatic lament, pointing to her head with the flat of her hand. Something broke in here. One minute he was living, one minute he was dead.” This captures the sentiment in the novel as we can see there are several characters who come in and they do something and people laugh around them and the very next second they die.

Life and death become so almost interconnected, mutable categories, almost interchangeable categories in this novel. One minute he was living, one minute he was dead. The whole idea of foregrounding, the mutability, the violent velocity with which



life and death can sort of slapped into each other, this interchangeable quality about the violence of life and death, one minute he was living, one or two as dead.

That becomes even the structure of the sentiment; structure of the sentence reflects the sentiment of interchangeability. But he cannot be dead Yossarian cried, ready to argue insistently. But, he knew it was true, knew it was logical and true. Once again, the old man had much along with the majority. We see this irony and paradox where the majority have been killed and the old man had marched along with the majority.

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the flat of her hand. 'Something broke in here. One minute he was living, one minute he was dead.'

'But he can't be dead!' Yossarian cried, ready to argue insistently. But of course he knew it was true, knew it was logical and true; once again the old man had marched along with the majority.

Yossarian turned away and trudged through the apartment with a gloomy scowl, peering with pessimistic curiosity into all the rooms. Everything made of glass had been smashed by the men with the clubs. Torn drapes and bedding lay dumped on the floor. Chairs, tables and dressers had been overturned. Everything breakable had been broken. The destruction was total. No wild vandals could have been more thorough. Every window was smashed, and darkness poured like inky clouds into each room through the shattered panes. Yossarian could imagine the heavy, crashing footfalls of the tall M.P.s in the hard white hats. He could picture the fiery and malicious exhilaration with which they had made their wreckage, and their sanctimonious, ruthless sense of right and dedication. All the poor young girls were gone. Everyone was gone but the weeping old woman in the bulky brown and gray sweaters and black head shawl, and soon she too would be gone.

'Gone,' she grieved, when he walked back in, before he could even speak. 'Who will take care of me now?'

Yossarian ignored the question. 'Nately's girl friend - did anyone hear from her?' he asked.

'Gone.'

“Yossarian turned away and trudged through the apartment with a gloomy scowl, peering with pessimistic curiosity into all the rooms.” This is one of the rare instances in the novel where Yossarian bears or carries pure pessimism because you see even the optimism and pessimism they intertwine and very asymmetric ways. Hope and hopelessness are connected together in ways which made the whole ontology of sentiment is very unstable in the novel.

We do not quite know what is hopeful and what is hopeless. Hopefulness can emerge out of hopelessness just where we least expect them, but here in the novel we find it is almost becoming tragic. It is almost becoming purely pessimistic. He is looking around with a pessimistic curiosity into all the rooms. Everything made of glass had been smashed by the man with the clubs.

“Torn drapes and bedding lay dumped on the floor. Chairs, tables and dressers have been overturned. Everything breakable had been broken. The broken mess or materials, not just materials but the meanings associated with the materials that had been broken, everything breakable had been broken. The destruction was total.” This is almost a nihilistic scene where everything is just destroyed for destruction sake.

The totality of destruction, the totality of nihilism is something that we see as spectacle and also something which happens around the materiality. There is very interesting combination of mind and materiality at work over here because what we see is brokenness of materials, but what it also reflects is the brokenness of the mind. No wild vandals could have been more thorough.

“Every window was smashed and darkness poured like inky clouds into each room through the shattered panes. The darkness pours in, again we have a paradoxical representation, normally light flows in through the windows where we have darkness pouring in like inky clouds. Yossarian could imagine the heavy, crushing footfalls of the tall MP’s in the hard white hats.

He could picture the fiery and malicious exhilaration with which they had made the wreckage and their sanctimonious, ruthless sense of right and dedication. All the poor young girls were gone. Everyone was gone but the weeping old woman in the bulky brown and gray sweaters black head shawl, and soon to she will be gone.”

It captures the sentiment of emptiness and hollowness in the novel. The hollowness of meaning; there is no rationale for destruction. God knows why this place was ransacked. No one quite knows why the people over here were asked to leave such abruptly.

No one quite knows why the violence was executed. The only reason, only word the, only empty signifier that is given as some kind of a pseudo-rationale for this was “Catch-22”. The word “Catch-22” consumes all rationale meanings. It just takes up all possibilities of rationality. It consumes all possibilities of rationality. It is a slightly cannibalistic quality about “Catch-22”, it just eats up all possibilities of meaning.

It consumes all possibilities of meaning. In that process, it just becomes very sinister signifier which can mean anything and as the old woman says that the real law of “Catch-22” ensures that a law of “Catch-22” should not be shown or does not have to be shown, it is just something written and no need to show it. No one is to read it. No, it just auto protects itself and auto-mutates itself and it auto-connects itself to different categories at different points of time.

We have a scene in the novel Yossarian’s prism, the focal point of Yossarian, the mind of Yossarian, it begins to become purely pessimistic, so the purity of pessimism, the purity of sadness begins to come in because all along in the novel we see how sentiments are impurely mixed or heterogeneously mixed so we happiness and sadness, we have some kind of cynical, subversive intelligence playing along with death and tragedy and horror; all mixed together.

But over here, we find that for only rare occasions where cynicism goes away Yossarian just experiences the totality of loss, experiences the hollowness that emerges out of loss, the emptiness, the emptiness of the materials, the emptiness of meaning; everything is broken and as we can see that wonderfully moving line, that everything breakable had been broken.

The brokenness is no just a level of materials but also the level of mind, the level of mindfulness. There is no mind to connect to any material anymore and that mindlessness of damage over here, the mindlessness of violence over here is reflective of the broader, massive mindlessness through which this war is being fought that is why it is being operated as a systematic killing machine or people can be killed for no reason or no rationale whatsoever.

This is the penultimate about this novel which is called “Catch-22” which is the subsequent chapter from this point, chapter-40. But the title Eternal City of Rome it is a deliberately ironical title because it has this sense of timelessness, a sense of almost a mythical meaningfulness.

We have these images of fracture, images of destruction, and images of complete violence which means that no sense of mythical meaningfulness can sustain itself against

this just rampage of violence, everything breakable has been broken. The mythicity of Rome has been broken, even the eternality of Rome has been broken. The breakage, the interruption over here is not just an interruption of material, but also an interruption of time.

These are interruption of temporality and that itself becomes the biggest form of violence in this war, the psychological violence. There is physical copy of violence, there also psychological violence of orders of time coming to an end. "Eternal City" is an ironic representation of the mutability of everything. There is nothing eternal over here, everything can be broken.

Everything breakable had been broken. The eternality of the city has been broken as well. It is just another bombed city. Therein lies the paradox and the irony in the title of this chapter and of course we see so "Catch-22" becoming the instrument of irony, the hegemonic instrument or the metanarrative of irony where no meaning needs to be shown. No knowledge needs to be narrated. No rationale needs to be presented. It just becomes a metanarrative of meaninglessness, which is captured by the phrase "Catch-22".