

Ambiguity and the Grotesque: History, Humor, and McCarthyism in Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*

Joseph Heller's political and social observations are an integral part of his fiction. One of America's most revered authors, Heller has been credited with a unique skill of getting "history and humor to work hand in hand" (Miller 1982:237). The novelist's scorching political passion manifests itself especially vividly in *Catch-22*, an indisputable classic, which unveils the writer's spirited mockery of the Cold War red-baiting.

At the novel's publication in 1961 a spate of critical attention followed introducing a variety of reviews and scholarly interpretations. However, those critics who give credit to the claim that Heller's *Catch-22* reflects the climate of postwar America offer no more than a passing acknowledgement of the influence of the McCarthy-driven events on the novel. Walter James Miller (1982: 238) treats *Catch-22* as "seemingly an attack on the military-industrial complex of World War II, [which] actually aims, through highly original use of anachronisms, to expose the entire power system of the postwar world." Further in his article, Miller (1982: 240) mentions "controversies rampant in the Eisenhower Administration (1953-1961)" and points to Heller's technique of "creating fictional events in one period of time (World War II) that parodied actual events that would not occur until a later period (the 1950s)." Robert Brustein (qtd. in Aldridge 1987: 380), writing in the *New Republic*, perceives the book's Air Force setting in World War II as a metaphor of "a satirical microcosm for many of the macrocosmic idiocies" afflicting the postwar era. In fact, Joan Robertson's essay "They're After Everyone: Heller's *Catch-22* and the Cold War" (1989: 41-50) is one of the few instances in which the critic holds the view that Heller's treatment of McCarthyism was by no means coincidental and that a fully comprehensive study of the novel's grounding in the McCarthy years is still lacking.

In this paper I will argue that in *Catch-22* the writer uses his razor-sharp wit to lure his readers into unexpected confrontations with McCarthyism, satirizing anticommunist rhetoric of the later years of the Truman administration. Replete with literary allusions, quotations, and misquotations, the book is to be seen

here as a vicious comment on the then-current excesses of McCarthy's ideology. Its characters get entangled both by means of propaganda of the deed and word-level propaganda in persecutions characteristic of the 1950s America. Most effective are Heller's references to the Major Peress case, the McCarran-Walter Act, loyalty oaths, and an overall feeling of fear. Propagandistic tools of the time, such as *guilt by association* as well as other attention-getters of the era, come up for ridicule in Heller's depiction of false testimonies, investigations, and trials.

Historically, McCarthyism dominated the U.S. political scene as well as other sectors of American life in the years 1947-1957. The Republican senator Joseph R. McCarthy of Wisconsin and his reckless charges of subversion in government and elsewhere succeeded in creating a culture of fear, distrust, and disunity in postwar America. By charging that various federal and nongovernmental agencies harbor Communist employees, McCarthy has become the central figure of unprecedented political turmoil, and his practice of publicizing accusations of disloyalty or subversion gave the decade its name. McCarthyism as a political "ism" has entered the historical lexicon to refer to a political style or methods that cross the bounds of decency. Most historians judge McCarthy to have been a demagogue who made false and misleading charges and identify the anticommunist investigations and hearings of the late 1940s and early 1950s as a shameful episode in American life during which an allegedly nonexistent Communist threat was used to pillory innocent people for their political beliefs. Referring to what many researchers have denigrated as an overreaction to Soviet subversion espionage, Irving Horowitz (1996: 101) points out that "despite the existence of a few genuinely brilliant works on the subject of McCarthyism, the nature of the man and of the period he presumably represented remains elusive." Whether there were grounds for Heller's treatment of McCarthyism as a solely laughable and condemnable concept is another vital matter that is to be seen.

One of the writer's most obvious and most frequently cited satirizations of the McCarthy years is the description of Major Major. Because his first name is Major, an IBM machine reads that as his rank. Major Major's promotion is a clear reference to Major Irving Peress, a dentist, who in 1953 had been forced to accept a discharge from the Army for refusing to discuss his possible leftist political associations. When asked about the character, Joseph Heller admitted that Major Major was certainly drawn from the events of the era. He made it clear when he said: "I took a paragraph straight out of the news reports and slipped it into the chapter about Major Major" (Merrill 1992: 150).

Indeed, in September and October of 1953, McCarthy began making the headlines when he focused his attention on accusations of espionage activities associated with the Army Signal Corps at Fort Monmouth, New Jersey. The Army Signal Corps installation at Fort Monmouth was one of the nation's most vital security posts for the three research centers housed there were engaged in developing defensive devices designed to protect the United States from an atomic attack. Julius Rosenberg, a central figure in the U.S. espionage history, worked as an inspector at the military laboratories from 1940 to 1945 and maintained his Signal Corps contacts for at least two years following his departure. In the period 1949-1953, the FBI had been warning the Army about security risks at Monmouth, but the Army paid little or no attention to the reports of subversion until the McCarthy investigation began in 1953. The so-called Army-McCarthy hearings, held in Washington, were based on documents and information sent to the senator by military and government officials as well as on the testimony of people who had left signal-corps related work soon after the war. In December of 1953, the senator was tipped off regarding the case of Irving Peress. He found out that, due to the military bureaucracy foul-up, one office was seeking Peress's removal for his taking the Fifth Amendment¹ and failing to answer questions on the Army's Loyalty Certificate, while another office had automatically promoted him. McCarthy labeled the promotion of the Army dentist the "key to the deliberate Communist infiltration of our armed forces" (qtd. in Robertson 1989:46) and demanded a court martial. The rallying cry in this case was *Who promoted Major Peress?* In *Catch-22* the Army gives private Major an immediate promotion and makes him Major Major so that "Congressmen with nothing else on their minds could go trotting back and forth through the streets of Washington, D.C., chanting, 'Who promoted Major Major? Who promoted Major Major?'" (Heller 1994: 113).²

Heller placed the Major on the faculty of an insignificant university. Major Major's suspicious background caught the attention of the FBI and his selection of English history over American history is considered a truly subversive action. Instantaneously, Major's patriotism is under scrutiny and his record smeared

¹ The clause from the Fifth Amendment that says that a person shall "not be compelled in any criminal case to be a witness against himself" became prominent in many investigations in the 1950s, especially of people accused of Communist activity. Although witnesses' refusal to answer questions often frustrated government investigators, this amendment clearly made it legal.

² Heller's choice of the phrase "Congressmen with nothing else on their minds" might be his indirect reference to the Republican-controlled 80th Congress under President Harry S. Truman whose achievements or lack thereof brought it a name of *do-nothing Congress* (also known as *Turnip Congress*).

with the accusations of Communist affiliation and homosexuality, all making him an inevitable peril to national security. This passage is significant enough to be quoted here:

Since he had nothing better to do well in, he did well in school. At the state university he took his studies so seriously that he was suspected by the homosexuals of being a Communist and suspected by the Communists of being homosexual. He majored in English history, which was a mistake.

“*English* history!” roared the silver-maned senior Senator from his state indignantly. “What’s the matter with American history? American history is as good as any history in the world!”

Major Major switched immediately to American literature, but not before the F.B.I. had opened a file on him. (Heller 1994: 113)³

Major Major’s ill-defined un-American behavior calls to mind the House Un-American Activities Committee which, independent of McCarthy in action, but not in attitude, worked at combating Communism by picking it out in many spheres of the American life. In one of the episodes of *Catch-22*, Captain Black jumps to conclusions when he identifies the corporal conducting the educational sessions in Captain Black’s intelligence tent as subversive “because he wore eyeglasses and used words like *panacea* and *utopia*, and because he disapproved of Adolf Hitler, who had done such a great job of combating un-American activities in Germany” (Heller 1994: 48). Later in the novel, Colonel Cathcart, working on his prayers-before-each-mission project, asks the chaplain to his office to help him perfect the idea. When the chaplain brings up the issue of atheism, Colonel Cathcart gets furious:

“What atheists? [...] There are no atheists in my outfit! Atheism is against the law, isn’t it?”

“No, sir.”

“It isn’t?” The colonel was surprised. “Then it’s un-American, isn’t it?”

³ The sexual allusion seems intentional here. In the early Cold War years McCarthyites targeted sexual minorities as national security risks and the conviction that homosexuals were highly blackmailable went unquestioned until the 1980s (Leebaert 2002: 116). Many initiatives were undertaken in the name of resisting subversion by the governments of Canada, U.S. and the UK. The notorious 1950s homosexual dismissal cases were those of the American Communist conspirator James A. Mintkenbaugh, Dwight D. Eisenhower’s spokesman Arthur Vandenberg, Jr., anticommunist columnist Joseph Alsop as well as British atomic bomb spies Guy Burgess, Anthony Blunt and bisexual Donald Maclean of The Cambridge Five. Homosexuals were also being expelled from the Communist ranks for fear that their vulnerability to blackmail might endanger their comrades.

"I'm not sure, sir," answered the chaplain.

"Well, I am!" the colonel declared. "I'm not going to disrupt our religious services just to accommodate a bunch of lousy atheists." (Heller 1994: 247)

Heller treats extensively minority groups and immigration issues in McCarthy's America by making indirect references to the McCarran-Walter Act. The McCarran Act of September 23, 1950 required the registration of Communist organizations with the Attorney General, forbade entry into the United States of anyone who belonged or had belonged to any totalitarian organizations, and provided for the detention centers for such people in the event of national emergencies. In June 1952 Congress passed McCarran-Walter Immigration and Nationality Act which listed being a Communist or Communist sympathizer as one of the 700 reasons to deny immigration. Suitably, in the novel, when Chief White Halfcoat shares his story with Yossarian, he describes a group of his native American relatives who wandered into Canada and who, upon trying to re-enter the U.S., were stopped at the border by American immigration authorities who would not let them back in. Heller's wordplay is brilliant here: "They could not come back in because they were red" (Heller 1994: 61). In the first draft of the novel, as Robertson (1989: 43) reveals, the writer had stated it more plainly: "They could not come back in because of the McCarran-Walter Act."

The 1950s legislation in question was codified on the basis of a quota system. In his veto message to Congress, president Truman (qtd. in Hochman 1997:313) pointed out the inequities of the legislative draft which in his opinion boiled down to the statement that "Americans with English or Irish names were better people and better citizens than Americans with Italian or Greek or Polish names." This comes up for ridicule in the passage in which Colonel Cathcart is tangled up in a menacing problem of his own:

The colonel sat back when he had finished and was extremely pleased with himself for the prompt action he had just taken to meet this sinister crisis. *Yossarian* - the very sight of the name made him shudder. There were so many esses in it. It just had to be subversive. It was like the word *subversive* itself. It was like *seditious* and *insidious* too, and like *socialist*, *suspicious*, *fascist* and *Communist*. It was an odious, alien, distasteful name, that just did not inspire confidence. It was not at all like such clean, crisp, honest, American names as Cathcart, Peckem and Dreedle.

(Heller 1994: 268)

Personal attacks, the violation of privacy that resulted from red-baiting, and an overall feeling of harassment are used by Heller as a subtext throughout his novel. In *Catch-22* the characters are set in a climate of secret informants

in which reason gives way to hysteria, trust to suspicion and friendship to self-preservation. In a meaningful scene, ex-P.F.C. Wintergreen confides to Yossarian:

“We’d probably shoot you,” ex-P.F.C. Wintergreen replied.

“*We?*” Yossarian cried in surprise. “What do you mean, *we?* Since when are you on their side?”

“If you’re going to be shot, whose side do you expect me to be on?”

(Heller 1994: 79)

In McCarthy’s America charges were frequently made based on widely publicized, dubious or selectively documented evidence. At one point in McCarthy’s political career, the senator suggested that a person must be guilty if there was no information to state otherwise (Anderson and May 1953: 186). This *guilt by association* technique is clearly evident in Heller’s handling of the Action Board and its investigatory methods. Clevinger’s case, of whom Lieutenant Scheisskopf knew he “might cause trouble if he wasn’t watched” (Heller 1994: 106) was open and shut. As the narrator explains, Clevinger “was guilty, of course, or he would not have been accused, and [...] the only way to prove it was to find him guilty” (Heller 1994: 106). In his hearings, the senator of Wisconsin would often transform some minor point into an overwhelming proof of a person’s guilt. Suitably, Clevinger’s accidental stumbling on the parade field becomes “breaking ranks while in formation, felonious assault, indiscriminate behavior, moperly, high treason, provoking, being a smart guy, listening to classical music and so on” (Heller 1994: 100).

In Heller’s novel numerous characters are exposed to McCarthyite smear tactics. Corporal Popinjay, Yossarian, Major Major and others are all damned by innuendo. Significantly, the very first chapter of the novel opens with Dunbar and Yossarian’s allegations regarding the soldier in white. The comical effect is doubled when the reader learns that the Texan, who is under their attack, was so good-natured, generous and likeable that “in three days no one could stand him” (Heller 1994: 16):

“Murderer,” Dunbar said quietly.

The Texan looked up at him with an uncertain grin.

“Killer,” Yossarian said.

“What are you fellas talkin’ about?” the Texan asked nervously.

“You murdered him,” said Dunbar.

“You killed him,” said Yossarian.

The Texan shrank back. “You fellas are crazy. I didn’t even touch him.”

“You murdered him,” said Dunbar.

"I heard you kill him," said Yossarian.

"You killed him because he was a nigger," Dunbar said.

"You fellas are crazy," the Texan cried. "They don't allow niggers in here. They got a special place for niggers."

"The sergeant smuggled him in," Dunbar said.

"The Communist sergeant," said Yossarian.

"And you knew it."

(Heller 1994: 17-18)

In his probably most infamous speech, which he delivered in Wheeling, West Virginia on February 9, 1950, McCarthy (qtd. in Morgan 2003: 384-5) said: "I have in my hand a list of 205 - a list of names that were made known to the Secretary of State [Dean Acheson] as being members of the Communist Party and who, nevertheless, are still working and shaping the policy in the State Department." Three days later the 205 Communists became 57 card-carrying Communists.⁴ The number was subsequently altered to 81.

This landmark event of McCarthyism is incorporated in *Catch-22* when the meek Chaplain R. O. Shipman becomes a target of harassment. Heller's reference to the incidents that have taken place since the advent of McCarthyism, the term being often synonymous with the Age of Accusation, is highly readable in the trial which abounds in the overwhelming pieces of evidence that the interrogator begins pulling one after another from a manila folder. In the lexicon so reminiscent of the 1950s verbiage, the colonel declares: "I have here in my hands another statement from Colonel Cathcart in which he swears that you refused to co-operate with him in conducting prayer meetings in the briefing room before each mission" (Heller 1994:486). Or, "I have here another affidavit from Colonel Cathcart that states you told him atheism was not against the law" (Heller 1994: 486). Or, "I have a signed statement here from Colonel Cathcart asserting you stole that plum tomato from him" (Heller 1994: 485). Or, "I have a notarized affidavit from Sergeant Whitcomb [...]" (Heller 1994: 485), etc. Not surprisingly, all the official statements are either fabricated proofs or documents obtained from false witnesses whom their commanding officers can easily make swear anything.

As the novel unfolds, the colonels charge the chaplain with "a very serious crime" of which they "don't know yet but [...] are going to find out" (Heller 1994: 480). Soon before the trial Chaplain Shipman is tipped off by Corporal Whitcomb and learns about his alleged crimes:

⁴ In McCarthy's words: "I have in my hand 57 cases of individuals who would appear to be either card-carrying members or certainly loyal to the Communist Party, but who nevertheless are still helping to shape our foreign policy" (qtd. in Hochman 1997: 314).

"They're going to crack down on you for signing Washington Irving's name to all those letters you've been signing Washington Irving's name to. How do you like that?"

"I haven't been signing Washington Irving's name to any letters," said the chaplain. "You don't have to lie to me," Corporal Whitcomb answered. "I'm not the one you have to convince."

"But I'm not lying."

"I don't care whether you're lying or not. They're going to get you for intercepting Major Major's correspondence, too. A lot of this stuff is classified information."

"What correspondence?" asked the chaplain plaintively in rising exasperation. "I've never even seen any of Major Major's correspondence."

"You don't have to lie to me," Corporal Whitcomb replied. "I'm not the one you have to convince."

"But I'm not lying!" protested the chaplain. [...]

Corporal Whitcomb was incensed. "I'm the best friend you've got and you don't even know it," he asserted belligerently, and walked out of the chaplain's tent. He walked back in. "I'm on your side and you don't even realize it. Don't you know what serious trouble you're in? That C.I.D. man has gone rushing back to the hospital to write a brand-new report on you about that tomato."

"What tomato?" the chaplain asked, blinking.

"The plum tomato you were hiding in your hand when you first showed up here. There it is. The tomato you're still holding in your hand right this very minute!"

The chaplain unclenched his fingers with surprise and saw he was still holding the plum tomato he had obtained in Colonel Cathcart's office. He set it down quickly on the bridge table. "I got this tomato from Colonel Cathcart," he said, and was struck by how ludicrous his explanation sounded. "He insisted I take it."

"You don't have to lie to me," Corporal Whitcomb answered. "I don't care whether you stole it from him or not."

"Stole it?" the chaplain exclaimed with amazement. "Why should I want to steal a plum tomato?"

"That's exactly what had us both stumped," said Corporal Whitcomb. "And then the C.I.D. man figured out you might have some important secret papers hidden away inside it."

The chaplain sagged limply beneath the mountainous weight of his despair. "I don't have any important papers hidden away inside it," he stated simply. "I didn't even want it to begin with. Here, you can have it and see for yourself."

(Heller 1994: 262-4)

Clearly, the memorable scene is Heller's reference to the famed Hiss pumpkin. The historic Alger Hiss Case appeared before the House Un-American Activities Committee from 1948 through 1950. The former American public

official Alger Hiss was accused by Whittaker Chambers, a self-confessed Soviet agent and a longtime editor of the weekly newsmagazine *Time*, of having been a secret Communist between 1934 and 1938. Denying that he had ever even known Chambers, Hiss was convicted for perjury by a second trial in January 1950 and sentenced to a five-year prison term. In this notorious case, at a pretrial hearing, Chambers produced a selection of classified material and on December 2, 1948 he led HU AC investigators to his Maryland farm, where from a hollowed-out pumpkin he exhibited several microfilm rolls of documents he said had been given to him by Hiss. The far-famed *pumpkin papers* turned out to be either blank microfilms or altogether unimportant technical documents.

Finally, Captain Black is cast as a man of McCarthy's caliber and his Glorious Loyalty Oath Crusade reflects the spirit of the early Cold-War years. Loyalty oaths originated from a new loyalty program (*Loyalty Probes*) instituted by President Harry S. Truman on March 22, 1947. The Executive Order 9835 inaugurated a loyalty check of all federal employees by the Civil Service Commission and the FBI. This was a nationwide initiative and hundreds of loyalty boards were set up across the country. A Loyalty Review Board coordinated dismissal procedures and supervised the overall program. The standard for dismissal was the existence of "reasonable grounds [...] for belief that the person involved is disloyal to the Government of the United States" (Fried 1991: 68). The loyalty ordinance required each employee to execute an affidavit stating whether or not they have ever been "members of or affiliated with any group, society, association, organization or party which advises, advocates or teaches [...] the overthrow by force, violence or other unlawful means of the Government of the United States of America" (Fried 1997:108). As a university professor, Heller himself ostensibly signed the required loyalty oath.

In *Catch-22* the loyalty crusade is taken to absurd lengths. When in full swing, it makes all the squadron men sign the oaths "to get their pay from the finance officer, to obtain their PX supplies, to have their hair cut by the Italian barbers" (Heller 1994: 147). Captain Black's reasoning is the following: "The more loyalty oaths a person signed, the more loyal he was" (Heller 1994: 148). Any further modifications of the campaign, such as Continual Reaffirmation, the purpose of which was to "trap all those men who had become disloyal since the last time they had signed a loyalty oath the day before" (Heller 1994: 149), add up to the whole soapbox patriotism and render any emergency operations in the base utterly impossible. Like senator McCarthy and his associates' artful maneuvers, Captain Black's dogged politics increases the displeasure and consternation of his superiors. Infuriated by the ardent

crusader's tactics, Colonel Korn reports: "It's that idiot Black off on a patriotism binge [...] the best thing you can do is [...] hope he drops dead before he does too much damage" (Heller 1994: 150).

Historically, McCarthy was able to capitalize upon the climate of fear which he had in fact used in two ways. Edward R. Murrow's report on senator McCarthy in the now-famous provocative news program *See It Now* categorized that fear cogently into the fear of Communism that led people to listen to McCarthy's charges, and the fear of being blacklisted by the senator which intimidated people from speaking out against him.⁵ Through the long lens of history, McCarthyism still remains a controversial and complex phenomenon. With the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, a number of new archival sources have become available to the public which throw much-needed light on the McCarthy era. Released in the late 1990s, the Venona transcripts are forcing the revision of many of the prevailing myths about the internal threat of Communism to American democracy. Some 2,900 intercepted and decoded Soviet messages prove that there was a large scale Communist penetration of the U.S. government and that Communist spies passed on valuable information to the KGB. The deciphered cables identify 349 citizens, immigrants and permanent residents of the United States who had had a covert relationship with Soviet intelligence agencies. John Earl Haynes and Harvey Klehr (1999: 9), authors of *Venona. Decoding Soviet Espionage in America*, presume that American cryptanalysts in the Venona Project deciphered only a fraction of the Soviet intelligence traffic and that "it [is] only logical to conclude that many additional agents were discussed in the thousands of unread messages."

The predominant view among American literati, most of them of liberal or leftist beliefs, was that the concern about domestic Communism in the late 1940s and 1950s was without justification. The culture of fear attracted attention of those who were affected by McCarthy's assaults as well as those who wrote on McCarthyism from the post-Cold War perspective. A gallery of red hunters caricatured by Joseph Heller appear and reappear in the works of Arthur Miller, Norman Mailer, Lillian Hellman, Mary McCarthy, Howard Fast, Robert Coover, E. L. Doctorow, Philip Roth, Tony Kushner and others. Heller himself pointed out repeatedly that his unreal novel reflects real themes. In one of the interviews the writer referred to his work as a "novel of comment" in which

⁵ For a fuller treatment of Murrow's report see O'Connor (1987: 5-16). Murrow's probably most famous broadcast of March 9, 1954, which focused on the threat to American liberties posed by the activities of the Wisconsin senator, is often credited with having significantly contributed to Joseph R. McCarthy's downfall.

“there are comments about the loyalty oath, about the free enterprise system, about civil rights, about bureaucracy, about patriotism” (Krassner 1992: 8). When asked about his political philosophy and major influences for *Catch-22*, he said unambiguously:

It’s the idea of being charged with something and not knowing what it is [...]. The thing that inspired that was the congressional hearings that were going on then - this was the period of McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities Committee. We had state committees as well as loyalty oaths [...]. I wanted to create an impression of our society at that time and with a literary consciousness. That’s why the book is replete with literary allusions and quotations or misquotations.

(Heller qtd. in Gold 1992: 59)

To conclude, just as the writer’s parody of McCarthyism in *Catch-22* remains clearly evident, his crucial point seems ambiguous. Following the conception delineated by Klehr, Haynes and Firsov (1995: 326-7), who said that “the situation in America in the late 1940s and 1950s was much more complicated than is suggested by the view that an idealistic, innocent Communist movement was persecuted by a paranoid security apparatus. Although many innocent people were harassed, the secret world of the CPUSA made such excesses possible,” Heller tempts the reader to trace darkening tones within the novel where all seemingly clear-cut distinctions become blurred. Most characters may just as well be perceived as both oppressors and victims of circumstances, and the common acceptance of the image of the military industrial complex as the only enemy is just a partial truth. Yossarian, Dunbar, Wintergreen, Milo, Korn, Black, Cathcart, Scheisskopf, Dreedle, Major Major, Clevinger, and Nately all thrive on abuse, recrimination, and slander - a confirmation of a slogan which Heller (qtd. in Merrill 1996: 151) seems to be endorsing for all its ambiguity and grotesque: “we have met the enemy, and it is us.”

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