

**Trauma and Literature**  
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**Lecture – 30**  
**Heller's Catch– 22 – Part 3**

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All the officer patients in the ward were forced to censor letters written by all the enlisted-men patients, who were kept in residence in wards of their own. It was a monotonous job, and Yossarian was disappointed to learn that the lives of enlisted men were only slightly more interesting than the lives of officers. After the first day he had no curiosity at all. To break the monotony he invented games. Death to all modifiers, he declared one day, and out of every letter that passed through his hands went every adverb and every adjective. The next day he made war on articles. He reached a much higher plane of creativity the following day when he blacked out everything in the letters but \*a, an\* and \*the\*. That erected more dynamic intralinear tensions, he felt, and in just about every case left a message far more universal. Soon he was proscribing parts of salutations and signatures and leaving the text untouched. One time he blacked out all but the salutation 'Dear Mary' from a letter, and at the bottom he wrote, 'I yearn for you tragically. R. O. Shipman, Chaplain, U.S. Army.' R.O. Shipman was the group chaplain's name.

When he had exhausted all possibilities in the letters, he began attacking the names and addresses on the envelopes, obliterating whole homes and streets, annihilating entire metropolises with careless flicks of his wrist as though he were God. Catch-22 required that each censored letter bear the censoring officer's name. Most letters he didn't read at all. On those he didn't read at all he wrote his own name. On those he did read he wrote, 'Washington Irving.' When that grew monotonous he wrote, 'Irving Washington.' Censoring the envelopes had serious repercussions, produced a ripple of anxiety on some ethereal military echelon that floated a C.I.D. man back into the ward posing as a patient. They all knew he was a C.I.D. man because he kept inquiring about an officer named Irving or Washington and because after his first day there he wouldn't censor letters. He found them too monotonous.

It was a good ward this time, one of the best he and Dunbar had ever enjoyed. With

This is an NPTEL course entitled “Trauma and Literature”. We have already begun looking at Joseph Heller's novel “Catch-22”. We were talking about how the opening of the novel is set in hospital ward, a military hospital ward.

The protagonist Yossarian is an inhabitant in the hospital and there is a comic quality to it. There is a comic quality to the entire characterization and also in a way that sense of humour is quite morbid in quality because there are people dying, coming and dying and people would retain their suffering people, suffering subjects, but the way they are represented is quite comic in quality and the comicality of it actually accentuates the trauma of it rather than undercutting it.

This is a very different take on trauma, a very different perspective on trauma. It gives a dark comic quality and that sort of makes it more nihilistic as well. It just empties out any possibility of tragedy, empties out or exhausts any possibility of tragedy. The grandeur of tragedy, the poetry of tragedy, the substance of tragedy is denied to these people.

They are so traumatized in a numbed sense. We talked about the quality of farce over here, how this is actually a farcical representation rather than a tragic representation. And paradoxically therein lies the tragedy of it, it is not even tragic, it has become farcical. Yossarian is the character here and we sort of see these actions through his eyes.

He is a focal character, the focal point and we read this in a minute that how his job in the hospital is to censor letters. Letters which are sent by the soldiers in the hospital to the families, he is supposed to censor those; look at the content and blacken out, scratch out anything which is objectionable or confidential or classified information. That was his job.

It sounds quite serious, it sounds like an intelligence officer duty, but then we get to know very quickly that how he is making up, again farce out of it. Farce and paradox these are two very recursive tropes in the entire novel keeps coming back. These are instruments of correction, instruments or representation used by the novelists Heller in terms of looking at a situation of human suffering, which is very tragic, very political in quality the Second World War.

But then the way it is represented is almost through morbid humour, through gallows humour. This is a very interesting proximity to death over here. Humour and death, and humour and hollowness. These are almost connected categories over here. The hollowness of these people, the fact that they cannot feel sad anymore, it just become so repetitive.

It just becomes a part of the daily routine that the shock of suffering goes away and suffering becomes the daily condition or repetitive ritual and in that sense it becomes farcical in quality, almost domestic in quality, intimate in quality. Suffering is not tragic anymore because there should be a shock component in tragedy.

Something which unsettles, something which moves, makes one emotionally moved, but then these are people who suffer at such a daily level, it is like a ritual of suffering that they exhaust all possibility of tragedy in that sense. Here we have this section where Yossarian is supposed to censor the letters and we get to know how he does it; again very farcical representation.

“All the officer patients in the ward were forced to censor letters written by all the enlisted men patients, who were kept in residence in wards of their own. It was a monotonous job and Yossarian was disappointed to learn the lives of enlisted men were only slightly more interesting than lives of officers. After the first day, he had no curiosity at all. To break the monotony, he invented games.

Death to all modifiers, he declared one day, and out of every letter that passed through his hands went every adverb and every adjective. The next day he made war on articles. He reached a much higher plane of creativity the following day when one blacked out everything in the letters but a, an and the. That erected more dynamic intralinear tensions he felt, and just about every case left a message far more universal.”

Soon he was proscribing parts of salutations and signatures and leaving the text untouched. One time he blacked out all but the salutation Dear Mary from a letter and at the bottom he wrote tragically R. O. Shipman, Chaplain, US Army. R. O. Shipman was a group chaplain's name. So what we see over here is again some type of parody; some satire and a trivialization of something which is supposed to be very human in quality.

These are suffering sick soldiers sending letters to the families, to the beloved, to the people they are connected to. And here we have a man, very cynical, very humorous in a dark comic way. And his job is to censor those letters. So what does he do? He cuts out, scratches out words randomly. On certain days, he gets rid of all adjectives or adverbs. On certain other days, he gets rid of all articles “a an and the”.

There are certain days where he just gets rid of all signatures, so the text goes untouched and he just add signatures to it. The signatures could be completely fictional in quality. He writes fictional names of people. This is done in a very tragic comic way to create some kind of a playful atmosphere, a playful politics, the politics of play, and play over here is not an innocent activity, and play over here is some type of self-preservation technique.

There is a ludic quality ludic meaning playful. There is a dark ludic quality to this which is the only ritual that he can invent to give some kind of meaning. We can think of some

other representations of trauma, horror which incorporate this ludic quality, this playful quality. For example, we can think of certain films which have this Holocaust films which have this ludic quality where prisoners in a concentration camp, they are inventing games in terms of how they can pass time.

But also gives some kind of a fantasy structure around the condition. These are little rituals that human beings make in certain situations of horror and terror and trauma. We have a similar setting over here as here is a person who is just malingering, feigning to be sick, but actually in a hospital ward in a military hospital ward during the war and he is just randomly blackening out letters, inserting signatures, getting rid of certain words, certain adjectives depending on his will.

There is a perverse God-like quality that Yossarian has and he is just someone who decides what should go out and what should not go out in terms of the censoring of letters. If we think about it in an emotional way, these are letters which reach certain people and those are people who are very eager to learn how the soldiers are, how their relatives are in the hospital ward.

Here is a man who was just playing a playful God in this trauma ward of the hospital and just getting rid of certain words, certain letters, and signatures at whims. The whimsicality of it is what we are trying to underline over here and that again connects to the absurdity of this existence, the absurdity of these rituals which in turn connects to the broader absurdity of the war.

So what is reflective of essentially and symbolically is the absurdity of the spectacle of war, spectacle of suffering which is caused by the Second World War. So that is reason why we need to take this trivial sections, playful sections, flippant sections very seriously. The tragedy of the suffering lies in the flippancy and the flippant representation of it. It is not any grandeur to it.

He is not writing poetry about the suffering anymore that has debased into, degenerated into this kind of flippant ritual of scratching out letters, blackening out certain signs, inserting certain signatures. The flippancy of it is a pointer to the mental state over here, the traumatic state over here. He is so numbed, so bored by trauma, so bombarded by

trauma as a daily ritual that there is nothing that can shock in terms of creating something emotional out of it.

He has to pass time and there is a perverse god-like quality to this. He is like squatting flies as at work and getting rid of letters. The textuality of it is also important because we are literally looking at text which conveys the messages and he is just controlling the text, controlling the flow of text from his hospital ward, but again it is a very flippant flow.

He makes sure that the flow of texts becomes flippant in quality, becomes comic in quality and a comicality and flippancy are pointers to the mental state of this particular person. It is an important passage in terms of what he is doing with the letters, the textual play, the sign play are important because again these come out of boredom, this come out of a ritual that he has invented to pass time.

And again, this creation of a playfulness is something that he is doing deliberately in order to have some sort of self-preservation technique. And then we come to the next passage. The key word in the passage here is exhausted, if we can take a look. When he had exhausted all possibilities in the letters, he began attacking the names and addresses on the envelopes, obliterating whole names and streets.

Annihilating entire metropolises with careless flicks of his wrist as though he were God. So that first sentence is quite indicative. So, he is just getting rid of addresses, getting rid of street names, and entire cities have been scratched out obliterating whole homes as though he were God. So, he is like a textual God in certain sense. He controls the text, he controls information, and he controls what goes out.

He controls the semiotic play emerging out of this hospital ward. And again, there is this flippant quality to it, but the flippancy is exactly reflective of his state, the condition that he is in. "Catch-22" required that each censored letter bear the censoring officer's name. "Catch-22" is the name given to this program; this exercise of censoring letters and it was telling that the person who was censoring should write the name at the bottom of each letter.

Yossarian was supposed to write the name of himself. Most letters he did not read at all. On those he did not read at all, he wrote his own name. On those he did read, he wrote Washington Irving. Washington Irving is the name of the very significant American cultural figure and he would write that name Washington Irving on the letters that he had read.

When that grew monotonous, he wrote Irving Washington; sorts of change the sequence. Censoring the envelopes had serious repercussions, produced a ripple of anxiety on some ethereal military echelon that floated a C.I.D man back into the word posing as a patient. They all knew he was a C.I.D. man because he kept inquiring about an officer named Irving or Washington and because after his first day he would not censor letters.

He found them too monotonous. We find the production of paradoxes over here, a very interesting that he just takes us in a very flippant way. He scratches out entire names, addresses, blackens out street names, and blackens out city names. In other words, he is destroying the letters, he is decimating the information in those letters and he is supposed to do just the opposite.

Now, also we can find how there is a dwindling of everything over here. He writes the name of Washington Irving a major literary cultural figure, an iconic figure in American imagination. The fact that he is writing the name after the end of such comic exercise, he just dwindles entire American cultural imaginary over here. The point is making everything flippant, is making everything into some type of a mockery of existence.

Everything has been brought down and mocked at and therein lies deconstruction over here that everything becomes a playful activity. Tragedy becomes a playful activity. Tragedy becomes a semiotic activity. It just becomes a play of science. There is always this very close proximity to death, so it is all about death. The people dying in this war, but the way it is represented it almost has some kind of a morbid humour about it.

We have an intelligence officer coming in to inquire about who is Washington Irving or Irving Washington and then Yossarian stops. Writing letters because he finds them too monotonous. The first two passages over here are very clearly indicative of the comic

quality and the sort of dark comic quality to the suffering and how that becomes the only quality available, only existence available.

It is important because in a way that connects to the mental state of these people; that they cannot be tragic, they cannot be profound or deep or have any grandeur of existence because all are denied to them. All that is taken away from them because of the dailyness of horror, the dailyness of suffering. Suffering becomes like a routine for them and they invent this fantasy games, playful games, comic games in order to have some sense of sustenance, so that becomes important.

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When he had exhausted all possibilities in the letters, he began attacking the names and addresses on the envelopes, obliterating whole homes and streets, annihilating entire metropolises with careless flicks of his wrist as though he were God. Catch-22 required that each censored letter bear the censoring officer's name. Most letters he didn't read at all. On those he didn't read at all he wrote his own name. On those he did read he wrote, 'Washington Irving.' When that grew monotonous he wrote, 'Irving Washington.' Censoring the envelopes had serious repercussions, produced a ripple of anxiety on some ethereal military echelon that floated a C.I.D. man back into the ward posing as a patient. They all knew he was a C.I.D. man because he kept inquiring about an officer named Irving or Washington and because after his first day there he wouldn't censor letters. He found them too monotonous.

It was a good ward this time, one of the best he and Dunbar had ever enjoyed. With them this time was the twenty-four-year-old fighter-pilot captain with the sparse golden mustache who had been shot into the Adriatic Sea in midwinter and not even caught cold. Now the summer was upon them, the captain had not been shot down, and he said he had the grippe. In the bed on Yossarian's right, still lying amorously on his belly, was the startled captain with malaria in his blood and a mosquito bite on his ass. Across the aisle from Yossarian was Dunbar, and next to Dunbar was the artillery captain with whom Yossarian had stopped playing chess. The captain was a good chess player, and the games were always interesting. Yossarian had stopped playing chess with him because the games were so interesting they were foolish. Then there was the educated Texan from Texas who looked like someone in Technicolor and felt, patriotically, that people of means - decent folk - should be given more votes than drifters, whores, criminals, degenerates, atheists and indecent folk - people without means.

“It was a good ward at this time, one of the best he and Dunbar had ever enjoyed. With them this time there was a twenty-four year old fighter pilot captain with a sparse golden mustache who had been shot in the Adriatic Sea in midwinter and not even caught cold.” This is a classic paradox over here. We have a captain, the fighter pilot captain who was in this hospital who had been shot down and Adriatic Sea.

It connotes implies all kinds of tragedy. Someone had been shot down, someone had been bombed and fell in the sea. But then the next part of sentence just makes it comic and says that despite being shot down, despite having fallen in the Adriatic Sea in midwinter he did not catch cold. This is a juxtaposition of horror and comicality makes “Catch-22” a cognitively complex novel because it is not about tragedy.

Although the content is very tragic, the content is very serious, the content is about human suffering. But the form and the representation have a playful quality to it and that playfulness, the comicality is exactly what makes a novel very postmodern in quality and also in a certain sense post-structuralist. The reason why we are doing this right after Malabou is because if we look at Malabou's model of trauma, there is a very post-structuralist Derridan quality about trauma in Malabou something like this which has this sense of cognitive flatness.

These are people who are seemingly incapable of experiencing tragedy or experiencing any sadness. All they can have is some sort of hollow humour. The hollowness of the humour, the superficiality of the humour is important for us to understand and underline. This is a captain, a fighter pilot captain who had been shot and fell in the Adriatic Sea in midwinter and did not catch cold.

The summer was upon them, the captain had not been shot down and he said he had the grippe. In the bed on Yossarian's right, still lying amorously on his belly was the startled captain with malaria and his blood and a mosquito bite on his ass. The chosen words are almost vulgar in quality. The word amorously is interesting because that is the last word one would associate in a hospital ward; amorous is romantic, playful, and erotic.

Still lying amorously on his belly was the startled captain with malaria in his blood. Malaria in his blood, malaria is like a tropical disease, but it is not something which is related to war. It is not a grant war disease. The references of disease over here cold, grippe, malaria seems to be some kind of flattening of the entire tragedy of war again to the choice of disease, reference of disease.

These are diseases which do not quite have the glamorous connotation of war. Across the aisle from Yossarian was Dunbar and next to Dunbar was the artillery captain with whom Yossarian had stopped playing chess. Capitalization and definitions over here people are introduced to negations. This is a person that is described over here was introduced he is someone with whom Yossarian had stopped playing chess.

Definition through absence, description through absence, description through negation which is again part of the production of paradoxes in a novel. It is a very paradoxical



representational mode that has been employed over here. This definition, description through negation is a very classic trope for that kind of representation. The captain was a good chess player and the games were always interesting but stopped playing chess.

We begin to think why was the game stopped because he was a good player, the games were interesting. Yossarian had stopped playing chess with him because the games were so interesting; they were foolish. We can see some kind of a deconstruction at work over here. A complete reversal of logic as mentioned per the introductory session.

There is a dark carnivalesque quality about this novel where the theoretical, notional, logical parameters are inverted and reversed. Someone has stopped playing chess why because the games were very interesting. And why is that the problem because the games were interesting, they were foolish. There is no drama. They know exactly how to play the game, they know the rules and as a result of which the games become foolish.

There is no creativity as such. There is no drama as such. There was the educated Texan from Texas. Again, there seemed to be some kind of a satire where educated Texan, the connotation is a slightly rare thing, educated Texan from Texas who looked like someone in Technicolor. Technicolor being this movie production house and felt patriotically that people of means, decent folk, should be given more votes than drifters, whores, criminals, degenerate, atheists and indecent folk, people without means.

We can see some kind of a smuggled political message over here. This is a person from Texas who thinks that people with means and what people with means, people with capital, with money and they are the decent people by default and they are the patriotic people by default. They should be given more votes. So, all these people should have the ability to get more than one vote as it well than compared to people without means.

The people who are without means, who are the nonvoters, who should be the nonvoters, drifters, whores, criminals, degenerates, atheist and indecent folks. We have a very conservative Christian picture over here which is parodied and satirized. This is a person from Texas, an educated Texan who feels this way. There is a satire on certain kind of political and religious and cultural standpoint which is being conveyed over here.

These are people without mean. They are people who should be denied the voting ability and that ability should go only to people with means who happen to be the patriotic people. We can see how the novel begins to smuggle in as a very subversive messages and very subversive political messages in a very flippant way.

It is a complete comical world where the messages just come in a very superficial way. The superficiality in the novel, the flippancy in the novel are very deliberate narrative strategies, a very deliberate novelistic strategies because that is exactly what makes the novel more complex in quality, more cognitively complex, more politically complex, more culturally complex.

It is the reason why it is such an important cultural artifact this novel "Catch-22" as becomes some kind of metaphor in popular imagination. "Catch-22" means a dilemma, a moral dilemma, to do or not to do, to go or not to go, to act or not to act. But then again, we see how the profundity of that model dynamic is satirized and deconstructed and played so frequently.

The novel's very opening suggests that he does have a jaundice, does not have a jaundice do not quite know that is reason why he is in a limbo state in a hospital. He cannot be treated and he cannot be let go. There is a funny quality to it that makes it more serious at a certain way. There is no heavy handed moral message. There is no heavy handed religious or cultural or political message.

The sort of avoidance of any heavy handedness or the appropriation of a flippant frame is exactly what makes the novel very complex literary experiment which has attained the status of a classic in modern times.