

## **Catch-22's Omniscient Narrator: A Subtle Weapon in the Satiric Attack on American Business**

Kate Prudchenko

A Catch-22 is a rule that makes two opposing and contradictory claims, both of which are true. For example, a man who wants to fly many missions is insane because a sane man would not risk his life in this manner. Simultaneously, a man who does not want to go on flying missions is not insane because, if he were really insane, he would not mind flying the missions. In other words, Catch-22 confounds sanity and insanity, just as war does. This paradox is at the heart of Joseph Heller's novel which, among other things, explores the absurdity of military life during World War II. While *Catch-22's* numerous characters and seemingly non-chronological events present a rather convoluted plot, its third-person omniscient narrator helps Heller avoid preachy rhetoric in his satiric attack on American business.

*Catch-22* is divided into chapters that typically focus on different characters. The advantage of the third person omniscient narrator is that it gives the reader a fragmented view of reality by presenting various incidents from different perspectives with what appears to be a non-chronological plot. But events only seem out of order on the surface. In reality, the novel is structured around free associations and random connections between various characters and events. For example, in the first chapter, Yossarian uses the name Washington Irving to censor the letters he reads. The name is then adopted by Major Major, in chapter 9, who uses it to forge official documents prior to switching to John Milton. This use of free associations creates something of an inconsistent narrative that nevertheless strengthens the impact of the novel's satire. In particular, it allows Heller the opportunity to discuss different characters and events episodically.

The main character of *Catch-22* is Yossarian, a U.S. Army Air Forces B-25 bombardier, whose primary concern in life is to avoid getting killed. Yossarian's preoccupation with this idea is almost single-minded in focus and borders on paranoia. But unlike the main characters from other classic works of literature, including Huckleberry Finn, Yossarian is less of a prominent protagonist and more of a common thread that runs throughout the story. Heller launches his attack against one of the most important American institutions using the character of First Lieutenant Milo Minderbinder, a mess officer at the US Army Air Corps. Milo started a business called M & M enterprises. The two M's stood for Milo and Minderbinder and the "&" was inserted "to nullify any impression that the syndicate was a one-man operation" (Heller 253). This decision sheds light on two important details that encapsulate Heller's satire of American business. First, truth is inconsequential when it comes to the pursuit of profit and, second, egomania rules all. The one-man operation could have been disguised using any number of fake names, like M & K or M& T. But Milo's ego and pride do not allow him to part with any of the credit, even with a fictitious third-party.

Later in the same chapter, Milo's men painted over German swastikas and replaced them with the sign: M & M Enterprises, Fine Fruits and Produce. Once the syndicate grew into "an international cartel" and reached its saturation point

in clients, Milo formed “a whollyowned subsidiary” and expanded his operations into fancy pastries (Heller 254). Milo's corporate model is the quintessential American business, a stereotype that remains appropriate today. For instance, in 1919, the automobile manufacturer General Motors formed a subsidiary called GMAC in order to provide automobile financing and, in 1985, expanded their business into home purchases by forming GMAC Mortgage. In 1999, the company bought Bank of New York's asset-based lending and factoring business, acquired a number of mortgage loan operations including Ditech.com, and created GMAC Commercial Finance Group (Our History). In 2005, the enterprise launched Residential Capital, a new parent holding company for its global real estate mortgage business, before finally becoming a bank, in 2008. Unfortunately, the absurdity of a company transforming from an automobile manufacturer into a bank is so common in today's society that it is barely noticeable.

Besides satirizing the expansionist model of American business, Heller also satirizes the relationship between corporations and war. In chapter 24, Milo makes two deals, one with American authorities to bomb a bridge held by the Germans and another with German authorities to defend the bridge against his own bombing. Even though both countries paid large sums of money for their military contracts, Milo wastes none of the syndicate's resources “to bomb and defend the bridge” because both countries have “ample men and material right there to do so and were perfectly happy to contribute them” (Heller 255). As a result, Milo, like many military contractors, “realized a fantastic profit” off the war effort “for doing nothing more than signing his name twice” (Heller 255). As a character, Milo is the embodiment of capitalism and his willingness to contract with both sides of the war is a scathing satire of corporate America's uncompromising business tactics.

The third person limited omniscient narrator allows Heller to portray Yossarian as someone with a kind of sick fascination with Milo: “Yossarian thought that Milo was a jerk; but he also knew the Milo was a genius” (Heller 253). This portrayal is similar to American society's view of investment bankers. On one hand, society is astonished by Wall Street's lack of allegiance to the nation and their lack of remorse for closing factories and sending local jobs overseas. On the other hand, society is impressed by Wall Street's single-minded pursuit of profit and the traders' ability to make money out of almost nothing. Unfortunately, the American people only tend to be less impressed and more astonished during economic recessions, despite the fact that Wall Street's intentions, however deplorable, remain consistent throughout. Accordingly, Milo's approach to the structure of his syndicate is likewise satirical of the internal structure of corporations. In chapter 24, Major Danby points out that Milo's company is using German planes, to which Milo replies: “They are no such thing! Those planes belong to the syndicate, and everybody has a share” (Heller 254). This insistence on sharing is likewise found in corporate advertisements that refer to employees as family members in an effort to build loyalty and get the employees to invest their retirement. The sad reality, however, is that the corporation's ruthless pursuit of profit makes it impossible for them to be loyal in return. The betrayals are evident in the cutbacks and layoffs of low-level employees and in the stock splits of their 401(k) plans. The result is an entity, reminiscent of Soviet society, which acts solely for the good of the few at the top.

In addition to displaying yet another lack of allegiance to either his country or his fellow soldiers, Milo's response to Major Danby is also an example of the way that corporations tend to argue out of both sides of their mouth. On one hand, Wall Street firms lobby for less regulation in order to facilitate a kind of ultracompetitive, kill or be killed, approach to capitalism. On the other hand, they lobby in order to merge and consolidate until they are so ingrained in society that they are deemed "too big to fail" (Stern and Feldman ix). The result is a kind of corporate welfare in which their financial losses become subsidized by taxpayers. By talking out of both sides of their mouth, corporate America makes two opposing claims. Since both claims cannot be true, these actions are a kind of contemporary Catch-22.

By portraying Milo and his business ventures from the perspective of a third person omniscient narrator, Heller is able to present the readers with an overarching point of view. This view, which is grounded in facts, figures and details, is not muddled with unnecessary emotions. It allows events to unfold from an appropriate distance without incorporating an ounce of preachy rhetoric and the result is a highly effective satire of one the most important American institutions.

#### WORKS CITED

Heller, Joseph. *Catch-22*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004. Print.

"Our History." *Ally.com*. Ally Financial, n.d. Web. 20 October, 2011. <http://www.ally.com/about/company-structure/history/>

Stern, Gary & Feldman, Ron. (2004). *Too Big to Fail: The Hazards of Bank Bailouts*. Maryland: The Brookings Institution, 2004. Print.

**Ms. Kate Prudchenko**  
**Ph.D., Research Scholar**  
**Western New Mexico University**  
**Silver City, New Mexico**  
**United States of America**