The American Romance-Parody: A Study of Purdy's *Malcolm* and Heller's *Catch-22*

by Constance Denniston*

I

The Structure Of The American Romance-Parody

Parody of the romance is not usually recognized in the American novel. Northrop Frye in *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), was the first critic to deal with the parody of romance as a separate genre.[1] Perhaps parody as a long piece of fiction is not recognized because it so often appears as a shorter form, a poem, a short story, or an essay, and is not expected to appear in a novel-length form. Another difficulty in recognizing parody lies in the fact that the form often parodies itself, and subsequently it is difficult to know where the serious writing ends and parody begins.[2] A third reason that parody is not recognized in the romance form arises from the fact that the American parodies imitate a type of romance rather than the work of a specific writer, and, unless a reader knows the conventions of the romance and sees its structure, he is not likely to recognize a parody of it.

Many critics classify all long prose fiction into one genre, the novel, and do not distinguish between the principles governing the romance and those governing a novel. If a romance is judged according to the rules of novel writing, it will appear too unrealistic to be a first rate novel, and its characters will seem to lack development. But it is bad critical taste to judge one genre according to the traits of another.[3] In order to understand the romance, it is necessary for one to recognize the differences between this genre and the novel. The romance can, then, be judged according to the conventions and traits indigenous to it.

The romance does not present human action in the context of the everyday life of ordinary people. Hawthorne recognized the difference between the two forms and felt the need to explain their traits in his Preface to *The House of the Seven Gables,* since he was writing a romance and wished to show the difference between his work and the novel. Hawthorne writes:

> When a writer calls his work a romance, it need hardly be observed that he wishes to claim a certain latitude, both as to fashion and material, which he would not have felt himself entitled to assume, had he professed to be writing a novel. The latter form of composition is presumed to aim at a very minute fidelity, not merely to the possible, but to the probable and ordinary course of man's experience. The former—while, as a work of art, it must rigidly subject itself to

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* Mrs. Denniston is an Instructor in English at Kansas State Teachers College, Emporia. Portions of this study originated as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts, Kansas State Teachers College, Emporia.

[1] Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, pp. 231-39.

[2] William Van O'Connor, "Parody as Criticism," *College English,* XXV (January, 1964), 246-247.

[3] Frye, *op. cit.,* pp. 305-306.

> laws, and while it sins unpardonably so far as it may swerve aside from the truth of the human heart—has fairly a right to present that truth under circumstances, to a great extent, of a writer's own choosing or creation.[4]

Edwin Muir notes that if a piece of fiction makes use of flat, generalized characters, it will employ a complicated plot, but if the characters are highly individualized, the plot tends to be general and simple.[5] The former observation describes the romance; the latter, the novel. The characters of the romance tend to be idealized types rather than specific individuals. The tendency of the novel is to show character in varying shades of grey, whereas the tendency of the romance is to show character in terms of black and white or good and evil. Each age reveals its aspirations toward the ideal through the romance; the heroes represent the ideal and the villains, threats to that ideal.[6] These characters do not depend for their vitality upon their similarity to ordinary people. Instead, they derive it from their similarity to ancient heroes who are conceived of as being much above the stature of ordinary men.[7] The characters of a romance, therefore, expand into archetypes.[8] On the other hand, characters of the novel have a sociological, biological existence, unlike those of the romance who are inscrutable and mysterious and have a legendary existence.[9]

The plot of the romance is also more complex than that of the novel. The romance recounts numerous events, and often an event will be repeated. Futhermore, these events seem to have a processional, linear movement as seen, for example, in the use of the pageant wagons of the Middle Ages.[10] In other words, Gothic space seems unfocused so that it appears to be more interested in action than in pictorial effects.[11] *Moby Dick* is a modern example of the linear accents of the romance: Ahab and his crew meet a variety of ships and have numerous confrontations with the white whale. Each ship encountered brings more news of the whale or reveals a deeper conflict in the story. Thus, the suspense and significance of the voyage heighten with each new encounter. The novel, on the other hand, tends to utilize a minimum of plot. The action will focus upon a few events and, sometimes, upon a single event. Henry James' *The Ambassadors* is an example of this kind of plot unity, for there is little action, and most of the novel is focused upon the hero, Lambert Strether, while he waits for Chad Newsome to make up his mind to come home. James centers the attention on the mental attitudes of Lambert Strether.

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[4]Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The House of the Seven Gables*, p. iii.

[5]Edwin Muir, "Novels of Action and Character," reprinted in *Approaches to the Novel*, pp. 171-179.

[6]Frye, *op. cit.*, p. 186.

[7]Hawthorne, *op. cit.*, p. v.

[8]Frye, *op. cit.*, p. 304.

[9]Richard Chase, *The American Novel and Its Tradition*, pp. 12-13.

[10]Wylie Sypher, *Four Stages of Renaissance Style*, p. 51.

[11]*Loc. cit.*

Then, too, the novel is more coherent than the romance.[12] Typical features of the romance are conflicts, enchantments, masked identities and numerous events. These events are improbable, rather than ordinary. Characters therein are types of prominent stature. The romance is, therefore, more symbolic than naturalistic, more legendary than factual.[13] The medieval romance, especially, is more concerned with the symbolism within an event than with its historicity.[14]

The structure of a romance takes the form of a quest, which has three stages. The first stage introduces the hero of a search, and he undergoes a series of minor trials. The climax, the second stage, brings the hero to his major encounter, in which he tries to overcome his enemy. The third stage involves the subsequent elevation of the hero.[15] Furthermore, this elevation takes place, regardless of whether the hero has been victorious or defeated in his conflict with the enemy.[16]

The conventions of the romance form lend themselves readily to the contradictions of American experience. Richard Chase in concluding his book, *The American Novel and Its Tradition*, says that American literature shows life in the context of unresolved tensions and irreconcilable conflicts.[17] The violent paradoxes of American experience can best be accommodated by the romance, as its form is not obliged to render factual detail or sociological data.[18] The old novel of manners, so capable of depicting social classes, was ineffectual in the business of explaining the absurdities in American life. On the other hand, the romance, the more symbolic form, is more appropriate, because it handles absurdity as a matter of convention. The masquerade, another convention of the romance, is a device which lends itself to the paradox; things are not what they seem on the surface. Another face lies hidden.[19]

The isolation of the hero from society is the basic assumption of much modern fiction, and the pattern of the romance fits this assumption.[20] The hero in the convention of the romance is isolated from society in two ways: First, because he is above ordinary human beings in stature, he is automatically isolated from common men;[21] second, the hero's quest takes him upon a search, during the course of which he must leave home.

The isolation of the hero from society, his search for identity, and the paradoxical situations in which he finds himself—all are ideas which lend themselves more readily to the romance than to the novel of manners. They find their way into American literature and are used so often by critics to describe American fiction that they have tended to

[12] Chase, *op. cit.*, p. 22.
[13] *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13.
[14] R. W. Barber, *Arthur of Albion*, p. 130.
[15] Frye, *op. cit.*, p. 187.
[16] *Ibid.*, p. 187.
[17] Chase, *op. cit.*, p. 244.
[18] Ihab Habib Hassan, *Radical Innocence*, pp. 110-111.
[19] Daniel G. Hoffman, *Form and Fable in American Fiction*, p. 355.
[20] Hassan, *op. cit.*, p. 104.
[21] *Ibid.*, p. 113.

become clichés. Chase even shows that the use of the romance form in American fiction has prevailed from Hawthorne to the present.[22]

While Ihab Hassan admires the completeness with which Chase examines the romance in American fiction, he also notes that Chase does not deal with the parody of the romance.[23] Hassan believes that many American romances have the quality of self-parody, and, Hoffman agrees, Americans sometimes write legends and tales of god-like heroes, treating them ironically or satirically.[24] To say that American fiction uses the elements of the romance is not a total picture of romance fiction, because some fictions are satiric imitations of the romance. Frye describes this form as a romance-parody.

Frye defines the romance-parody as a structure which subjects the mythic properties of the romance to everyday experience. When these two opposing forces, the mythic and the mundane meet, their differences result in alarming contradictions and ironies. Thus the romance disintegrates to a certain extent when presented in the context of everyday experience.[25]

The parody uses both satire and irony to belittle the ideals of the romance. Satire measures the humane against the grotesque.[26] To describe a man in terms of a pig is satire. Irony is much more difficult to recognize, for when irony is heaviest, the reader is often not certain what his attitude should be or what the author intends.[27] Masks are ironic because the wearer appears to be one thing, while underneath the façade he is another.

Frye describes parody in six phases. The first two are largely satiric and near to comedy. The last is more ironic and near to tragedy.[28] The sixth phase is most essential to the description of American parodies. This phase, according to Frye, presents life in the context of permanent bondage, where the only release is death, for social tyranny is inescapable. The enslaved characters are often parodies of romantic roles; those saintly in the romance may become demonic in the parody. The female is a malicious *femme fatale*, the Christ is an antichrist, and the parent, an evil guardian.[29]

When romantic roles are parodied, comic heroes lose their stature to become sickly weaklings.[30] These heroes often appear in American frontier humor. Walter Blair, in his study of the heroes of American legends, notes that these figures are often unrefined and self-reliant. There are two major types, the Yankee, a crafty opportunist, who usually

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[22]Chase, *op. cit.*, p. 20.
[23]Hassan, *op. cit.*, pp. 109-111.
[24]Hoffman, *op. cit.*, pp. 16-23.
[25]Frye, *op. cit.*, p. 223.
[26]*Ibid.*, p. 233-235.
[27]*Ibid.*, p. 224.
[28]*Ibid.*, pp. 224-238.
[29]*Ibid.*, p. 238.
[30]*Loc. cit.*

appears as a ubiquitous peddler, and the woodsman, a simple man of great physical strength. These two heroes represent an American's comic view of himself.[31] In the American parody, the strong self-reliant hero is diminished in size until he is below the stature of an ordinary man. He is too naive to be comic and too perverse to be tragic; the comic element recedes to the demonic, the tragic to the ironic.[32] While it is comic to see a man of high social position slip on a banana peel and fall, it is not comic to see a cripple in the same predicament. When a great man is caught unaware and falls, it is comic, but when a cripple falls, he suffers pain, and only a demonic observer would then laugh.[33]

The crippled hero cannot be comic, but neither can he be tragic. Only a strong figure, above the stature of ordinary men, can be tragic. Christ and Prometheus are the heroes of the tragic myth, because they are extraordinary in virtue and are sacrificial figures.[34] Job is the figure of the parody because he suffers without being tragic. He is merely diminished, not victimized. His predicament is ironic, not tragic.[35]

Parody has a way of turning everything upside-down, and the romance-parody is no exception. Not only has the hero become unheroic; all other conventions of the romance are also made to achieve an opposite effect through the use of irony. The conventional isolation of the hero in the romance shows the hero's ability to stand alone. He is alone by choice and is not at odds with his society.[36] In the parody, the hero is not self-contained; he is isolated because he is a misfit of one kind or another and is not strong enough to stand alone.[37] The convention of the masquerade in the romance reveals identity through the act of unmasking, usually at the climax of a story. In the parody, the unmasking does not reveal identity; for when one mask is taken off, another more bewildering than the first is revealed. The conventional search of the romance leads the hero into the light, but in the parody, the hero's search ends in confusion and darkness. Even if the hero believes that he has become enlightened, the enlightenment is false, and he has been duped. The quest, then, leads to rebirth or redemption in the romance, but in the parody, there is no redemption for the hero. The gods have deserted man, and a demon rules. The conventional use of absurdity in the romance signifies the supernatural.[38] Absurdities in the parody, on the other hand, signify only that life is illogical or diseased.[39] The romance shows life to be more glorious and meaningful than the experiences of ordinary men; parody of the romance, on the other hand, shows life to be more hideous and less meaningful than the experiences of ordinary men.

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[31]Hassan, *op. cit.*, p. 119.
[32]*Ibid.*, p. 119.
[33]W. H. Auden, "Notes on the Comic," *Thought*, XXVII (Spring, 1952), p. 60.
[34]Frye, *op. cit.*, p. 42.
[35]*Loc. cit.*
[36]Hassan, *op. cit.*, p. 113.
[37]*Ibid.*, p. 114.
[38]J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon (eds.), *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, p. xi.
[39]Hassan, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

The romance-parody essentially follows the three successive stages of the romance mentioned by Frye: a series of minor trials, the major conflict, and elevation of the hero. In the parody, however, the final stage is reversed: the hero is not elevated. Here, his quest has brought no light to him and no order to his society. In some parodies there is a false elevation of the hero, a mock celebration, and because the hero is naive, he thinks his defeat, a success.

This study proposes to examine a parody of the conventions of the romance of love and war in selections from American literature: James Purdy's *Malcolm* as a love-parody; and Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, as a parody of war. These works possess the qualities and structure of the romance, but each parodies the romance. Conventions of the romance are used ironically and in an opposite context from the way in which they are used in the romance. They are satiric imitations of the romance.

These romance-parodies have received much adverse criticism. They are often judged according to the principles of the sociological novel. When this criticism occurs, they are judged as too unrealistic or ridiculous to be first rate; when they are judged as romances, they are thought to be defective structurally because the last stage, the elevation of the hero, seems to be false. The ironic ending confuses some critics, because, as Frye has pointed out, when the irony is the heaviest, it is difficult to know what the author is doing and what he intends. If the critic does not recognize the form as a parody, he is apt to be bewildered and shift the blame to the author, accusing him of being confused by his own story.

II

Malcolm A Parody Of Love

When James Purdy's *Malcolm* was first published, critics described this book as a fantasy, but many saw little or no significance in its inventiveness. Maurice Richardson believed the book was too ridiculous to be considered first-rate.[40] Granville Hicks thought the book masterful in style, but obscure in meaning.[41] Whitney Balliet considered the book superficial and dull but felt that it was a strange genre that seemed to parody myth.[42] Richardson considered the book a failure because its mixture of comedy, fantasy, and realism did not blend.[43] These comments are rather typical of the initial reviewers who saw no coherent meaning in Purdy's novel.

The meaning and structure of the book, however, become clear when one treats it as a parody of the romance. The plot of *Malcolm* fits the pattern of the romance-parody. Malcolm, the hero, goes upon a quest which is presented in three stages. In the first stage, the hero withstands a series of minor trials, followed by a major trial, or the second stage of the romance-parody. The third stage is the false elevation of the hero. The characterizations in *Malcolm* are also flat like those of the romance-parody, and Purdy's hero is the ironic or unheroic hero so typical of this genre.

The plot of *Malcolm* is circular in motion. Malcolm, a teen-age youth, first appears, sitting on a bench outside his hotel, awaiting his father. His father will never return. He receives four addresses from an astrologer, Mr. Cox, who intends to acquaint the boy with the world. In this way, Malcolm, as an innocent bystander, is introduced to a series of love affairs between couples. In each male lover, Malcolm seeks to find a replacement for his lost father, but fails. In the last episode, Malcolm is isolated from the world of Mr. Cox and accepts a proposal of marriage from a narcissistic, teenage singer. He is the object of his wife's lust, and, consequently, dies of overindulgence in sex and liquor. In the beginning of the work, the waiting boy is described as one with an empty stare who has become part of his bench, a useless ornament that not even old ladies will sit upon. This symbolic state of death in which Malcolm first appears becomes a fact at the end of the book, and Malcolm is found to be in essentially the same position at the end of the book as he was at its beginning.

The characters of Purdy's book are representative types rather than specific individuals. They represent various types of psychotic lovers. Madame Girard's love for Molcolm is idolatrous. Jerome is a sadistic

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[40]Maurice Richardson, "New Novels," *New Statesman*, LIX (May 7, 1960), p. 688.
[41]Granville Hicks, "Literary Horizons," *SR*, XLII (September 26, 1959), 15.
[42]Whitney Balliet, "Underseas with Purdy and Humes," *New Yorker*, XXXV (December 19, 1959), 138.
[43]Richardson, *op. cit.*, p. 688.

lover, and Melba, Malcolm's wife, is narcissistic. Perverted forms of paternal and maternal lovers are also represented. Each character, in his own way, is a parody of the ideal lover.

Each of Mr. Cox's addresses presents a couple involved in some diseased form of love. The first address is that of Cora Naldi and Estel Blanc, a dark-skinned, forty-year-old, retired mortician. Estel Blanc admits that he keeps Cora Naldi and pays her a salary to entertain guests by singing and dancing, because she faithfully sang for him at funerals in the days when he was a mortician. His love for Cora Naldi is, however, a selfish, sentimental love, and he reveals his hypocrisy when he finds fault with the way in which Cora Naldi sings. He does not wish to hear her voice; only the lyrics he has written.

Kermit and Laureen Raphaelson live at the second address. Their marriage represents another form of diseased love. Kermit is a quarrelsome midget who treats his wife like a child. He orders her about and punishes her when she is disobedient. He punishes her by sending her into a room of fifteen cats, some of which are malicious. When she gets scratched, he takes pity upon her and pats her on the head in a fatherly way. Kermit's paternal love for his wife is domineering and possessive.

A wealthly financier, Girard Girard, and his wife, Madame Girard, are the third address on Malcolm's list. Madame Girard's love for Girard is a malicious form of maternal love. She commands him and rejoices in her victories over him. He, on the other hand, has love affairs with servant girls. He idolizes Madame Girard, but when he finally sees that she is not the god-like woman he believed her to be, his love for her suddenly disintegrates, and he leaves her to marry Laureen Raphaelson. He tells Madame Girard that he is unhappy with her because she is sterile and can bear no children to inherit his huge fortune. She is upset by his leaving, for it seems to her that her husband may have scored a victory over her. But she soon changes her defeat into victory by keeping her title, Madame Girard, which is far more important to her than keeping her husband. Madame Girard, then, loves her husband as a domineering mother loves her naughty, uncontrollable son, and Girard's love for her is, in the beginning, idolatrous.

The fourth address on Malcolm's list is a married couple who represent a masochistic and a sadistic lover. Jerome Brace, recently released from imprisonment for burglary, is proud of his past crimes and receives pleasure from making his wife suffer. His wife, Eloisa, has divorced her first husband to marry Jerome, because her first husband was rich and kind! She tells Malcolm that she loves the poverty, chaos, and misery that Jerome has provided for her and that the marriage is especially satisfactory to Jerome because it is similar to his life in prison which he enjoyed. Jerome and Eloisa are handcuffed to each other by reason of mutual dependence: he enjoys inflicting pain, and she loves to receive it.

Malcolm's marriage to Melba, America's sex symbol, is perhaps the most degrading of all the pictures of married love. There is no com-

munication between Malcolm and Melba. Melba uses Malcolm to satisfy her own selfish desires; she is too selfish to love, while Malcolm is too naive to love. Both believe their marriage to be excellent, because Melba enjoys using Malcolm, and Malcolm enjoys being used. Their marriage is not unlike animal existence.

Purdy's love-parody takes the form of a quest, presented in three stages. In the first stage, the hero's minor conflicts consist of a series of addresses which he visits at the request of a demonic astrologer. The second stage is the hero's marriage, and the third is the mock elevation of the hero to a god-like position, which brings only superficial order to society.

In the first stage of the quest, Malcolm, at the insistence of an astrologer, Mr. Cox, goes upon a journey involving a series of addresses. Mr. Cox serves as a father image to Malcolm, who, in turn, plays the role of the obedient son.

The second stage or major conflict of the quest is embodied in Malcolm's marriage. While waiting for Girard at the horticultural gardens, Malcolm meets Gus, a teenager, on a motorcycle. Gus takes him to a night club where Melba, Gus's ex-wife, is singing. Melba says that she recognizes Malcolm as one of her "category" because he is in her age group. This explanation seems to Malcolm to be reason enough to fall in love, and within a few minutes after their meeting, Melba announces her engagement to Malcolm. The marriage is a perfect one, as far as Malcolm and Melba are concerned. Malcolm, having no will of his own, happily takes orders from his wife, namely ". . . to drink more and have more frequent conjugal duties with her."[44] Malcolm has no sense of pain or restraint and becomes addicted to both alchohol and sex and, as a result, loses weight, grows weak, and dies. He sacrifices himself, not out of love, but out of his inability to do anything else. He looks to Melba for direction, but she is immature and unknowingly directs him to his own destruction.

The third stage of the quest, the mock elevation of the hero, begins with Malcolm on his death bed. This episode is a parody of the death and resurrection of Christ. As he is dying, Malcolm has a vision of a father coming for him. In a coma, he shouts, "Estel Blanc on a white mare!"[45] He shouts for joy several times as though his quest is at last successful. After his death, his body receives a lavish funeral, arranged, paid for, and attended by Madame Girard alone. The circumstances surrounding the funeral are shrouded in mystery. The coroner and undertaker insist that there was no body in the casket and that no one was buried in the ceremony. Malcolm's body seems miraculously to have escaped decay. A year after Malcolm's death, rumor spreads among Mr. Cox's circle of friends that Malcolm is alive again. The similarity between Christ and Malcolm is, of course, ironic, for Malcolm's death

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[44]James Purdy, *Malcolm*, p. 153.
[45]*Ibid.*, p. 155.

is meaningless. He is unaware that he is a sacrificial object, and instead of returning to the father image of the Creator, Malcolm returns to a father image that symbolizes death. He cries out for Estel Blanc, the mortician, and of course, the name, *Blanc,* only serves to emphasize the meaninglessness of Malcolm's death. Malcolm's resurrection is equally pointless, assuming the significance of idle gossip that is soon forgotten.

As Christ's death brought salvation to the world, so Malcolm's death also seems to have wrought changes upon his friends in the form of a mock rebirth. All achieve their worldly goals, shallow and ridiculous as they are. Mr. Cox finds a new student who withstands visits to twenty-five of his addresses and surpasses his master in astrology. Girard Girard and Laureen have six male children to inherit their fortune. Estel Blanc becomes an entrepreneur of an opera company, and Cora Naldi has a permanent job as his guest star. Madame Girard becomes attached to a young Italian biochemist, and Kermit marries a rich movie star who will support him. Eloisa Brace loses her talent for art, but she and Jerome take up social work. Melba breaks her previous records by staying married for more than five years, (to her valet) and is almost happy even though her singing voice has left her.

Obviously, the third stage of the romance is parodied in *Malcolm.* The elevation of the hero and the restoration of order are both superficial. The deep-rooted sickness, the failure to love, reaches a high point at the end of Purdy's book.

Northrop Frye's sixth phase of parody is also evident in *Malcolm.* This phase presents malicious parental figures and figures of bondage. Mr. Cox, symbolically a coxswain guiding the lives of those in his address book, tyrannizes all his subjects. Within the Cox circle, Estel Blanc, Kermit Raphaelson, Madame Girard, and Jerome Brace demand submission from their mates. Their mates are figures of bondage, not free to act according to their will.

Purdy's book is structured upon intentional ambiguities.[46] The most domineering characters are the weakest. Madame Girard needs a title in order to be sure of her own existence. Kermit must be supported financially. Jerome Brace needs to inflict pain in order to feel alive. The civilized mannerliness of Purdy's characters is ambiguous, for it is only a mask for the cruel, the fearful, or the naive.[47] The hero is an ambiguous figure, for he seeks maturity, but remains a child. He is the desire of everyone's eye, but is left homeless and forgotten. Even while he lies dying, his wife is planning to elope with her valet. Madame Girard clings to him after his death by reading a diary he wrote while feverish and in a delirium, but the record Malcolm leaves to the world is that of hopeless gibberish.

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[46] Webster Schott, "James Purdy: American Dreams," Nation, CXCVIII (March 23, 1964), 300-303.

[47] Donald Cook, "By the World Possessed," *New Republic,* CXLI (November 9, 1959), 26-27.

III

Catch-22: A Parody Of War

Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* was published in 1961, and the adverse criticism it has received is strikingly similar to that received by the other work dealt with in this paper. One critic feels that the characters of Heller's book are not drawn with enough individuality.[48] Another critic thinks that there are simply too many characters to deal with any one in depth, and concludes that, in general, the book is too complicated to be comprehended.[49] The book reviewer of *Time* feels that, because of its episodic structure, *Catch-22* is a formless piece of fiction.[50] A number of critics believe that Heller's chief weakness is his inability to write humor. They believe that Heller intended to write a comic book, but failed because he repeated and elaborated upon his jokes to the extent that they are more grim than funny.[51]

The objections to *Catch-22* stem from the fact that the book does not fit the category of the novel, but, rather, seems to be a mixture of genres. Though the book has some of the characteristics of the novel, many of its characteristics are those of the romance—such as the flatness of character, the repetition of events, and the linear accents of the structure inherent in its make up—and it is these elements of the romance that some critics find objectionable. They seem to demand that a work of fiction be either a novel or a romance, a symbolic literature or a naturalistic one, a tragedy or a comedy, but never a mixture of these.

The romance-parody is a mixture of genres, and the structure of *Catch-22* is such a mixture. Heller, by using opposing elements within the structure of his book, wrote a fiction with startling clashes. The comic and tragic elements are mixed to produce ironies. Heller used a mixed genre quite intentionally. He says of *Catch-22:*

> I tried consciously for a comic effect juxtaposed with the tragic, working the frivolous in with the catastrophic. I wanted people to laugh and then look back with horror at what they were laughing at.[52]

The entire structure of the book consists of the juxtaposition of two groups of characters and two plots. The ideals of the war romance are shown in reverse, and the comic element recedes into irony. A study of the mixture of the opposing elements of Heller's work will show that *Catch-22* is typical of the romance-parody.

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[48]Spencer Klaw, "Airman's Wacky War," *New York Herald Tribune,* XXXVIII (Sunday, October 15, 1961), p 8.

[49]Granville Hicks, "Medals for Madness," *SR,* XLIV (October 14, 1961), 32-33.

[50]"Good Soldier Yossarian," *Time,* LXXVIII (October 27, 1961), p. 97.

[51]Klaw, *op. cit.,* p. 8. *Time, op. cit.,* p. 98. William Barrett, "Two Newcomers," *Atlantic,* CCLX (January, 1962), p. 98.

[52]"So They Say: Guest Editors Interview Six Creative People," *Madamoiselle,* LVII (August, 1963), 234-335.

Catch-22 has more than three dozen characters, and all but the hero are of nearly equal importance. The huge cast of characters presents a cross-section of life, and the great variety of characters can only be supported by the romance form which deals with flat characterizations.

The character types of this work are parodies of those found in the American romances. In the upside-down world of *Catch-22*, the characters fall into two categories, the aggressors and the victims. The aggressors are Yankee types who express their American know-how and individuality in a will to power. These naive and arrogant Yankees succeed by bullying those they cannot deceive. Heller's description of the farmer is an example of his satire of the Yankee character:

> Major Major's father was a sober, God-fearing man whose idea of a good joke was to lie about his age. He was a long-limbed, freedom-loving, law-abiding rugged individualist who held that federal aid to anyone but farmers was creeping socialism. He advocated thrift and hard work and disapproved of loose women who turned him down. His specialty was alfalfa, and he made a good thing of not growing any. The government paid him well for every bushel of alfalfa he did not grow. The more alfalfa he did not grow, the more money the government gave him, and he spent every penny he didn't earn on new land to increase the amount of alfalfa he did not produce.[53]

The officers who run the machinery of the war are examples of selfishness and maliciousness; they desire to advance themselves at the expense of the lives of men they command. Heller says of one officer: "Colonel Cathcart had courage and never hesitated to volunteer his men for any target available."[54] Another officer who is foolish enough to beat Major .... de Coverly at a game of horseshoes is stricken with a severe disease as a result.[55] Milo Minderbinder is the officer in charge of buying for the mess hall, and he uses his office to make quick profits. He believes that war should be run as a business and says, " . . . what's good for the syndicate is good for the country."[56] As boss of the syndicate, Milo is responsible for directing a bombing raid against his own squadron in order to make a profit. General Peckham is described as a man who believes only in himself. He says, "My only fault . . . is that I have no faults."[57] American officers are as dangerous to the American enlisted men as are the Germans. The Germans can be defeated, but the American commanders are too powerful to be undermined, and their evil power will not subside when the war with the Germans comes to an end.

Yossarian and his friends are victims. They are sensitive to the brutalities in the world; they are cheated and maligned and are helpless to do anything about it. They are not aggressive and are, therefore, misfits in a world where only power has value. Doc Daneeka, Hungry Joe, Chief Halfoat, and Orr are a few examples of the long list of misfits who

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[53]Joseph Heller, *Catch-22*, p. 85.
[54]*Ibid.*, p. 57.
[55]*Ibid.*, p. 94. The blank in the major's name is written here as it appears in *Catch-22*.
[56]*Ibid.*, p. 238.
[57]*Ibid.*, p. 328.

are among Yossarian's friends. Doc Daneeka is " . . . a neat, clean man whose idea of a good time was to sulk."[58] Hungry Joe has " . . . a desolate, cratered face, sooty with care like an abandoned mining town."[59] Chief Halfoat is " . . . a glowering, disillusioned, vengeful Indian."[60] Orr is " . . . an eccentric midget, a freakish, likable dwarf with a thousand valuable skills that would keep him in the lower income group all his life."[61] The victims are aware of the fact that they are in immediate danger of a violent and meaningless death.

Catch-22 has a double plot, one concerning the aggressors in their struggle to gain power, the other concerning the hero, Yossarian, in his struggle to live. In the plot concerning the aggressors, one American general declares war on another. General Peckham is head of Special Services, and while at that post, he gives Special Services authority over all other branches of the service. Later, General Peckham leaves Special Services and declares war on General Dreedle and obtains the top post as wing commander. Lieutenant Scheisskopf is left to command Special Services when General Peckham transfers out of that branch, but Peckham forgets to void his memorandum giving Special Services the highest command. Peckham defeats Dreedle, only to find that he is under Scheisskopf, who has been promoted to Lieutenant General. Scheisskopf is described as a man who wants war because he loves to wear a uniform and direct parades. When he becomes the top commander, he orders the divisions to line up for a parade. The plot concerning the aggressors ends in complete absurdity.

The plot concerning the victims centers around the quest of the hero, Yossarian. The three stages of the romance are evident in the hero's quest, and the third stage is reversed. The celebration of Yossarian as hero is a mockery, and the end of *Catch-22* is typical of the pattern of the romance-parody.

Yossarian's quest is a basic one. He wants to stay alive. He will accept death as an eventual necessity, but is unwilling to allow others to kill him or to die as a victim of circumstances.[62] After moving the bomb line on the map so that his company will not have to fly a bombing mission over Bologna, Yossarian explains that he is unwilling to fly the mission just because " . . . the colonel wants to be a general."[63] The mission over Bologna is a volunteer mission, and Colonel Cathcart, in order to gain prestige, volunteers Yossarian's company for extra missions.

The first thirty-eight chapters of *Catch-22* present the first stage of the hero's quest. The first stage is a series of episodes in which Yossarian avoids death through deceit, caution, cleverness or outward defiance.[64]

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[58] *Ibid.*, p. 33.
[59] *Ibid.*, p. 53.
[60] *Ibid.*, p. 44.
[61] *Ibid.*, p. 321.
[62] Robert Brustein, "The Logic of Survival in a Lunatic World," *New Republic*, CXLV (November 13, 1963), 11.
[63] Heller, *op. cit.*, p. 126.
[64] Brustein, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

The second stage of the hero's quest, the major conflict, takes place in Chapter XXXIX, "The Eternal City." Yossarian goes absent without leave to Rome to try to save Nately's Whore's young sister. He soon realizes that to find the girl is a hopeless task. He is surrounded by devastation and is a helpless bystander in an inferno of hate and destruction. In Rome, he has a vision of transcendent evil.[65] The hero sees a sick world:

> The night was filled with horrors, and he thought he knew how Christ must have felt as he walked through the world, like a psychiatrist through a ward full of nuts, like a victim through a prison of thieves.[66]

Yossarian sees a man beating a small boy to death while a sinister crowd looks on. A short time later Yossarian sees the police beating a man, his blood and teeth splattering on the street, while the man himself, as a matter of form, desperately calls for the police to help him. Yossarian goes to the officers' apartment only to find that his friend Aarfy has raped and killed the maid, and she is lying dead on the pavement below the window. As the sound of sirens draws near, Yossarian tries to explain to Aarfy that rape and murder are terrible crimes and that the police are coming to arrest him. But when the M. P.s arrive, they ignore the dead body, arrest Yossarian for being absent without leave, apologize to Aarfy for intruding, and put Yossarian in jail.

In this climactic chapter, Yossarian learns that there is no justice in the world; the good are victims in the hands of malicious forces which exist in overpowering numbers. In his major trial, in his attempt to save the innocent from being victimized, the hero fails.

The third stage of the romance-parody begins with Chapter XL. This stage presents the mock celebration of the protagonist as hero. Yossarian is brought before Colonel Cathcart and Colonel Korn because he has been absent without leave. The two colonels are anxious to be rid of Yossarian, a constant source of irritation and embarrassment to them, and they offer him a bargain. Yossarian agrees to their terms—when they send him home, he will speak well of them. As Yossarian leaves, Nately's Whore tries to knife him, but the two colonels frighten her away. In order to keep Yossarian on their side, Colonel Cathcart and Colonel Korn report the incident in such a way as to make Yossarian a hero. According to the report, Yossarian has stopped a Nazi spy from stabbing them. The knife of Nately's Whore, and a grim recollection of the macabre details of the death of his friend, Snowden, remind Yossarian of his own mutability, and he realizes that his bargain with the colonels is just another form of death. Under the circumstances, he decides that it is better to be free than to be a hero in the hands of his superiors. He breaks his bargain and gleefully decides to flee to Sweden where he can govern himself. He knows that the risk of being shot is great and

[65]Brustein, *op. cit.*, p. 13.
[66]Heller, *op. cit.*, p. 424.

that the journey is long. As he leaves, the hero's emotions are a mixture of jubilation and fear. On the first step of his journey, Yossarian jumps aside, and Nately's Whore, knife in hand, misses her mark.

The book ends with the beginning of Yossarian's journey, and the plot has a circular motion. The story opens with Yossarian's pretending to be sick to escape death at the hands of malicious tyrants, and ends with his flight to Sweden so that he may be free of tyranny. He is like a man forever standing in a sea on melting chunks of ice, forced to jump to a larger piece of ice as it melts.

Yossarian's predicament is, therefore, typical of the ironic hero in bondage described by Northrop Frye. In this state, the victims are too weak to overthrow the tyrants, and, in the case of Yossarian, his decision to run away does not make his life any more secure. He is typical of the unheroic hero of ironic fiction. The hero seeks a goal that is unattainable; Sweden, a symbolic Eden, cannot be found in a world of meaningless cruelty and violence. Yossarian will never be free from those who seek to destroy him, and death itself will be his only release from the fears he suffers.

The title of Heller's book, *Catch-22*, is taken from an army regulation that is symbolic of inescapable bondage. This regulation is a Fascistic rule which does not let men do what they want to do, but which forces them to do what they do not want to do. Catch-22 states that if a man wants to fly missions, he is crazy and must be grounded, but if he does not want to fly missions and asks to be grounded, he is sane and must continue to fly missions. The catch-22 regulation also states that no one has a right to examine it or question its validity. Near the end of the book, the military police push the whores out into the street and confiscate their home. The police obtain the authority for this action from the catch-22 regulation. The old woman who is left to tell Yossarian of the fate of the women says, "Catch-22 says they [the military] have a right to do anything we can't stop them from doing."[67] Yossarian tells her that she should have asked to see the regulation, but she says, "They don't have to show us Catch-22. . . . The law says they don't have to."[68]

In the last chapter of the book, the hero takes an existentialist attitude toward life. Once he assumes full responsibility for himself and disowns military life, his struggle to stay alive becomes a joyful pursuit. This decision is an important change in the attitude of the hero, because, up to this point, he had considered himself a part of a huge military force, and the fact that he had to be nimble to stay alive was nauseous to him. At the end of the novel, the hero celebrates life and decides to fight for it outside the framework of military ranks. When Major Danby warns Yossarian that it is impossible to get to Sweden, Yossarian replies, "Hell Danby, I know that. But at least I'll be trying."[69] The major also tells

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[67]*Ibid.*, p. 416.
[68]*Loc. cit.*
[69]*Ibid.*, p. 462.

Yossarian that his journey will not be a happy one, but the hero replies with exuberance, "Yes it will."[70] Thus, the book ends upon an ironic note: the hero filled with conviction begins a journey that is perhaps futile, but he has reached the existentialist point on the other side of despair, a point of self-fulfillment. He is fulfilling his own convictions, not those of military tyrants, and, for the first time, the hero has true courage.

War is the central symbol of Heller's book, and *Catch-22* is a parody of the war romance. The war is symbolic of all life.[71] Heller uses the war romance to point up the hypocrisy of man and the absurdity of life. The war romance celebrates the ideals of patriotism and heroism in the face of death, but, as we have seen, in *Catch-22*, the ideals of patriotism, love, and heroism are pretensions.

Patriotism in *Catch-22* is an absurdity. The high-ranking officials of the American army, fighting for self-interests, are at war with each other. In their struggle for power, the squadron commanders victimize those whom they command by demanding extra missions or by killing those who stand in the way of their progress. Patriotism can only exist when a country has a degree of unity. In *Catch-22*, the idea that war should be a unified effort, that Americans should fight for other Americans, does not seem to occur to the commanders.

Even the subject of death that traditionally belongs to the tragic modes of literature, especially in the case of the war romance, is parodied in *Catch-22*. In all cases, death is presented as being absurd and unheroic. In the opening chapter of the book, a soldier, covered in a white plaster cast, is in the hospital ward with Yossarian. The soldier's arms and legs are useless, and his senses are gone. He is fed through the arm from one jar, and the waste from his kidneys are drained into a jar on the floor. When the jar attached to his arm is emptied, it is switched with the one on the floor in a continuing process. The attempt to save life, when carried to this extreme, is shown to be absurd because, for all practical purposes, the man in the cast is dead.

Heller's parody is most brutal in the episode of Kid Sampson's death. Kid Sampson is spending a pleasant day at the beach with other bathers, when McWatt, who is a practical joker, playfully flies low over the bathers and accidentally hits Kid Sampson. The plane's propellers cut off Kid Sampson's body at the top of his legs. The description of this macabre incident is told through a grotesque technique of slap-stick comedy. Kid Sampson's legs stand alone for a minute, then fall back into the water and turn upside down, revealing the white underside of his feet, while the rest of his body, cut into the size of rain-drops, falls in a shower over the rest of the bathers. The incongruity of the comic technique with the tragic subject emphasizes the irony of death. Heller, then, follows up the accidental death with a suicide and a fake death.

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[70] *Ibid.*, p. 463.
[71] Brustein, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

McWatt, realizing that his playfulness has resulted in death, crashes his plane into a mountain, committing suicide. Sergeant Knight refers to his list of men that are supposed to be on McWatt's plane and, finding Doc Daneeka's name there, subsequently reports him dead. Doc Daneeka, however, is standing beside the sergeant and keeps protesting that he is alive. The army pays no attention to Doc Daneeka's plight because, as far as they are concerned, he is a name that is crossed off their list. The army sends a form letter to Mrs. Daneeka, announcing the death of her husband. The letter, designed to fit every case, points up the absurdity of efficiency that does not consider the personal implications of death. The letter sent to Mrs. Daneeka reads:

> Dear Mrs., Mr., Miss, or Mr. and Mrs. Daneeka:
> Words cannot express the deep personal grief I experienced when your husband, son, father, or brother was killed, wounded or reported missing in action.[72]

Before Mrs. Daneeka receives the form letter, she is overcome by grief because of an unofficial report of her husband's death. But when she receives large sums of money from insurance policies and her husband's friends flirt with her, she is so overjoyed that she has her hair dyed. Doc Daneeka writes her letters and pleads with her to consider him alive, but when the form letter arrives, stating that her husband's death is official, Mrs. Daneeka is so bewildered by the conflicting evidence that she decides to move, leaving no forwarding address. Mrs. Daneeka's solution again points up her inability to deal with the problem. Doc Daneeka's fake death is reminiscent of situation comedy with the exception that the problem is never solved. It remains as unsolvable as the problem of death itself.

In *Catch-22*, death is unheroic and meaningless. The episode of the soldier in white presents a living death, and Kid Sampson's death is as needless as McWatt's death is futile. In Doc Daneeka's case, death is an imposter.

Malcolm and *Catch-22* received much adverse criticism of a strikingly similar nature. These stories are considered by many critics to be unrealistic, because they show only a dark side of life, and formless, because they have episodic plots.

These works, however, do have a strict form unrecognized by many critics. They utilize the pattern and conventions of the romance, and parody them. Those critics who expect all fiction to imitate life in accordance with the standards of the novel are disappointed in these books because they do not imitate life—they imitate a literary form, the romance.

The masked identity, a convention of the romance, is used ironically in the romance-parody. The masks of the romance are stripped away at the end of the story, and the face underlying the mask reveals the true identity of a character. In the parody, identities are masked, but the ambiguity of the mask remains. Malcolm is a love object, but is in-

[72] *Ibid.*, p. 354.

different to love. Yossarian, in *Catch-22,* is a courageous coward. He receives his strength from fear. The identities of the figures of the romance-parody always remain ambiguous. The romance presents ideals, while the parody shatters those ideals. The vigorous hero of the romance is an unheroic hero in the parody. Order is restored in the romance; in the parody all society is absurd and chaotic.

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