THE PERSPECTIVE OF BLACK HUMOR: AN EXAMINATION OF A NEW DIRECTION IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

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PREFACE

There is always a question raised in relation to studies of literary innovations as to whether or not inquiry should be undertaken at all. There is always the charge, after all, that the phenomenon under examination may prove to be only a fad and disappear before any adequate assessment can be made of it. It is equally possible that the phenomenon, once having been examined, may not prove equal to the amount of time spent on it.

I do not, however, believe this to be the case with black humor. Awareness of the form and utilization of its techniques appear to be steadily increasing, not only in literature but in other art forms as well. I feel also that the philosophical conclusions of black humor are extremely relevant as a measure of current attitudes toward the human condition. Based on these considerations, I believe that the study has been worthwhile.

I should also like to extend my sincere thanks to my thesis committee, Dr. Clinton Keeler, Dr. Samuel H. Woods and Dr. Judson Milburn; to Dr. Mary Rohrberger; and to my wife, Peggy, who saw it through with me.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

"Much madness is divinest sense"
Emily Dickinson

> To establish a defence on the ground of insanity it must be clearly proved that, at the time of committing the act, the party accused was labouring under such a defect of reason, from disease of the mind, as not to know the nature and quality of the act he was doing, or, if he did know it, that he did not know he was doing what was wrong.[1]

In law the preceding statement is known as the "M'Naghten Rule" and is the basis for establishing insanity as a legal defense. The M'Naghten Rule is relevant to this study because it offers an illustration of a basic premise of black humor; the relation between insanity and morality.

The implication of the rule is that madmen cannot be held accountable for their actions because they are incapable of distinguishing right from wrong. The actions of a madman, therefore, can be said to be amoral rather than immoral. Applying this concept to the world created by the black humorists, it is possible to conclude that to the extent that black humor creates an insane humanity it also creates a world in which "normal" morality is no longer relevant or applicable.

To accept the ideas of black humor, it is first neces-

sary to accept the premise that the madman can be a metaphor for all men and that the basic position of humanity as presented in the black humor novel is intrinsic and immutable absurdity. It is further necessary to establish man as the sole author and creator of all things in order to put on man the full responsibility for his actions and to disassociate man from a god who can create, advise, or otherwise influence man and thus assume part of, if not all of, the responsibility for man's condition.

Man as an autonomous entity, the master of all he surveys, has classically always been good for a laugh. Occupying as he did a rather inconclusive position in the divine scheme of things, man originally seemed to have few compunctions about being presented as a schlemiel. The basic idea seemed to be that as long as man was subservient to God or gods, there seemed to be no particular objection to presenting his spasmodic activity as perhaps more entertaining than instructive. "What fools these mortals be" is a conclusion which lends itself not only to Puck but to almost any conflict between man and immortal. The humor in these conflicts lies finally in the inability of man to better a god.

The idea of man as eternally under the thumb of a stronger and more intelligent power, however, is essentially unpalatable; and thus the struggle between man and immortal, which is the basis for a comic statement on the nature of man, becomes as well, when viewed in another light,

the basis for a serious one. The desire to win over a superior force, which in comedy is attributed to cupidity, vanity, or lack of good sense, is seen in tragedy as the essence of man's nobilty, the characteristic which allows him to challenge and equal the gods.

If man can be the equal of gods, then it should also be true that he can replace them, establishing himself at the core of the universe by the virtue of his human qualities. However, at this point a question should be raised: is man any less of an ass at the top of the Chain of Being than he was in the middle of it? The answer, as posed by the humorist, would seem to be that he is not; and any device with which he deludes himself that he is anything but an ass is potentially absurd.

The conclusion which absurdity suggests and which black humor intensifies is that the efforts of man to be the captain of his fate and master of his soul are best viewed as the struggles of an inverted turtle to right itself--the more determined and thus the more grotesque the effort, the more amusing the spectacle. The term <u>amusement</u> may seem at first a cruel one since it seems to imply enjoyment of pain. In fact, however, the capacity to be amused by the turtle is not so much a function of the discomfort of the animal but in our lack of identification with it. Viewed with this disassociation, the humor of the situation is seen largely to be a result not of the discomfort of the turtle, but of the seriousness with which

he pursues his objective.

Black humor, then, deals with a condition in which man's attempts to create for himself a semblance of nobility are seen as his most amusing characteristic. The difference in the various black humor writers lies mainly in their reaction to and presentation of this condition. The fact that it is presented as humor may not be a distinctly American reaction; but humor, particularly humor of exaggeration, has always seemed an uniquely American province. This is not to suggest that writers like Heller and Southern are the direct literary descendants of humorists like Twain and Ring Lardner, but rather possibly to suggest why the phenomenon seems to have occurred here rather than elsewhere. The fact that the black humor view seems to be one which can only exist under a specialized set of conditions makes it perhaps a transitory expression; but at the same time it is a highly immediate and accurate representative of its time.

As this study develops, it will be increasingly obvious that there is a great deal of common ground between the terms satire and black humor. There is, in fact, such a great deal of similarity that at first the two might seem interchangeable. It is suggested, however, that between the two terms there are certain key differences and that these are an integral part of the foundation on which black humor philosophy is built.

There has been to date only one anthology of black

humor in print. In the introduction to his anthology, Bruce Jay Friedman, himself an author of black books, Stern, A Mother's Kisses, suggests that the province of black humor is in the "...darker waters out beyond satire".[2] Despite this distinction, however, the general tone of Friedman's introduction gives the impression that there is much that is not right with the world, particularly in its contemporary condition and that perhaps the purpose of black humor is primarily to expose man's inhumanity both to other men and himself.

It is tempting to consider black humor as totally satiric and certainly there is a great deal happening in the world which lends itself to satire. Nor is there any poverty of phrases with which the potential exposer can arm himself: "unmasking of a corrupt society", "paucity of contemporary values", "the big sell-out", etc. The role of society's critic is an almost irresistible one and the role of satiric critic the most irresistible one of all since it offers the opportunity to announce that mankind is going to hell without the attendant embarrassment of clerical uniform.

Black humor acknowledges a great debt to satire; the middle ground previously mentioned includes many similarities in technique. However, though it is related to satire, black humor is not totally dependent on it. Between the two are instrinsic differences listed briefly here which will be more fully developed in later sections

of the paper.

The first distinction, and one of the primary ones between black humor and satire, is largely a matter of tone. Both accept as basic the initial absurdity of man; but where satire considers this condition as finally serious, even at times tragic, black humor suggests that it is comic.

Further, satire is aimed at things; more often than not, man and man's institutions. Black humor, on the other hand, deals predominantly with attitudes towards things, specifically with commitments to abstract ideas.

Satire, according to nearly all definitions, suggests a corrective--that the situation, though temporarily bad, is potentially salvageable. However, to suggest that a corrective is available, indeed, even to suggest that a corrective is needed, is finally a moral statement, based on the idea that one mode of existence is in some way preferable to another. Black humor implicitly rules out any conclusions of morality by maintaining that any and all conditions are equally laughable under the conditions of absurdity.

The total absence of morality in the black humor is, again, a product of the perspective necessary in the black humor vision. If satire is ultimately serious, it is serious largely because the very act of criticizing something, no matter how stringently, betrays a concern or involvement on the part of the author in the thing he is criticizing.

Black humor suggests the converse of this idea - that to achieve a comic effect it is first necessary for the artist to disassociate himself from the object he is considering. Thus involvement is contrasted with non-involvement. The techniques employed in black humor; the grotesque, the ridiculous, the absurd, function to create disassociation which creates, in turn, an expanded perspective. This perspective frees the audience from any immediate involvement in the conditions of the work and is necessary in order to arrive at the larger purpose of black humor which is to present man's commitments as absurd.

At the furthest extreme from satire, then, black humor arrives at something which is almost exactly opposed to a condition of involvement. This is a conclusion of relativity based on an expanded perspective, in which all things are seen as equally absurd and potentially laughable. Although the roads are parallel, the satiric and disassociative approaches to black humor start at different ends and arrive at two distinctly different conclusions. The satiric approach suggests that black humor uses a technique of seeming absurdity in order to expose a condition of society which is, in fact, remedial. The disassociative approach, on the other hand, suggests the use of satiric techniques, specifically exaggeration, to arrive at a conclusion of an insane and, therefore, irremedial humanity.[3]

The limitations of the satiric approach to black humor

may be illustrated in the examples that Friedman gives of what might be called freely occurring black humor; that is, non-fictional events which tend to give rise to a black humor view of the world. Friedman suggests (and accurately so) that one of the world's greatest sources of black humor is the New York Times and gives three examples to substantiate his point. The first of these concerns the trial of several Mississippi men stemming from charges that by murdering a civil rights worker they had violated her civil rights. In the second, several thousand combat - ready troops are described as being in Viet-Nam as "advisors". The third reveals that at a recent ecumenical council, it was decided to absolve the Jews of any responsibility for the death of Christ.

Individually, each of these examples are adequate illustrations of an absurd humanity. Taken collectively, however, they suggest the view that black humor is largely a political expression and that it deals with basically (except in the case of the ecumenical council) correctable issues. In the civil rights case for example, the humor seems to be used as the basis for a plea for Negro equality. (The black humor view is that civil rights is a matter of individual dignity and, therefore, highly amusing.)

In all of these illustrations, the humor is seen to arise from an ironic disjunction between an event and its explanation. It is the kind of basic irrationality that is seen in a statement such as: "This is going to hurt me

more than it does you" which taken to its extreme becomes "I'm going to kill you for your own good", and lends itself very well to satire. Black humor recognizes this basic irony but suggests further that the comic potential of the situation is increased because the seriousness of the event provides an atmosphere which makes the comic statement funnier than it would be under ordinary circumstances. It should be pointed out here that under these conditions the humor arises not so much from the event itself, as from the event's "seriousness".

To digress briefly, perhaps the classic example of freely occurring black humor is seen in the case of the Siamese twins, Change and Eng Bunker. Joined together at the waist and chest and without any possibility of separation, the brothers were in the position of not only being unable to have any privacy but of necessity having to go through life continually facing one another. To add to these problems, there were personality differences; Chang was an alcoholic and Eng was a teetotaler. As a result, the brothers thoroughly despised each other and each took every opportunity to make life miserable for the other.

The case of the Bunker brothers is a classic of black humor because of the fact that it is the pathetic or serious elements of the situation which contribute to its humorous effect. It should be noted that the distortion of reality suggested by the Siamese twins promotes the mixture of the amusing and the grotesque necessary to produce a

perspective which ultimately disassociates the viewer from the spectacle. It should also be pointed out that there is nothing political about the situation; the absurdity arises from the situation rather than a comment on society.

These, then, are the basic assumptions of black humor. From even this brief look, it is obvious that the philosophy suggested by it is neither particularly hopeful nor particularly flattering. It is, however, particularly funny. Before proceeding to a more specific application of these general principles, I would like to acknowledge certain difficulties which of necessity are involved in a work of this type:

(1) Black humor ridicules anything which shows evidence of becoming serious and, therefore, to approach black humor with a serious motive or to suggest it serves in some way a serious purpose is immediately to introduce a contradiction. A great deal of the effect of black humor lies in the fact that it can never be accurately described. This I hope will explain a number of amorphous definitions in this study and a tendency toward occasionally using an absurdity to illustrate an absurdity.

(2) An explained joke is never funny.

(3) Black humor, like all humor, is ultimately a matter of individual taste. Thus for the person who simply cannot find anything amusing in the misfortunes of the Siamese twins, black humor will be a total failure.

(4) It must be remembered that black humor is first

of all a technique, specifically a technique in which a comic situation is viewed against a serious background. This technique is not the sole province of the black humorist but can be and has been used before in literature. Thus, a book may contain instances of black humor (such as the floating coffin in As I Lay Dying) without itself being a black humor work.

(5) Related to number four above, this study will deal only with those works which seem to have been consciously designed to be funny. This definition precludes the incorporation of books as those of Saul Bellow which present certain aspects of black humor but which are immensely serious in intent. Precluded also are works such as DeSade's Philosophy of the Bedroom and Burrough's Naked Lunch, which approximate black humor because the intensity with which the topic is presented sometimes falls unconsciously into absurd grotesque.

CHAPTER I

THE TECHNIQUE

"Bobby Franks was snotty"
Lenny Bruce

Since a study of this sort demands at the outset a definition of terms, it would be pleasant to report that humor means simply anything that is funny. Such, however, is not the case; as with most things that have come under intellectual scrutiny, humor has been found to represent not one thing, but several, and thus has been divided, drawn, quartered, and otherwise fragmented into various terms, each with a separate label and each relating to a separate effect. The first essay in The Comic in Theory and Practice, "Humor", by H. W. Fowler, is devoted to the definition of seven of these sub-divisions and gives a distinct impression that these are only the major headings.

Of these seven, only two will be considered, wit and humor, not so much for purposes of capsulization, but rather because they represent the two major approaches to the techniques and characteristics of humor. It is important to draw these distinctions since a substantial portion of black humor is not humor at all, but wit. It is advisable then to be aware of which part of the black

humor process is wit and which is humor, and if either of these two values dominates the other.

To begin, then, with a somewhat involved definition of the two terms:

> Humor is the describing the ludicrous as it is in itself; wit is the exposing, by comparing or contrasting it with something else. Humor is, as it were, the growth of nature and accident; wit is the product of art and fancy. Humor, as it is shown in books, is an imitation of the natural or acquired absurdities of mankind [italics mine] or of the ludicrous in accident situation or character; wit is the illustrating and heightening of the sense of absurdity by some sudden or unexpected likeness or opposition of one thing to another; which sets off the quality we laugh at or despise in a still more contemptible or striking point of view.[1]

From this definition, one may extract some general principles relating to the value of wit and humor. First, if one accepts the idea that the purpose of both wit and humor is to excite laughter, then there is a basic difference between the two in the way this purpose is accomplished. Of the two, humor is the more impersonal, concerning itself with simply the objective reporting of a situation which is in itself funny. Wit, on the otherhand, is more personal and vindictive, the object being not laughter from but laughter at; this laughter, opposed to that of humor, has a double purpose: amusement and destruction. From this it may be seen that wit relies for its effects on manipulation, the exaggeration of a natural situation by the wit in order to heighten the ludicrous appearance of the victim. It follows also from

this that while humor requires in theory only two characters, the laughed at and the laugher, wit requires three, the wit, his victim, and his audience which appreciates both the wit's destructive skill and the victim's humiliation.

To relate this to our discussion, it may be said that to the extent that black humor is satiric, that it relies on exaggeration in order to make its characters seem ludicrous; the laughter it excites is a product of wit rather than humor. On the other hand, keeping in mind that black humor deals finally with the objective reporting of an incorrectable situation, it seems to be more accurately classified as humor than wit.

The most accurate statement, then, is to say that black humor is both humorous and witty, just as it is at once both personal and objective. Rather than making distinctions between the two approaches to laughter, black humor relies on their synthesis. Although both these elements exist, in view of the over-all purpose of the form and to facilitate this discussion, it may be more useful to assume the form is accurately named and to consider it from now on as black humor rather than black wit.

If one accepts, then, black humor as humor and agrees further that the purpose of humor is to excite laughter rather than tears, perhaps the next step in the understanding of black humor is to understand something in general about the mechanics of laughter.

In his book, The Enjoyment of Laughter, Max Eastman alludes to two theories of the comic which, between them, cover almost every humorous situation. The first of these philosophies derives from Aristotle's observation on the comic: "...The causes of laughter are errors and deformities that do not pain or injure us; the comic mask, for instance, is deformed and distorted but not painfully so."[2] Or, as Eastman puts it, "...it is making terrible faces playfully."[3] The second comes from Immanuel Kant and is defined as "'The sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing' or in other words, as reaching after something and finding that it is not there."[4]

There are two important characteristics that are common to both of these theories, both of which have to do with the relation of the comic and the serious. First, it should be noted that in both cases the laughter derives from a sense of play, or from the non-serious aspects of the situation. This "sense of play" is very important to Eastman and figures substantially in his explanation of the comic. Second, in the Aristotle and Kant theories, it is observed that the comic arts are a disguise or mask for something which under other circumstances would be unpleasant.

Another aspect of the relationship between the serious and the comic will be examined later. For the present, however, this study will concentrate on the comic as a

disguise for something serious. A statement such as this immediately suggests two limitations of the comic. The first of these limitations is one of degree since the relationship between the comic and serious implies that there is a point at which a comic reaction is no longer possible; at this point the spirit of "being in fun" is no longer able to over-ride the serious aspects of the situation.

Given, again, the close relationship of the serious and the comic, it should stand to reason that anything serious has the potential for being comic if only it is approached in the correct "sense of play". Such, however, is not the case, for Eastman in his "laws" of joke telling says, "Remember that humorous laughter is inseparable from the mood of play, and you will not try to crack jokes on subjects about which people feel too intensely to be playful."[5]

Eastman suggests, supported by Aristotle, that humor is largely a matter of degree and genre; that is, that there is a point beyond which the potential for humor no longer exists and that there are things which by their very nature cannot be considered humorous. The creation of these limitations is vital to black humor, since the form depends greatly for its effects on the humorous treatment of a serious subject. One of the purposes of black humor, then, is to carry Eastman's philosophy to its logical conclusion, to suggest not only that no subject is

too serious for a humorous presentation, but that, indeed, the seriousness of the subject may be the basis for its humor. In this case, the elements of seriousness and humor do not exist separately from each other but rather in a relationship where the effect of one is enhanced by its opposition to the other. The coexistence of the dual reactions of seriousness and humor may be defined as simultaneity.

To more fully explain simultaneity, it is necessary to turn to the Aristotelian term, Catharsis. In the cathartic reaction, the condition of the tragic hero simultaneously elicits two separate emotional responses from the audience: pity for his suffering and fear they might be similarly afflicted. The effect of the tension between these two emotions produces a condition which leads to the awareness of over-all truth. Similarly, the effects of black humor are largely a product of a simultaneity which can be seen as a condition arising from reaction to both the humorous and the serious, represented individually in black humor by the amusing and grotesque.

The difference between the simultaneity of the amusing and the grotesque and a situation in which the two elements are employed in a sequential relationship may be seen in the drunken porter scene from Macbeth. Positioned as it is, directly after the murder of Duncan, the humorous soliloquy of the porter and his subsequent comic exchanges with Macduff are devices employed solely for the

purpose of releasing the tension of the audience. The laughter in this case is a relaxant, which serves not only to soothe emotions excited by the murder, but to signify a return to a condition of normality (if the word can be used in Macbeth). Thomas DeQuincy in an essay on the scene, comments on this return.

> Hence it is that, when the deed is done, when the work of darkness is perfect, then the world of darkness passes away like a pageantry in the clouds: the knocking at the gate is heard, and it makes known audibly that the reaction has commenced; the human has made its reflux upon the fiendish; the pulses of life are beginning to beat again; and the re-establishment of the goings-on of the world in which we live first makes us profoundly sensible of the awful parenthesis that had suspended them.[6]

The scene illustrates again the importance of chronology in the black humor effect. If the porter scene is played after the murder, it becomes comic relief and the laughter which it induces is largely therapeutic; however, should the porter scene be envisioned as taking place at the same time as the murder, the simultaneity of the two events gives to the porter scene a macabre quality which adds greatly to its effect and makes the murder the more terrifying by playing it against the laughter from below.

To recapitulate: the essence of the black humor laugh is the juxtaposition of the amusing and the grotesque, which exist in a simultaneous rather than sequential relationship. Because of these unique conditions, the black humor laugh must be distinguished on one hand from the laugh that serves to break tension, and

on the other from the laugh that is used to cover a conflicting emotion, i.e. "If I laugh, it is so that I do not weep."

It has already been established that black humor is, to a substantial degree, satiric. The principal satiric technique in black humor is the grotesque, which, for the purposes of this study, may be defined as the ludicrous distortion of people and events for the purpose of illustrating their faults and under-scoring their basic dissimilarity to a more normal appearing humanity.

The results of this satiric distortion tend to be humorous, although it is well at this point to keep the limits suggested by Aristotle in mind. The relationship of distortion to laughter is readily seen by the analysis of nearly any comic character, particularly those associated with low comedy. An analysis of this sort reveals that core of the character is little more than some exaggerated characteristic which, in turn, is housed in an exaggerated physical body.

In Thomas Wright's A History of Caricature and Grotesque, there is a picture taken from the walls of an Egyptian tomb which illustrates an incident during a funeral procession on the Lake of the Dead. The scene depicts a collision between two boats, the larger containing the deceased and what appears to be a party of mourners and a smaller one which is filled with food and wine for the funeral banquet. Describing the scene,

Wright says,

> ...the retrograde movement of the large boat, which has grounded and is pushed off the bank, striking the smaller one with its rudder, has overturned a large table loaded with cakes and other things upon the rowers seated below, in spite of all the efforts of the prowman, and the earnest vociferations of the alarmed steerman. The accident which thus overthrows and scatters provisions intended for the funeral feast, and the confusion attendant upon it, form a ludicrous scene in the middle of a solemn picture...[7]

The illustration is interesting for a number of reasons. First, it is a good example of simultaneity, occurring in the dichotomy between the solemnity of the funeral procession and the ludicrous confusion of the shouting men and falling fruit. It is a moment in which, however briefly, the comic overtakes the tragic. The juxtaposition of the two is funny because, to follow Kant's theory of humor, a direction of motion which one has temporarily agreed to accept, that is, the solemnity of the occasion, has suddenly been interrupted by the ludicrous activity attendant upon the collision.

More importantly, the scene illustrates the fact that laughing at something has the effect of reducing its stature. Because of the unique set of circumstances surrounding the event, death, which is traditionally surrounded by solemn attitudes, is shown to be capable of sustaining a comic rather than a serious reaction. Thus, momentarily, the solemn quality of death is invalidated. The accident cannot be considered a true example of black humor since because of its air of plausibility it lacks

the bizarre quality of extremes of the serious and the humorous which normally characterize the form. To produce a valid black humor reaction as this study will show, it is necessary to exaggerate the normal into the realm of the fantastic.

Whether it is a caricature or an effigy, the grotesque is, of necessity, an imitation of a model, and thus is basically a parasitic form which exists in a symbiotic relationship with its subject. Obviously the exaggeration cannot be removed from its source without destroying the very thing that animates it and gives it its characteristics.

There may be a point, however, at which caricature or effigy, if carried far enough into the realm of the grotesque, disassociates itself from its host and takes on an identity of its own which is only nominally related to the subject on which it is based. Again, the idea is based on an extension of Aristotelian limitations: if there is a degree of ambivalence between the humorous and the grotesque, that is, if humor stretched too far becomes grotesque, then it should be reciprocally true that the grotesque, if extended equally, should become humorous.

To illustrate this, consider once more Aristotle's example of a face and its capacity to be distorted. If this face is only slightly disfigured by the process known as making a face, the result is humorous. Ex-

aggerate the distortion even more and the face becomes grotesque, terrifying, and no longer amusing. Is it therefore not possible to continue this process, that is, to further distort the face until it once again becomes amusing? In the first two stages of distortion a comment is being made on the face itself, a satiric exaggeration of the physiognomy which cannot be made without the face itself continually in mind as a point of reference. On the other hand, as the deformity of the face is continued, it ceases as a result of its distortion to have any relation to the face itself and thus renounces its connection with reality to take on a fantastic identity of its own. Freed of its human associations, the form becomes an abstraction based on some maximum quantity. This exaggerated form shall hereafter be referred to as a gigantic. It should be noted here that once the gigantic is freed of its association with reality, it can be objectively contemplated and thus loses its capacity to horrify. The humor-horror-humor pattern, in other words, is not infinite but lasts only until a condition of objectivity is reached. One may be objectively amused, but not objectively terrified. This objective perspective, as previously stated, is a product of the basic absurdity of the gigantic, just as the absurdity is a product of the distortion of reality. Based on the relationship of these three things one arrives at one of the basic processes of black humor: <u>distortion yields absurdity which in turn</u>,

yields objectivity.

A fine example of a gigantic is pictured in Wright's book on the grotesque. It is an engraving illustrating Christ's comment on the mote and the beam (Matt. vii. 3-5).[8] Here the word beam has been taken literally and rendered as such so that the figure in the engraving has something very much on the order of a two by four protruding from his eye. The beam in this case has been extended beyond any "real" aspect and into the realm of the fantastic, and consequently the engraving becomes interesting not only as it illustrates an idea but because of the absurdity which it presents. By expanding into a gigantic, the beam has disassociated the illustration from its source and given it a life of its own. A similar disassociating absurdity is seen in the woodcuts of Brueghel where different parts of various animals are grafted on to one another, producing bizarre results.

The grotesque, therefore, is highly important to black humor. First, it functions as the means of creating absurdity. Secondly, it provides the basis for the humorous treatment of a serious subject. Finally, it creates an atmosphere of disassociation which allows for an objective examination of the subject.

In order to understand exactly what it is that black humor satirizes, it is once again necessary to begin with considerations which may seem at first obvious and oversimplified, but which are nevertheless vital to the under-

standing of the black humor attitude.

To begin one must first distinguish between the world of things and the world of ideals, which is to say one must distinguish ultimately between one atmosphere of denotation and one of connotation. The realm of things, which is denotative, is based upon a philosophy of observable reality and tends to be measured by the senses. The realm of ideals, on the other hand, which is connotative, is more abstract in character and tends to be measured by emotions.

If human endeavor, then, and the idealistic pursuit of abstracts are at the core of humanity, it follows that they must be considerations of the utmost magnitude. The question in relation to this study then becomes: How can something as serious as this possibly be funny?

One of the theories of the comic which has already been examined is Kant's explanation of humor as the result of denied expectation. To illustrate this explanation, Eastman has used the anecdote concerning Queen Victoria's chair. Victoria's faith in her position, it seems, was so absolute that she never bothered to look for a chair but simply sat, whenever so motivated, secure in her belief that someone would have something to receive her. If, however, the Queen should sit and not find a chair waiting, the result, Eastman maintains, is funny not only in the spectacle which would result, but because of the frustrated expectation.

To bring the theory of frustrated expectations a lit-

tle closer to the realm of black humor, consider a scene in which a man executes a beautiful swan dive into a pool with no water in it. Again this is a situation in which the expected result is replaced by something else. In this case, the beauty of the dive is contradicted by the crash into the empty pool. It follows also that the humor of the situation is directly proportional to the polarity of the contrasting elements; thus, the more swan-like the dive, the funnier the crash into the pool.

Consider now, as a related example, a situation in which a man, expecting to fly, tapes eagle feathers to his arms and, leaping off a cliff, flaps his arms mightily, but once again he falls. Again the humor rises out of the contradiction; in this case the height of the man's aspirations is contrasted with the ignominy of his fall.

Finally, consider the example of a man who, again wishing to fly, affixes eagle feathers to his arms with wax and actually succeeds in flying; but, entranced with his own accomplishment, flies too close to the sun which melts the wax and sends the man into the now-familiar plunge. Once more it should be pointed out that the humor is seen to be directly proportional to the extent of the man's ambition. It is not funny for the man to accidentally fall off a cliff, nor will the effect be as amusing if he takes his plunge at a lower altitude. In order for the contrast to be most effective, the man must be pictured at his highest moment of glory. The humor of

frustrated expectations may therefore be seen as composed of height and depth. Based on these two concepts, the following law of humor might be suggested: the more ostentatious the height, the greater potential humor in the descent.

The last illustration is, of course, the story of Icarus, a legend which is not normally considered to be funny since it may be interpreted as a demonstration of one of the basic constituents of man's inherent nobility; that is, his indomitable aspiration to achieve something above and beyond his immediate condition. If it is further correct to assume that it is this same aspiration which is a primary element in tragedy, as for example in Oedipus Rex and Agamemnon, how can it possibly be considered as humorous?

A possible solution to this paradox lies once more in the close relationship of the serious and the comic. In the case of both Icarus and the man diving into the empty pool, it should be noted that the element which is common to both is belief or commitment. The concept of commitment is an important one in black humor and is used in a number of ways; in general, however, it may be defined, in terms of the previous discussion of things versus ideals, as the voluntary renouncing of the physical in favor of the abstract or ideal. Given this essential similarity, the difference between comedy and tragedy is seen to be largely one of background rather than motivation. The

only reason that Icarus looks more noble is that the setting is more attractive. What Icarus has done is to entrust himself to a commitment and embark upon a course of action. Remove the heroic posturing and the effect is exactly the same as the swan dive into the empty pool.

The end of black humor is the ridicule of these commitments, not as they reveal the frustration of desires, but rather as they show the person involved to be taking himself seriously. Commitments in this sense should be distinguished from hypocrisy and duplicity (Holden Caulfield's "phonies", for example, or Tartuffe) in which characters try to present themselves as something that they are not. The essence of the commitment is the sincerity in which it is made.

A classic study in the effect of commitment of character is Cervantes's Man of LaMancha, Don Quixote. Henri Bergson in his essay on the comic suggests that, "At the root of the comic there is a sort of rigidity which compels its victims to keep strictly to one path, to follow it straight along, to shut their ears and refuse to listen."[9] To the extent that Don Quixote's actions perfectly illustrate this behavioral pattern, he becomes a basic if not the basic comedy type.

Don Quixote is a man who walks with his head in the clouds, a method of transportation which sets up the potential for a great deal of stumbling over material objects; indeed, it is this constant disjunction between the

real and the ideal on which the humor of Don Quixote is based. Bergson suggests that the reason behind the Don's inability to make these distinctions is a lack of elasticity.

> Let us try to picture to ourselves a certain inborn lack of elasticity of both senses and intelligence, which brings to pass that we continue to see what is no longer visible, to hear what is no longer audible, to say what is no longer to the point: in short, to adapt ourselves to a past and therefore imaginary situation, when we ought to be shaping our conduct in accordance with the reality which is present....the comic will take up abode in this person himself; it is the person who will supply it with everything-matter and form, cause and opportunity.[10]

At this point, it may be observed that the physics of inelasticity and commitment are remarkable similar in that in both cases the effect depends on a renouncing of the immediate in favor of the ideal. Based on this, then, it may be possible to conclude that humor of a situation involving a commitment is largely a result of the inelasticity of that commitment.

One thing is common to both the commission of inelasticity and the recognitior of its comic potential- this is perspective.

It is perspective, or rather the loss of perspective, which is at the core of inelasticity. The commitment produces a sort of tunnel vision which renders the individual incapable of making a rational analysis of the situation and leads him to disregard the material in favor of the ideal. It is precisely this loss of perspective by which

a thing becomes an abstraction.

Second, and perhaps more important, it is necessary to recognize the fact that humor in general and black humor in particular can be appreciated only through perspective. In his essay, Bergson immediately establishes the importance of perspective.

> Try, for a moment, to become interested in everything that is being said and done; act, in imagination, with those who act, and feel with those who feel; in a word, give your sympathy its widest expansion; as though at the touch of a fairy wand you will see the flimsiest of objects assume importance, and a gloomy hue spread over everything. Now step aside, look upon life as a disinterested spectator; many a drama will turn into a comedy.[11]

Perspective in this sense, then, is very much like the already mentioned process of disassociation, where non-involvement in an event makes for a more objective appreciation of it.

Black humor ridicules among other things the loss of perspective which is entailed in making a commitment. This loss obviously can only be seen from outside and thus perspective also keeps the black humor novel from falling victim to the things it ridicules.

It may be suggested that an idea's seriousness can be measured to the extent that it has a direct relationship to man's existence. Further, these abstractions may be distinguished from the world of things by their intangibility. There is, however, a way in which a tangible thing, that is to say, one which would be normally con-

sidered in non-abstract terms, can become an ideal; and that is to gain abstraction by taking itself seriously. A thing may be loosely defined as taking itself seriously when its connotative--that is, its idealized aspect--takes precedence over its denotative or physical one. It is this capacity of things for taking themselves seriously or being taken seriously that black humor attacks. Thus black humor does not laugh at things but things as they have become abstractions. It is also necessary to understand as a corollary to this that black humor does not laugh at things but at attitudes toward them.

To illustrate this let us return briefly to the collision of the barges on the Lake of the Dead. It has already been noted that the effect of the illustration is based on, first, the sudden interruption of solemnity by chaos and, second, on the simultaneity of opposite reactions to death and the humor of the collision. It is important to note, however, that death in this case is not considered the object of the joke, rather it is seen as a backdrop against which the humor of the collision is played. It is entirely possible to remove the serious backdrop from the scene and still retain the humor as if, for instance, the procession had been on the way to a marriage rather than a funeral. For the illustration to demonstrate black humor, however, there must be the simultaneity of conflicting responses to the serious and the humorous aspects of the situation.

The scene, therefore, does not make fun of death. Death in its denotative sense is a physical occurrence like gravity and, thus, like gravity, can be considered neither sad nor funny, but neutral. Rather, it is death in its connotative or abstract form which is used to compound the humor of the scene and the solemnity of the occasion. Thus death can be shown to be potentially funny only as an abstract quantity or as it is taken seriously.

A situation or thing, then, may be said to take itself seriously in that concentration on its connotative potential causes it to lose what might be called the denotative perspective. If this is true for objects, then it should also be possible for a person to take himself seriously, to make a commitment to some idealized portion of his character or position which would cause him to lose his denotative perspective . To use Don Quixote as an example, it might be suggested that the Don's eccentric pattern of behavior might be seen as a function of his complete devotion to the role of Knight, so that his zest for fulfilling the ideal completely over-rides any consideration of the practical. In other words, Don Quixote takes himself seriously. The capital letter syndrome, then, observable in any role which concentrates on the connotative rather than the denotative aspects of the role. For example, mother becomes Mother when the emotional aspects of the role is stressed over the functional ones.

Black humor, then, consists basically of treating

"serious" matters such as war, truth, the dignity of man in a non-serious manner, specifically by using these concepts as the background for joking. Obviously the more serious the object, the greater the potential for laughter becomes.

If one accepts that commitment to ideals is potentially funny and further that any object which stresses its ideal over its physical aspect is potentially funny, then it is possible to conclude that man, in that he lives in a civilization guided by ideals, in that he takes himself seriously by continually emphasizing his ideal qualities, in short, man in his noblest posture, possesses an almost boundless comic potential.

In order to more specifically illustrate these general characteristics of black humor, this study will examine four jokes whose effects, it seems, are largely dependent on black humor techniques. Because it is a story in miniature and subject to most of the rules of longer writing, the joke is an excellent subject for analysis.

The difference between humor and wit has already been discussed. Based on this distinction, the technique of the joke seems to be basically witty since it depends for its effect on the humorous destruction of a third party for the benefit of an audience. The basic process of the witticism is described by Martin Grotjahn in his book, Beyond Laughter.

Increasing demands for repression through the

> ages have changed aggression from assault to wit. Where we would have struck a person in earlier times, we restrict our hostility now and often repress it entirely. Aggressive wit gives us a new way of admitting dangerous aggression to our conscience ...The first person, the one who makes the joke or perceives the idea, attacks the second person, the butt of the joke. In order to test whether the work disguising the aggressive tendency was successful, the first person has to tell his witticism to a third person...The third person, to whom the witticism is told is only a listener and judges only the disguise of the underlying aggression.[12]

The most basic kind of joke, then, is one which would most obviously illustrate this anti-social characteristic. This kind of witticism might be called an aggression joke. The tone of an aggression joke is invariably violent, entailing a verbal or physical assault on another person, the brutality of which is masked by the amusing aspects of the situation. Even Max Eastman, who is almost fanatically opposed to any kind of Freudian interpretation, seems to recognize it:

> Aggression jokes derive their <u>peculiar delightfulness</u> /Italics mine/ note here that Eastman is suggesting a response not a great deal unlike that generated by the simultaneity of black humor/ from the fact that we have cruel impulses which we cannot unleash in serious life, cultural standards being here at variance with our instincts, and they sneak forth and take a furtive drink of satisfaction while we play.[13]

The most obvious of the aggression jokes, since it represents the thinnest disguise of the basic cruelty, is the insulting joke, which has infinite variations but can be generally exemplified by the following: "She was so fat

that the chairs in her house were bowlegged." The basic technique of the aggression joke lies in the humorous accentuation of unpleasant or undesirable traits for the purpose of ridicule. It may be seen also that the technique of exaggeration for humorous effect is ideally suited to satiric characterization and as such is used extensively by black humor authors, particularly Heller and Southern.

On a somewhat higher level than the insulting joke and more closely related to black humor is this response, generallly attributed to W.C. Fields: Question: "Would you hit a woman with a child?" Answer: "No, I'd hit her with a brick."

As with the insulting joke, Fields here is obviously using humor as a mask for aggression. Rather than attacking a specific person on an immediate level, however, Fields demolishes the institution of motherhood.

The story is a good example of black humor in that the basic effect is compounded by using as the elements of the joke concepts which are not ordinarily thought of as funny and thus playing the joke against a backdrop of seriousness. The effect of the joke, then, is increased because of the idealized qualities involved in it. Fields has combined two highly emotional constructs, women and children, into a single image of (applying the capital letter syndrome) Woman and Child.

The "sick" joke has supplanted its predecessor, the racial and ethnic joke, as the most widely damned variety

of humor in the past twenty years. It is perhaps more related to black humor than any other type of joke because it is based on the idea that there are some things that one does not joke about.

The grandfather of all sick jokes seems to be the one based on the untimely demise of the sixteenth President of the United States: "Other than that, how did you enjoy the play, Mrs. Lincoln?"

"Mrs. Lincoln" works almost entirely on the technique of ridiculed commitments. First, there is the idea of death. Like the collision on the Lake of the Dead, it is not death itself but the attitudes toward death which provides the serious background for the statement and thus enhances the humor. The effect in this case is more pronounced because of the violent and tragic nature of Lincoln's death, a condition brought about by the idea that some forms of death have more emotional potential than others and are thus more serious. The emotional quality of the joke is also further increased because of the idealized quality of Lincoln's image; his death represented not only the loss of a leader but of a father figure. Because of all these things, there is an enormous element of abstraction and emotional commitments surrounding Lincoln and it is against these commitments that the humor is played.

For all its tragedy, however, the seriousness of "Mrs. Lincoln" is to a degree lessened by its remove of

of time; it is difficult, after all to become involved to any extent in an event which occurred almost a century before. In the following joke, the "sickness" is in a large part dependent on the immediacy of childhood: Boy: "May Johnny come out and play?" Mother: "You know Johnny is a quadruple amputee." Boy: "I know, but we want to use him for third base."

Here again one can see the simultaneity of black humor demonstrated as a comic situation is presented against a serious background. The humor rises primarily from the technique of frustrated expectation presented by the dialog (the direction of the question--the counter--direction of the answer). It is enhanced to the extent that the subject of Crippled Children (again the capital letter syndrome) is a serious one which is then ridiculed by the joke.

Once again it must be noted that the quality that enhances the joke is the subject as it is serious and emotional rather than anything intrinsically funny in the crippled child. Nor does one laugh at a serious topic simply because he is told not to; a topic becomes serious and therefore taboo and therefore potentially humorous only when its emotive capacity is exploited to make the subject become a commitment to itself so that the abstract takes precedence over the concrete. What a person has been taught in reference to disease, death, sex, etc. is not the effects or processes of these things, that is, their

concrete values, but rather that they are serious.

Two other forms of humor which also relate to black humor but can be more briefly handled are the shaggy dog story and the elephant joke. As opposed to the aggression and sick jokes which depend for their effects on the serious subjects, the elephant and shaggy dog stories depend on the exaggeration of the frivolous and the meaningless. Once more one is dealing with a type of humor which ridicules belief in a situation by climaxing the build-up with a purely absurd conclusion. This is particularly evident in the elephant joke which makes a vocal response on the part of the believer a necessary part of the ritual.

It may be helpful by way of conclusion to this chapter, to recapitulate some of the basic ideas.

(1) Black humor depends on simultaneous and equal reactions to the amusing and the grotesque.

(2) As opposed to satire which is associative and aims at involvement, black humor uses techniques such as the absurd grotesque and the ridicule of commitments to achieve disassociation and perspective.

(3) Black humor does not ridicule things but things as they have come to be taken seriously. The technique of black humor entails using these serious ideas as the background for humorous situations.

(4) It may be useful to distinquish between this technique which is primarily wit, and the vision of black humor which is that the most serious situation is the most

potentially absurd, an attitude which is primarily humorous.

CHAPTER II

THE VISION

"God is Dead" (signed) Nietzsche
"Nietzsche is Dead" (signed) God
Anonymous

The preceding chapter has been given over to a discussion of the techniques of black humor. Obviously, however, there is more to a literary form than merely the ordering and manipulation of the physical elements. Underlying all of these relatively mobile considerations must be the artist's fixed conception of the ideas he wishes to present to his audience.

The question of morality in black humor, as in most forms of art, is ultimately a two-pronged affair. On one hand, the "moral" of a work may sometimes be considered synonymous with its theme; that is, the abstract statement which is demonstrated by the concrete elements of the work. On the other hand, the "morality" of a given work may refer to the ethical standards which motivate and are demonstrated by the work. In this study, it should be understood that the term "morality" will be used in its ethical rather than thematic sense.

The purpose of this chapter will be to present and to attempt to define the moral position implied in the black

humor statement. In order to do this, the study will discuss in roughly chronological order various authors and art forms whose positions on morality seems to approximate that of black humor.

It has already been shown that certain ancestral forms of black humor go back far beyond Jonathan Swift, but for a number of reasons, he seems to be the logical point at which to begin its literary history. Certainly the most immediately apparent similarity between Swift and the black humorists lies in the fact that both rely to a great extent on the use of bodily functions, both reproductory and excretory, as a means of creating their effects.

It would be pointless to catalog all references to elimination and products of elimination in Swift and in the black humor authors, but the following from Terry Southern's The Magic Christian is a fair example of the technique.

> Before dinner Guy Grand completed arrangements begun earlier in the day with the Chicago stockyards: these provided for the delivery of three hundred cubic feet of manure, a hundred gallons of urine, and fifty gallons of blood, to an address in the suburbs. Grand met them there and had the whole stinking mess transferred to a covered dump truck he had purchased that morning. These arrangements cost Grand a pretty penny, because the stockyards do not ordinarily conserve or sell urine, so that it had to be specially collected.[1]

If satire can be envisioned as an armed attack, then there are few tools of aggression more potent or more readily available than bodily wastes. As Norman O. Brown

in his essay on Swift,"The Excremental Vision",[2] points out, the use of excrement as a weapon ("dirt throwing") is a basic device of the satirist. Thus Swift's most corrosive satire is that which centers on the Yahoos, who are the most degenerate of Swift's characters; and, likewise, those most closely identified with waste matter.

Although the use of scatology is an unquestionably powerful technique, it should also be remembered that Swift intended not to employ it for its own sake, but as a means to an end. Scatology for Swift, as for Rabelais, is a necessary element in a morality which suggests that the road to truth lies by way of the bowel.

In black humor, the techniques of scatology are employed in essentially the same way, that is, as a means of producing satiric statement. In addition to these satiric purposes, however, scatology in black humor, because of the "serious" attitudes toward bodily functions, is also an effective means of producing the amusing grotesque.

The writings of Swift also serve as an effective illustration of the difference between black humor and satire. To demonstrate the difference, this study will examine two of Swift's better known works, "A Modest Proposal" and Gulliver's Travels.

"A Modest Proposal" initially seems to qualify as black humor, particularly with respect to the characteristic of simultaneity. The effect of the essay, in fact, is largely dependent on the juxtaposition of the grotesque

nature of Swift's proposition and the convivial manner in which he relates it. The result, of course, is a satiric statement which is heightened and made more devastating because of its indirection and subtlety. Thus, the purpose of the black humor technique in "A Modest Proposal" is to create an atmosphere in which Swift's petition for the reform of Irish laws can be more effectively presented.

It is, however, exactly this idea of purpose which prevents "A Modest Proposal" from becoming a genuine statement of black humor. If one accepts, as has been suggested a number of times, that the end of black humor is the creation of disassociation, then anything which operates against this conclusion cannot be included in the definition.

"A Modest Proposal" runs counter to this proposition primarily in its implication that a bad situation can be replaced by a good one. If one accepts the idea that life in all its aspects represents an irremedial insanity, the suggestion of a remedy is clearly impossible. Secondly, "A Modest Proposal" does not work as a black humor statement because of the degree of involvement which it implies. To put forth a proposition which opts for an improvement of the human condition, especially one based on ideas of right and wrong, betrays interest and thus potential seriousness. This introduces a rationality and morality alien to a black humor philosophy which views from a disassociated perspective an existence in which all conditions of

living are equally absurd.

In the hands of a genius like Swift, satire becomes a devastating weapon employed against the world's evils, and in this respect Swift's techniques might be thought of as therapeutic satire. The technique is unquestionably powerful, but it is also essentially duplicitous. Because his statement is so completely dependent on the concepts of right and wrong, the genuine satirist is ultimately a moralist and as such is inextricably involved with humanity. The technique of satire, however, dictates that the author must assume a pose of disaffection and pretend, as Swift does, to be less concerned than he really is. Thus while satire is dependent on an affectation of disassociation (as seen in the affectedly rational accents of the persona in "A Modest Proposal" and in the celestial indifference of Twain's Mysterious Stranger), it is at bottom deeply commited to the promotion of humanity.

The duplicity of satire then may be said to rise from the disjunction between the non-morality of the pose and the morality of the purpose. Black humor, it is suggested, avoids this duplicity by denying the concept of morality. Satire represents an attack on the evils of the world based on moralistic distinction between good and bad; black humor makes no such moralistic distinction because good and evil are impossible in an insane society.

Satire, then, is predicated generally on the concepts of involvement and morality. Based on these con-

cepts, the following maxim concerning morality in black humor can be constructed: A statement is potentially black humor to the extent that it relativizes the concept of morality.

The concept of relativized morality is illustrated to a degree by Gulliver's Travels. Discussing the difficulty of coming to a final moral conclusion, Ernest Tuveson states the problem of Gulliver in contemporary terms.

> Such a conclusion, however natural and however justifiable, is not the whole truth. If our time has exceeded all others in vicious horrors, there is the curious fact also that in every part of daily life we have seen the growth of a much keener sensitivity to suffering and injustice that ever existed before. The crooked cross of the swastika and the Red Cross are both emblems of our period. We then must ask: which is human--Hitler or Gandhi? The only truly realistic answer is--both. Here we encounter a great difficulty; the human mind is so constructed that it always requires logical solutions. To say that man is simultaneously evil and good in his nature evokes a kind of frustration, a psychological state perhaps not unlike claustrophobia. Hence, one reason for the popularity of either unrelieved pessimism or unrelieved optimism.[3]

Gulliver's Travels, as the title suggests, chronicles the events of a man with a penchant for traveling; there is more to Gulliver's role, however, than simply that of tourist. As the one human in a non-human world of giants, dwarfs, and distortions of normality, Gulliver becomes the ambassador for the world he has left behind. Thus, Gulliver's values are intended to represent man in general and Englishman in particular.

If Gulliver is a cultural metaphor who represents the

norms of his society, then the situation in Gulliver's Travels is basically an allegorical one in which the progress of Gulliver is representative of what would happen to all men in similar circumstances. This device of the cultural metaphor is also seen in black humor in diverse characters such as Charlie Brown, Yossarian, and Mandrake in Dr. Strangelove, who stand for the accepted values of their culture. Implied in the behavior and fate of these cultural metaphors is a comment on the position of these normal values in the conditions represented by the book.

The fourth voyage of Gulliver, it has been suggested, provides Swift's ultimate comment on the nature of man. Specifically the question seems to be: Is Gulliver as a cultural metaphor for humanity more nearly Yahoo or Houyhnhmn? If one follows the concept of "A Modest Proposal" in which good and bad are easily distinguishable, then it is obvious that alternatives exist and that a choice must be made.

As suggested by Tuveson's statement, however, the central point made by the fourth voyage seems to be that man is finally a mixture of both Houyhnhmn and Yahoo and as such is incapable of being either totally good or totally good or totally bad. A conclusion such as this one,

although still undeniably moral in character, nevertheless tends to relativize the concept of morality by negating the idea of good and evil as completely separate values.

It can further be suggested that in Gulliver's Travels the awareness of this duality leads both author and audience to an objective point of view. In an article entitled "The Final Comedy of Lemuel Gulliver", John F. Ross suggests that in the fourth book the Houyhnhmns as well as the Yahoos are handled with more irony than is normally suspected, and that the conclusion of Gulliver concerning the total superiority of the Houyhnhmns is not necessarily that of Swift.

It is suggested, rather, that the condition of man is inescapably both Houyhnhmn and Yahoo; and that although Gulliver is definite in his choice, it is precisely because of his lack of objectivity that Gulliver's conclusion cannot be taken as final. The position of Swift, Ross suggests, is a more transcendental one, based almost completely on an objective point of view.

> Thus severe satire remains the main theme, but the new theme of Gulliver's absurdity complicates the issue. By rising to a larger and more comprehensive view than he permits to Gulliver, Swift is satirically commenting on the insufficiency of the corrosive attitude. The evils in the world and in man are such that it is no wonder that a simple and ethical nature may be driven to despair and misanthropy, Nevertheless, such an attitude Swift demonstrates to be inadequate and absurd.[4]

In drawing a conclusion to the Ross article, one arrives at a principle already stated that morality is large-

ly a matter of perspective. If a sufficient distance is established from the subject under consideration, this distance renders moral distinctions between good and bad as relatively unimportant. As a corollary to this, it is also seen that the recognition of relativized morality yields disassociation.

In discussing the position of Swift at the end of Gulliver's Travels, Ross says,

> But Swift is not with him, Swift is above him in the realm of comic satire, still indignant at the Yahoo in man, but at the same time smiling at the absurdity of the view that can see only the Yahoo in man.[5]

Based also on these conclusions, it is possible at this point to suggest axiomatically that in writing produced in an atmosphere of moral objectivity (such as black humor), a character can function effectively as a raisonneur only as long as he maintains his moral objectivity.

This conclusion of relativism is an important one; and one which, as we will see, is at the core of the principle of disassociative perspective on which black humor is based. If the higher and lower, spiritual and physical aspects of life are indeed inseparable, then it takes only a sense of perspective to realize that, at times, distinctions between them are meaningless; thus man can be both Houyhnhmn and Yahoo in Gulliver's Travels, a single personality can be both good and bad in Candy, and blood and urine can be interchanged in Catch-22.

Another work which seems to point toward the con-

clusion of relative morality is Mark Twain's nihilistic statement, The Mysterious Stranger. Like Swift, Twain was ultimately a moralist who sought to conceal his didacticism with an overlay of humor.

The Mysterious Stranger is laid in the small Austrian hamlet of Eseldorf, a town which lies both on the outskirts of Time and the civilized world, in the waning years of the sixteenth century. The story, like many of Twain's, is told through the eyes of a boy.

Into the comfortable monotony of life in Eseldorf comes the Mysterious Stranger, who, as we subsequently learn, is none other than Satan, the nephew of his more famous namesake. On the pretext of innocently amusing the group of boys who befriend him, Satan proceeds to destroy casually, but very methodically, not only their traditional concepts, but also a measurable portion of the village's population. In the final scene of the story, Satan reveals to the boy that all life is nothing more than illusion and that even he, Satan, is a construction of the boy's mind; he then disappears, leaving the boy to realization and to emptiness.

There is a recurring pattern in the story centering on Satan's ability to alter at will an individual fate. Upon discovery that Satan has the power to control the lives of their fellow townsmen, the boys ask Satan to change the course of a life whenever some immediate danger threatens it. Satan always agrees to this, and the results are in-

variably more disastrous than they would have been if unchanged. A child drowns, for instance, but to spare his life means the outbreak of a scarlet fever epidemic.

There are several possible conclusions that may be drawn from this pattern: perhaps Twain intended to make a statement on the inadvisability of questioning the unknown, or his conception of life as a series of concantenated events might represent an early expression of determinism. The most apparent conclusion, however, and the one most closely related to this study is that Satan's character and, by extension, much of the theme of the book is based upon his indifference to ordinary distinctions between good and bad. Once again it is seen that the relativistic morality which allows Satan to consider all of man's possible alternatives as essentially equal is a direct function of a disassociative point of view. The purpose of the recurring pattern of seeming tragedy from a desire to produce good is two-fold. First, it points up the absolute power of Satan; more importantly, however, it serves to forever divide the boys from Satan and, by implication, to suggest the basic difference between men and angels. The boys are continually appalled by the fact that Satan causes the death of their townsmen because they are, as humans, unable to extricate themselves from a position which sees the death of a man as anything but tragic. In short they are, like Donne "involved in mankind", and, fastened to this level, can never achieve Satan's detachment. (Twain,

incidentally, seems fully aware of the moral paradox implied in the idea of Satan as a fallen angel and uses the contradiction to further prevent easy conclusions of good and bad).

Satan's view of the human race seems to be not a great deal removed from the figure of the inverted turtle suggested earlier.

> Here is a red spider, not so big as a pin's head. Can you imagine an elephant being interested in him--caring whether he is happy or isn't, or whether he is wealthy or poor, or whether his sweetheart returns his love or not, or whether his mother is sick or well, or whether he is looked up to in society or not, or whether his enemies will smite him or his friends desert him, or whether his hopes will suffer blight or his political ambitions fail, or whether he shall die in the bosom of his family or neglected and despised in a foreign land? These things can never be important to the elephant, they are nothing to him, he cannot shrink his sympathies to the microscopic size of them. Man is to me as the red spider is to the elephant. The elephant has nothing against the spider--he cannot get down to that remote level; I have nothing against man. The elephant is indifferent; I am indifferent.[6]

Given this relativized morality, it is then possible for Twain to produce humor based on the ironic disjunction between Satan's and the boy's conception of what is good and what is bad. For example,

> We felt a great joy and pride in what we had done for Fischer and were expecting Satan to sympathize with this feeling, but he showed no sign and this made us uneasy. We waited for him to speak but he didn't; so, to assuage our solicitude we had to ask him if there was any defect in Fischer's good luck. Satan considered the question a moment, then said, with some hesitation:

> "Well, the fact is, it is a delicate point. Under his several former possible life-careers he was going to heaven."[7]

It can be seen that the passage, in technique at least, approaches black humor in that a serious idea, having been relativized, is used as the subject for joking.

But although Twain approaches black humor in both technique and vision, his story lacks the total relativity necessary for the true black humor statement. For one thing, Twain stacks the cards. The view of life presented by his raisonneur, Satan, is absurd only because all of man's possibilities are equally unpleasant. Viewed through Twain's misanthropic eyes, man's alternatives are death, disease, or insanity. His view of history, too, is pessimistically eclectic; the only scenes from the past which are shown to the boys are those depicting murder, carnage, war,"...and other signs of the progress of the human race."[8] In short, Twain lacks perspective. His pessimism is too deeply ingrained and, try as he may, he cannot bring himself to laugh at a world so thoroughly depraved. Thus, for all its attempts at objectivity, The Mysterious Stranger is a very slanted book. By presenting the world as totally unpleasant, Twain implies that it is only unpleasantness which is absurd and thus negates the truly absurd revelation that all facets of life are meaningful.

The Mysterious Stranger, considered in this respect, interestingly contrasts with Swift's Gulliver's Travels in

that in Twain's case the raisonneur has more objectivity than the author.

Twain's reponse to the absurdities of the world is essentially that of black humor: laughter. For Twain, however, laughter becomes not merely a reaction, but a weapon.

> For your race, in its poverty, has unquestionable one really effective weapon--laughter. Power, money, persuasion, supplication, persecution--these can lift at a colossal humbug--push it a little--weaken it a little, by century, but only laughter can blow it to rags and atoms at a blast. Against the assault of laughter nothing can stand.[9]

Twain's statements illustrate once again the basic difference between therapeutic satire, despite its apparent objectivity, cannot avoid involvement in humanity because its perspective cannot allow for a truly relativized morality. Having thus admitted moral categorization, the ultimate and imminently serious purpose of laughter is the destruction of evil. The black humor laugh, on the other hand, is completely amoral and admits of no practical purpose except as a gesture signifying a pleasurable reaction.

Twain comes closer to establishing true absurdity when he is being funny than he does when he is serious. Here, for example, are two selections, one from Twain and the other from a contemporary black humor work, Joseph Heller's Catch-22.

In the following selection Twain is being interviewed by a reporter.

Question: Isn't that a brother of yours?
Answer: Oh! yes, yes,yes! Now you remind me of it, that was a brother of mine. That's William--Bill we called him. Poor old Bill!
Question: Why! Is he dead, then?
Answer: Ah! well, I suppose so. We never could tell. There was a great mystery about it.
Question: That is sad, very sad. He disappeared, then?
Answer: Well, yes, in a sort of general way. We buried him.
Question: Buried him! Buried him, without knowing whether he was dead or not?
Answer: Oh no! Not that. He was dead enough.
Question: Well, I confess that I can't understand this. If you buried him, and you knew him, and you knew he was dead--
Answer: No! no! We only thought he was.
Question: Oh, I see! He came to life again?
Answer: I bet he didn't.
Question: Well, I never heard anything like this. Somebody was dead. Somebody was buried. Now, where was the mystery.
Answer: Ah! that's just it! That's exactly. You see, we were twins,--defunct and I, -- and we got mixed in the bathtub when we were only two weeks old, and one of us was drowned. But we didn't know which. Some think it was Bill. Some think it was me.
Question: Well, that is remarkable. What do you think?[10]

From Catch-22:

Appleby spoke in a soft voice so that he would not be heard by the driver or by Captain Black, who was stretched out with his eyes closed in the front seat of the jeep.

"Havermeyer," he asked hesitantly. "Have I got flies in my eyes."

Havermeyer blinked quizzically. "Sties?" he asked.

"No, flies," he was told.

Havermeyer blinked again. "Flies?"

"In my eyes."

"You must be crazy," Havermeyer said.

> "No, I'm not crazy. Yossarian's crazy. Just tell me if I've got flies in my eyes or not. Go ahead. I can take it."
>
> Havermeyer popped another piece of peanut brittle into his mouth and peered very closely into Appleby's eyes.
>
> "I don't see any," he announced.
>
> Appleby heaved an immense sigh of relief. Havermeyer had tiny bits of peanut brittle adhering to his lips, chin and cheeks.
>
> "You've got peanut brittle crumbs on your face," Appleby remarked to him.
>
> "I'd rather have peanut brittle crumbs on my face than flies in my eyes." Havermeyer reported.[11]

Exchanges such as the ones above may seem at first glance to be of the standard comic--straight man variety. However, closer examination reveals that the comic effect of the interview lies as much in the failure to establish any over all pattern of direction as it does in the individual answers to the questions. It should be understood, then, that the principle of comic absurdity which underlies a great deal of black humor refers not so much to the technique of non-sequitur conversation as it does to the inability to arrive at any kind of meaningful results of the dialogue.

It should be noted also that in both cases the establishment of absurdity is largely a matter of force. Specifically, the scene represents a situation in which one party who represents a rational or what might be considered "normal" behavior is literally overwhelmed by the abnormal personality of a second party. This technique of anarchistic insanity is certainly not without precedent in humor, particularly slapstick humor; but as a style it

reaches a certain zenith in silent film comedy.

There is, of course, a great deal of similarity between the techniques of the silent film and those of black humor; in the silent film the distortion of movement, the highly theatrical characters, and the absurdity of the plots combine to produce a fantastic world which become an ideal background for the antics of a Chaplin or a Marx. The same is true for black humor where character and theme are heavily dependent on stylistic flamboyance. The following comments on Catch-22 might well refer to any silent film comedy.

> Heller is concerned entirely with that thin boundary of the surreal, the border-line between hilarity and horror which, much like the apparent formlessness of the unconscious, has its own special integrity and coherence... This gives the reader an effect of surrealistic dislocation intensified by a weird, rather flat, impersonal style full of complicated reversals, swift transitions, abrupt shifts in chronological time, and manipulated identities...[12]

A great deal of the humor in silent films is based on violence; a great deal of this violence, however, is based on principle of anarchistic insanity, which in the film comedies of the 20's and 30's takes the form of a sustained attack on anything that seeks to constrain the individual.

The two most notable practioners of the technique of anarchistic anti-social behavior are Charlie Chaplin and the Marx Brothers. In Chaplin, the anarchy tends to physical, often taking the form of an attack against the controlling aspects of society represented by policemen,

bosses, bankers, headwaiters, etc. The Marx Brothers are less political, preferring to spend the time dismantling the decorum of upper class society generally represented in the person of Margaret Dumond. In both cases, however, the technique of anarchistic insanity is the same--the impression by force of a system of counter-values on a seemingly sane world. One can see also in the technique of anarchistic insanity the division into the dominated and the dominating which is the basis in black humor for two basic character types of schelemiel and lovable villain.

We are dealing then in black humor with a philosophy based on the judicious avoidance of any moral posture whatsoever. The mechanics behind this process may be seen by returning once again to Eastman's "laws" of humor.

> The third law is the "being in fun" is a condition most natural to childhood and that children at play reveal the humorous laugh in its simplest and most omnivorous form. To them every untoward, unprepared for, unmanageable, inauspicious, ugly disgusting, puzzling, startling, deceiving, shaking, blinding, jolting, deafening, banging, dumping, or otherwise shocking and distrubing thing, unless it be calamitous enough to force them out of the mood of play, is enjoyable as funny.[13]

One explanation for this phenomenon might be that for the child, various diverse experiences such as the ones described are morally indistinguishable except as stimuli. At this stage the child is reacting to the element itself rather than to ideas associated with it. The child's

evaluation in that it exists apart from a socially learned attitude might be classified as amoral. Given this amorality, one can see the potential for reacting with a similar response to widely differing objects. Thus the child, unhampered by adult moral associations, has the potential for responding similarly to a snake and a butterfly.

It is suggested, therefore, that in the amoral world of the child everything is potentially entertaining since connotations of morality are as yet not a part of its evaluation. As opposed to the adult there is nothing in the child's world which in itself is simply not funny.

The vision of an absurd humanity on which black humor is based is similarly amoral. Given the highly relativistic view of man and his institutions which black humor employs, one arrives once again at a situation in which everything is potentially funny.

CHAPTER III

THE CHARACTERS

"Shazam"
Captain Marvel

Since literature is invariably a reflection on the culture in which it is conceived, some knowledge of the culture would seem, therefore, to be necessary for a complete understanding of any individual art work. If, as this study has suggested, black humor represents a highly contemporary and particularly American expression, then any evaluation of it must be undertaken on a sociological as well as literary basis.

To begin with it may be helpful to view man and his society as an example of physical tension where strain is produced as the result of opposing forces acting on one another. There are, of course, a limitless number of these conflicts; but for purposes of this study only one will be considered, the problem of man and mass.

As might be expected, one of the primary effects of a shift from an individually oriented to a group oriented culture, a shift such as the one which has occurred in America in the last sixty or seventy years, is the tension between the individual and the mass. Co-existent with

this sociological problem, however, is a psychological one, one on which all others must be ultimately predicated. This problem results from the subordination of the individual to the mass and the resultant loss of personal identity. In mass culture, the individual personality is sociologically unacceptable. The goal of the individual is no longer to secure that which benefits him alone, but rather to move in directions sanctioned by the group--a change which David Riesman in his book, The Lonely Crowd,[1] describes as a movement from an inner-directed to an other-directed culture. This change is not a matter of simple subordination but a relocation of the source of the drives which no longer stem from the individual but the mass.

It should be understood that the individual identity is more than simply a factor in personality or a way of distinguishing one person from another. It is finally the means by which the individual determines not only his existence, but the existence of all things by the way that they relate to him. The loss of this identity, then, constitutes more than a social problem; it is an ultimate threat. Therefore, although the following effects of transition are presented as primarily sociological, it must be recognized that underlying all of them is the individual threat of loss of personal identity.

Another of the immediate effects of the individual's conflict with mass-culture tends to be a state of indirection resulting from the lack of clearly defined goals. In

an inner-directed culture, the goals are instilled early and tend to be pursued throughout life. This single minded pursuit of a clearly defined objective tends to have a stablizing effect on the progress and development of the individual, a pattern which Riesman terms "gyroscopic". In the other-directed culture on the other hand, the goals, rather than being firmly fixed by childhood environment, are established by the dictates of the mass and tend to be nebulous and shifting; and the pursuit of these tenuous goals is often the basis of individual anxiety.

Any discussion of mass-culture must include some mention of the machine. The word automation has meaning in society to the extent that it represents a potential problem in economics. However, if one considers the term in its meaning of replacing human activity, automation takes on a more interesting significance.

The machine works against human behavior not only in the sense that it represents replacement by a heighted efficiency, thus ruling out the human factor of error, but also in its implications of control. One no longer talks to another person; he talks to a telephone which tells him what to do and where to go. Interviews and applications are processed largely by computer. Thus the machine tends to replace the human not only in function but in personality.

Further implications are introduced when one considers the machine, a product of man, as the agent of man's de-

struction. It can be said that the machine has the capacity for eliminating not only typesetters and railroad firemen, but a goodly portion of the world's population as well. This obviously represents mechanical control at its highest and suggests Milton's agent of the ultimate destruction as a "vast two-handed engine at the door".

Nearly every society creates its own heroes who inculcate the virtues of the time. Before considering the hero of black humor, it may be of some interest to examine some current heroes, both fictional and nonfictional, in order to see what constitutes the current heroic tradition. In doing this one not only gains additional information about contemporary culture in seeing what virtues are considered heroic but also a background against which the variances of the black humor hero may be most accurately seen.

The great majority of non-fictional contemporary heroes are in the classic heroic mold, one which might be called the metier or occupational hero. These are men and women who have not only done their job but have done it better than almost anyone else.

Although the metier hero is by far the most prevalent, heroic status may be obtained in other ways. The metier hero, to the extent that he is held up as a good example by his culture, tends to be a symbol of the established traditions of that culture. It is possible, however, to achieve heroic status by traveling in the opposite direction, that is, by flaunting rather than upholding the

culture.

Two aspects of the rebel hero may be noted in relation to black humor. First, like black humor, the rebel hero's position is based on the disruption, often anarchistic, of established tradition and commitments. Second, it may be seen that the rebel hero, like anyone else, becomes funny at the moment he takes himself seriously.

In the realm of fictional heroes, the great majority tend to be of the metier variety, fusing national characteristics with individual strength and courage. The metier hero in fiction has two functions: first, to provide entertainment and a source of vicarious adventure but, more importantly, to serve as an example and goal for those who admire him. Characters like Achilles, Beowulf, King Arthur, Roland, and Prince Hal, then, are cultural heroes who represent not only the ideal man, but, coincidentally, the ideal example of their society.

The metier hero has not survived in contemporary culture because of the superlative qualities which made him heroic to begin with; he is, simply, too good to be true. The qualities which the metier hero personifies; loyalty, devotion, honor, etc. have been invalidated by the conclusion of absurdity. Again, modern sensitivity, which tends toward the separation of form and content, exposes the futility of commitment to these ideas by presenting as ludicrous the spectacle of belief divorced

from idea. Considered from this perspective, what has formerly seemed earnest and heroic behavior is now seen as humorous posturing. It is the hero's sincerity, in other words, which renders him ludicrous. Obviously the more serious and sincere his behavior, the funnier he becomes.

The metier hero, then, is simply not applicable to the modern situation. The contemporary hero needs to be a more accurate reflection of his time, to be in some way a comment on a culture based on mass rather than the individual.

One method of creating a contemporary hero is to portray him in the condition described at the beginning of this chapter, as an individual victimized by mass culture. One of the most valid expressions of this type of character, whose literary ancestors include the members of the Lost Generation and Chaplin's Tramp, is Holden Caulfield of J.D. Salinger's Catcher in the Rye. Caulfield was immediately accepted, particularly by the adolescents (traditionally hero-makers) who found in him an articulation of their experiences.

Holden presents an excellent example of the hero victimized by contemporary society--he has no kind of relationship with his parents, he is shunted from one school to another, and he is constantly searching for an authentic identity in a world of "phonies". This victimization, however, is not so complete as it may seem, and here lies the

heroic potential of this type of character. Holden and his adult counterparts, as seen in the novels of Bellow and Updike, overcome their environment not by domination but by acceptance.

Up until this time, this study has been dealing with characters who although they may be victims of mass-cult are nevertheless heroic. From this we may evolve the following maxim: heroic ideas demand heroic spokesmen. Thus ideas which ultimately reflect positively on the condition of man need to be presented by characters who are basically admirable. If we accept the maxim as valid, then it follows that its opposite is also true; anti-heroic ideas demand anti-heroic spokesmen. This precept is the basis for the character of the black humor anti-hero.

The popularity of the comic strip has been discussed earlier. As a black humor device in contemporary literature, the comic strip functions as a disguise for the anarchistic overthrow of rationality. The process is relatively simple; cruelty when practiced by an abstract and two-dimensional cartoon character is no longer cruel because it is not real. If the cruelty is practiced, in addition, by children, it is even more removed from reality. Peanuts, then, in its amusing portrayal of anarchistic agression becomes one of the most popular examples of black humor.[2]

The use of the innocence of childhood to disguise

the isolation of the individual is not a new device in literature; it is employed by Mark Twain to cover the implications of the statement of his anti-hero, Huckleberry Finn, when he says, "I'll go to hell."7

The strip's anti-hero, Charlie Brown, however, seems to be more related to Eliot than Twain. Like Prufrock, his cry is always, "Do I dare?" and, "Do I dare?"

The myth of the new order is seen in the annually appearing strip in which Charlie Brown tries to kick a football held by Lucy. Year after year Charlie tries, sustained by his faith in human nature; and year after year the football is jerked away at the last moment. The dialogue of the cartoon is relatively unimportant; the greater meaning lies in the ritual which presents certain obvious parallels to the previously mentioned flight of Icarus. Charlie Brown's faith in man-kind like Icarus' faith in his wings is the instrument of his downfall. Both instances basically are predicated on the mocking of commitments.

The theme of Peanuts is, ultimately, the agony of frustration masked by the duplicitous innocence of childhood and presented as comedy. It is a world where the pathetic insight of Charlie Brown is seen against a background of the security blanket, the perpetually yanked football, and, in particular, the Great Pumpkin. The Great Pumpkin, rising as it does out of a "sincere" pumpkin patch each Halloween to bring presents to all good

boys and girls, represents the synthesis of the Christian elements of Christ's birth (The Christmas motif) and Resurrection set against a background which is commercially spooky. What is even more significant is that the Great Pumpkin, like Godot, never comes. Each year Linus, a child mystic somewhat like Simon in Lord of the Flies, waits and each year the vigil proves futile.

The pressures of mass-cult lead the antti-hero to react in one of two ways, either resisting completely or bending completely. The latter figure, the anti-hero as Schlemiel, is represented by "good old wishy-washy Charlie Brown," everybody's scapegoat. Charlie Brown comes to stand for benign acceptance carried to its extreme; the lukewarm name itself suggests the vapidity of the character. Charlie Brown has less individualizing features then any of the other characters in the strip, being identified primarily with a huge balloon-like head which is singularly devoid of any distinguishing human characteristics. The enormous head suggests a greater capacity for feeling and, indeed, it is Charlie Brown who becomes the spokesman for the world of ideal values. It is also true, however, that it is precisely this insistence on handling things in a idealistic way that leads to his rejection and his reputation as a schlemiel. Charlie Brown, in his failure to fly a kite, kick a football, or talk to the little red-headed girl, stands for the failure of the idealist in the hip, modern world represented by his

playmates.

Charlie becomes almost the classic statement of the anxiety produced by the demands to meet the standard of an other-directed peer group. A person seemingly motivated by ideas which transcend the fashions of his group, Charlie is a largely inner-directed personality whose pursuit of innate and steadfast goals is directly opposed to the more valuable group-oriented culture in which he exists.

One can feel pity for Charlie Brown, but liking him is another matter. He is too much of a jerk, too divorced from ordinary human conduct, too nice, too square. His attempts to be rational make him look ridiculous; his efforts to be friendly cause others to reject him. There are occasional lapses into a weltschmerz in which he condemns the state of the world, and in these moments he becomes more existential than black. Never able to completely assert himself nor to make a commitment to total isolation, he remains "good old wishy-washy Charlie Brown."

In character Charlie Brown seems to bear a great resemblance to the victimized hero, and, indeed, there are many areas of correspondence. Opposed to the figure of the victimized hero, however, whose conflict with society becomes the means for a final existential victory, the anti-hero as schlemiel represents a character totally defeated by the forces of the mass. Again in contrast to the victimized hero, where the tragic elements of the

character are emphasized, the destruction of the schlemiel anti-hero is presented as essentially comic. It may be pointed out here that these characteristics of the schlemiel along with his basic personality are those which prevent our identifying with him, thus maintaining the precept expressed earlier that un-heroic ideas demand un-heroic spokesmen.

The persecution of Charlie Brown has implications beyond those of the destruction of the individual by the group. Charlie, as pointed out earlier, is more than just an individual who gets his lumps for being a schlemiel, he is also like Gulliver an emblem of what is considered ideal in the culture. Taken on a symbolic level, then, his defeat suggests the overthrow of the ideal, the replacement of a set of values by those almost exactly opposed to them.

The alternative expression of the anti-hero figure, the anti-hero as destroyer, is depicted in the character of Lucy. It is Lucy as the aggressor who invariably triumphs over the schlemiel; she reviles him, mortifies him, and physically injures him, and yet is never punished for it. It is the triumph of aggression over benevolence, malice over mildness. Watching her in action yields a beautifully satisfying experience of vicarious cruelty. Lucy, then, become the enforcer in the new ethic which dictates that the nice guy no longer gets the girl but gets a punch in the mouth. She becomes the basis for the

black humorist device of the anti-hero as the lovable villain--the man whose most endearing aspect is his outrageous behavior.

The purpose of this chapter has been to trace some points in the evolution of a literary figure, one developed to meet the specialized demands of a relatively new literary statement. The term "anti-hero" has been used to indicate the general qualities of the figure. It should be understood, therefore, that although the characters of Peanuts are suggested as demonstrations of the anti-hero as schlemiel and lovable villain, they are by no means the only ways in which these ideas may be expressed. There are, for instance, few instances in which anti-hero as schlemiel appears in a form as unadulterated as Charlie Brown. More often, as in the case of Yossarian, the schlemiel and aggressor are combined into one personality. Further, the term anti-hero should not be construed as applying only to the major character, schlemiel and aggressor types can and often do appear among the secondary black humor characters.

CHAPTER IV

Catch-22

"the old lie/ Dulce et decorum est"
Wilfred Owen
"Everywhere he looked there was a nut."
Catch-22

"War", said General Sherman, "is hell." "Hell," said Jean-Paul Sartre, "is other people." In Catch-22 Joseph Heller sets out to demonstrate the thesis that almost no person fights a war just for the hell of it.

Generally the success of war comedy is dependent on the extent of its blackness. That is, the degree to which simultaneous reactions to the grimmer aspects of war and the humorous aspects of an individual situation can be achieved. Charlie Chaplin's The Great Dictator succeeds, for instance, because of the highly accurate portrayal of Hitler which is at once frightening and hilarious. Schlemeil war comedies such as those of Martin and Lewis or Abbot and Costello are often less effective because the grimmer aspects of war are almost completely obliterated.

If his goal is to portray insanity, then Heller's style is precisely suited to his purpose. The advantages of a style as flamboyant as Heller's have already been suggested. Basically, it is effective in black humor

because its natural wildness is extremely effective in creating the amusing grotesque, because its surrealistic quality prevents audience empathy to any great degree, and because its disjointed qualities effectively convey the idea of the absurd.

One of the basic stylistic techniques of black humor is that of character exaggeration. As noted previously, comic distortion of characters is not only a well-proven method of ridicule but serves as well as the basis for the creation of gigantic characters "...drawn with a grotesqueness so audacious that they somehow transcend caricature entirely and become vividly authentic.[1]

Coupled with these fantastic characters are fantastic names. Again, this technique is not solely the property of Heller but is used by other black humorists as well. Thus, in Catch-22 there are characters such as Major Major Major Major, Milo Minderbinder, and Lieutenant, later Colonel, later General Scheisskopf, in Candy, Professor Mephisto, Dr. Irving Krankheit; and in Dr. Strangelove, General Jack D. Ripper, Muffin Merkeley, "Buck" Turgidson, and Dimitri Kissoff.

Notable also as a stylistic device in Catch-22 is the break-neck pace at which events occur. Although this pace is maintained by such effects as practically continuous movement and abrupt scene changes, its frenetic quality is attributable mainly to the fast and loose way in which Heller handles time in the novel. Not content with merely

using flash-backs to disrupt the normal chronological time sequence, Heller employs the concept of deja-vu, a word used to describe the feeling when upon doing something, one has the impression that he has done exactly the same thing or has been in exactly the same situation before.

In addition to its use as a technique, the concept of deja-vu also has philosophical implications which are relevant to the basic ideas of the book. Disoriented time is more than simply a comic abnormality, it is a violation of one of the universe's most fundamental elements of order and, thus, is indicative of a cosmic absurdity. Further, Heller's particular distortion of time produces in Catch-22 a surrealistic, house-of-mirrors situation in which normal progress is impossible. Instead, events and persoanlity such as the soldier in white, Snowden, and the dead man in Yossarian's tent are recurrent, producing each time they are encountered a reaction which is both frightening and absurd.

Perhaps the most noticeable single stylistic device in the novel is the technique of verbal circumlocution, a situation in which the form of a conversation is ostensibly maintained but where actual communication is kept to a minimum. The following, for instance, evokes memories of Groucho Marx who once described the conversational purpose of his films as "...[seeing] to it that no idea gets anywhere, or, if anywhere, that its destination will be of the maximum unimportance to the human race."[2] In the scene,

Major Major Major Major is taking steps to avoid any encounter with his men.

> "From now on," he said, "I don't want anyone to come in to see me while I'm here. Is that clear?"
> "Yes, sir," said Sergeant Towser. "Does that include me?"
> "Yes."
> "I see. Will that be all?"
> "Yes."
> "What shall I say to the people who do come to see you while you're here?"
> "Tell them I'm in and ask them to wait."
> "Yes, sir. For how long?"
> "Until I've left."
> "And then what shall I do with them?"
> "I don't care."
> "May I send them in to see you after you've left?"
> "Yes."
> "But you won't be here then, will you?"
> "No."
> "Yes, sir. Will that be all?"
> "Yes."
> "Yes, sir."[3]

It may seem at first as if the humor in a scene such as this lies simply in developing a paradox-I will be in only when I am out-into an absurd conversation. There is, however, more to it than that; for in the scene the humor is a product not so much of the simple absurdity of the scene but of the fact that in the mutated logic of Catch-22, the absurdity is feasible.

Thus the absurdity of Catch-22 is one of a somewhat special type. Rather than simple non-directional whimsey, one is instead presented with a situation in which irrational ideas can be, and indeed must be, presented in a rational manner.

The technique of logical absurdity is important be-

cause it is indicative of the extent to which Catch-22 is dependent on rational analysis. The evasive action taken by the novel's anti-hero Yossarian is more than simply a zany malingering, rather it is carefully calculated defensive maneuvering planned and executed with almost chess-game logic.

It is entirely possible, in fact, to view Catch-22 in terms of a game of moves and countermoves. Every attack made against Yossarian's personal security is parried by an action on his part. Thus when his commanding officer moves to increase the number of missions that must be flown, Yossarian counters by feigning illness; when a dangerous raid is planned, Yossarian aborts it by shifting the bomb line; when he is brushed by death and Snowden, one of his crew, is killed in the back of his plane, Yossarian reacts by removing his uniform and standing naked in formation.

In Yossarian's rational world, the ultimate expression of logic, albeit elliptical logic, is Catch-22. Catch-22, from which the novel draws its name, represents in its impenetrable rationality the extent to which the lives of men are controlled by logical processes.

> Yossarian looked at him soberly and tried another approach. "Is Orr crazy?"
> "He sure is," Doc Daneeka said.
> "Can you ground him?"
> "I sure can. But first he has to ask me to. That's part of the rule."
> "Then why doesn't he ask you to?"
> "Because he's crazy,"Doc Daneeka said. "He has to be crazy to keep flying combat missions after all the close calls he's had. Sure, I can ground Orr. But first he has to

> ask me to."
>
> "That's all he has to do to be grounded?"
>
> "That's all. Let him ask me."
>
> "And then you can ground him?" Yossarian asked.
>
> "No. Then I can't ground him."
>
> "You mean there's a catch?"
>
> "Sure there's a catch," Doc Daneeka replied. "Catch-22. Anyone who wants to get out of combat duty isn't really crazy."
>
> There was only one catch and that was Catch-22, which specified that a concern for one's own safety in the face of dangers that were real and immediate was the process of a rational mind. Orr was crazy and could be grounded. All he had to do was ask; and as soon as he did, he would no longer be crazy and would have to fly more missions. Orr would be crazy to fly more missions and sane if he didn't, but if he was sane he had to fly them. If he flew them he was crazy and didn't have to; but if he didn't want to he was sane and had to. Yossarian was moved very deeply by the absolute simplicity of this clause of Catch-22 and let out a respectful whistle.
>
> "That's some catch, that Catch-22," he observed.
>
> "It's the best there is," Doc Daneeka agreed.[4]

Robert Brustein, in his review "The Logic of Survival in a Lunatic World", calls Catch-22 "...the unwritten loophole in every written law which empowers the authorities to revoke your rights whenever it suits their cruel whims; it is, in short, the principle of absolute evil in a malevolent, mechanical, and incompetent world."[5]

Such an analysis, however, not only misinterprets the principle of Catch-22 but distorts the idea of the novel as well. First, it must be understood that Catch-22 is not the opponent against which Yossarian plays, but is instead a brief but succinct statement of the rules of the game. Brustein suggests that Catch-22 can be invoked only by those in power to subordinate those beneath them. This

is inaccurate since the principles of move-countermove applies equally to everyone in the novel. Under the rules of Catch-22, generals can be dominated as easily as privates, bad guys as easily as good. Catch-22 is much more than simply a diatribe against those in authority, instead it poses a statement of absurdity much like that in Camus' "The Myth of Sisyphus". In Catch-22 the trump cards are held not by men but by the logical processes which control them.

Thus Catch-22 is less a position than a force; a force as Brustein points out, not a great deal unlike that of Hardy's "prime mover" or the deterministic power which controls the men in Crane's "The Open Boat". The most notable characteristic of this kind of power is its impersonality, which transcends individual men and everyone equally subject to it. Just as this power is impersonal to man, it is also impersonal to his ethic and because of this cannot be said to be subject to any moral evaluation. Thus Brustein's "principle of absolute evil" is no more evil than, say, gravity. In both cases there is involved a principle which universally and indifferently controls all men.

In short Catch-22 is not only omnipotent, it is also totally amoral. The absurdity which it implies may produce consequences that are individually good or evil, but the force per se cannot be morally evaluated. By saying that Catch-22 is evil, Brustein makes the same mistake as Clevinger, Appleby, and other idealists in the story, that

of believing that right and wrong can be divided into sides.

The major themes of Catch-22 are directly dependent on this atmosphere of relativized morality. Yossarian's point and Heller's, stressed over and over again, is the stupidity of believing in any kind of moral abstraction such as Honor, Victory, or worst of all the Inherent Moral Superiority of Our Side.

In Rome Nately, Heller's unflagging idealist who is eventually killed, argues this point with an old man in a brothel.

> Nately was instantly up in arms again. "There is nothing so absurd about risking your life for your country!" he declared.
> "Isn't there?" asked the old man. "What is a country? A country is a piece of land surrounded on all sides by boundaires, usually unnatural. Englishmen are dying for England, Americans are dying for America, Germans are dying for Germany, Russians are dying for Russia. There are now fifty or sixty countries fighting in this war. Surely so many countries can't all be worth dying for."
>
> ..."Because it's better to die on one's feet than live on one's knees," Nately retorted with triumphant and lofty conviction. "I guess you've heard that saying before."
> "Yes, I certainly have," mused the treacherous old man, smiling again. "But I'm afraid you have it backward. It is better to live on one's feet than to die on one's knees. That is the way the the saying goes."[6]

Belief in ideals is stupid, Yossarian discovers, because it can get a person killed. The key to Yossarian's behavior, in fact, lies in his formulation of a code of relativized morality in which the only meaningful commodity is individual self-preservation.

In addition to its relation to theme, relativized morality functions also in Catch-22 as the basis for much of the novel's humor. It has already been pointed out that the black humor effects in Catch-22 are a result of the simultaneity of war and humor. It is also true, however, that a great many of the individual instances of black humor in the book result from the technique of relativizing "serious" subjects and treating them in an off-hand or light hearted manner. A fair example of this technique of relativity is the soldier in white.

> The soldier in white was encased from head to toe in plaster and guaze. He had two useless legs and two useless arms. He had been smuggled into the ward during the night, and the men had no idea he was among them until they awoke in the morning and saw the two strange legs hoisted from the hips, the two strange arms anchored up perpendicularly, all four limbs pinioned strangely in air by lead weights suspended darkly above him that never moved. Sewn into the bandages over the insides of both elbows were zippered lips through which he was fed clear fluid from a clear jar. A silent zinc pipe rose from the cement on his groin and was coupled to a slim rubber hose that carried waste from his kidneys and dripped it efficiently into a clear, stoppered jar on the floor. When the jar on the floor was full, the jar feeding his elbow was empty, and the two were simply switched quickly so that stuff could drip back into him. All they ever really saw of the soldier in white was a frayed black hole over his mouth.[7]

The soldier in white suggests the depersonalization of war. Robbed of his identity, his existence is verified only by the two jars and the black hole over his mouth.

It is, naturally, a pathetic picture; but it is this very quality of pathos on which the humor of the situation is based. In the scene, the act of switching the jars

produces a simultaneous reaction of amusement and repulsion based, on one hand, to the absurdity of switching the jars and, on the other, to the use of waste material as food.

To develop this situation a bit futher, one can see in the switching of food and waste matter, the relativized condition on which black humor is based. With the soldier in white, a situation is presented which is considerably at odds with contemporary norms. Rather than a condition of normality in which food is considered "superior" to waste, there is instead a situation in which "superior" food and "inferior" waste are shown to be relative to the point of interchangeability. This view is made more credible by the fact that the alternation of the two bottles appears to have no effect on the soldier, who absorbs both without comment. The equality of food and waste, then, represents a breakdown of traditional values and a means of making a statement of absurdity.

Brustein's interpretation of Catch-22 as merely satiric lies in the way in which the characters align themselves with respect to authority. Through Heller's technique, the natural chain of command is exaggerated to the point where practically everyone in the novel can be fitted into a paradigm of victimized and victimizer. On examination, it can be seen that these basic character types correspond nicely to the basic black humor personalities of the schlemeil and the lovable villain.

The character of Major Major Major Major, for in-

stance, is an almost classic example of the schlemiel personality. The name itself is an emblem of a life dominated by superior forces. The first of these forces is his father, a man whose jolly good humor in naming his son Major Major Major shortly after his wife dies in childbirth is exceeded only by his patience.

> ...a weaker man might have compromised on such excellent substitutes as Drum Major, Minor Major, Sergeant Major, or C Sharp Major, but Major Major's father had waited fourteen years for just such an opportunity and he was not a person to waste it.[8]

The full title is achieved when Major Major Major is promoted by an army I.B.M. machine "...with a sense of humor almost as keen as his father's..."[9] to the rank of major.

Major Major is not simply a loser, he is a total loser. Rejected on one side by the enlisted men who hate him because he outranks them and on the other hand by his fellow officers who hate him because he has not come up through the ranks, Major Major is clearly a man victimized from all sides. In the end, there is nothing left for him to do but isolate himself from both elements and take his meals alone in his tent.

The character of Clevinger is also in the schlemiel mold, but in his case the implications are somewhat different. Clevinger, unlike Major Major, is not simply an innocent victim of circumstances beyond his control; rather he and characters such as Appleby and Nately, who closely resemble him, are persecuted because of the courage

of their convictions. Clevinger, like Gulliver and the reporter who interviews Mark Twain, is a cultural metaphor for some normally accepted value or pattern of behavior. Specifically, he represents the devotion to higher ideals which should ideally motivate man and, in particular, man in war. Thus Clevinger is a man who takes seriously the ideals of Bravery, Patriotism, Loyalty, and Truth.

Heller's purpose in creating Clevinger is to show that idealistic behavior is not only unworkable but potentially dangerous. Because he is brave, Clevinger comes in low and straight on his bomb runs, inevitably destroying his targets but also coming perilously close to getting himself and everyone on the plane killed. (Yossarian's flying by contrast, is as evasive as everything else he does). Because he believes a superior officer who says that he wants the criticism of his men, Clevinger is singled out as a trouble-maker and brought before an action review board. The resulting "trial" is a fine demonstration of anarchistic insanity in which Clevinger's "normal" thinking is completely overwhelmed by a superior force. The technique is a wild melange of Kafka and Marx.

> "All right," said the colonel. "Just what the hell <u>did</u> you mean?"
> "I didn't say you couldn't punish me, sir."
> "When?" asked the colonel.
> "When what, sir?"
> "Now you're asking me questions again."
> "I'm sorry, sir, I'm afraid I don't understand your question."
> "When didn't you say we couldn't punish you? Don't you understand my question?"
> "No sir. I don't understand."

"You've just told us that. Now suppose you answer my question."
"But how can I answer it?"
"That's another question you're asking me."
"I'm sorry sir. But I don't know how to answer it. I never said you couldn't punish me."
"Now you're telling us you did say it. I'm asking you to tell us when you didn't say it."
Clevinger took a deep breath. "I always didn't say you couldn't punish me, sir."[10]

Yossarian neatly pinpoints the reason for Clevinger's stupidity.

> He [Clevinger] often looked to Yossarian like one of those people hanging around modern museums with both eyes together on one side of a face. It was an illusion, of course, generated by Clevinger's predilection for staring fixedly at one side of a question and never seeing the other side at all.... He was constantly defending his Communist friends to his right-wing enemies, and his right-wing friends to his Communist enemies, and he was thoroughly detested by both groups, who never defended him to anyone because they thought he was a dope.[11]

Clevinger's problem lies in his lack of objectivity or in terms more pertinent to this study, his inability to relativize morality. Like Appleby, he has "Flies in his eyes" which prevent him from making a rational assessment of the situation and acting in a logical manner. In this way Helleragain stresses the importance of logic in Catch-22.

As previously noted, the majority of characters in Catch-22 resolve easily into opposing the roles of victims and victimizers. There are a number of characters in the book of the lovable villain type. Among these are: Captain Black, the instigator of the Glorious Loyalty Oath Crusade and who good-naturedly twits the men about the fact that they will probably all be killed ("eat your liver");

ex-P.F.C. Wintergreen, who secretly runs the war because he is only one with access to a mimeograph machine; and two C.I.D. investigators who spend the majority of their time brutally interrogating the company chaplain. In these cases the comic effect of the characters relates to the way in which they dominate others. (Yossarian, incidentally, cannot be completely identified with either of these types. Because he is oppressed by the army, he tends toward the schlemiel; however, to the extent that all of his actions are motivated by selfishness and cowardice, he is a lovable villain.)

Perhaps the most interesting of the lovable villains, however, is the mess officer, Milo Minderbinder. Embarking on a regimen for self-improvement which might rival Benjamin Franklin's, Milo works his way up through the economic ranks to become a kind of living symbol of the benefits of capitalism. Milo's beginnings are inauspicious, having to do mostly with procuring black market food supplies for his officers. By the close of the book, however, he has expanded to the point of controlling the imports and exports of entire countries and has become, as Brustein points out, "...Mayor of every town in Sicily, Vice-Shah of Iran, Caliph of Baghdad, Imam of Damascus, and the Sheik of Araby."[12]

Milo also understands that business and morality do not necessarily mix.

> The planes were decorated with flamboyant squadron emblems illustrating such laudable ideals as Courage, Might, Justice, Truth, Liberty, Love, Honor and Patriotism that were painted out at once by Milo's mechanics with a double coat of flat white and replaced in garish purple with the stenciled name M & M ENTERPRISES, FINE FRUITS AND PRODUCE. The "M & M" in"M & M ENTERPRISES" stood for Milo and Minderbinder.[13]

Milo's career is temporarily endangered when he takes a contract with the Germans to bomb and strafe his own base camp, however, when he opens the books of M & M Enterprises to show the economic soundness of the operation, all is forgiven.

It would thus seem that despite his pleasant exterior, Milo is thoroughly despicable. Rather than just bombing the Germans, he bombs both sides; instead of fighting the war, he utilizies it. The expose of characters such as Milo illustrates, according to Brustein, "...the procedure of the entire book: the ruthless ridicule of hypocrisy through a technique of farce-fantasy, beneath which the demon of satire lurks, prodding fat behinds with a red-hot pitch fork."[14] Brustein's condemnation of Milo is predicated on a concept of morality. Milo is a corrupt individual because he bombs his own men, and bombing one's own men is wrong. Further, it is implied in Brustein's statement that in bombing his own base camp, Milo has exceeded the bounds of propriety and can no longer be humorously tolerated. In other words, he has gone too far.

An explanation such as this one, however, fails to take into account the over-riding logic of Catch-22.

Throughout the book, Heller has drawn the conclusion that the only sane way of existing in a war is to deal with it in individual terms. Since it is clearly impossible because of Catch-22 to overcome war, the sanest alternative is to try to negotiate some kind of agreement with it. Yossarian's solution to the war problem through most of the book is to counterattack it whenever possible. His roommate's, is to stuff horse chestnuts in his cheeks so every one will think he is crazy. Even Major Major comes to a sort of working agreement with the war by returning permanently to his trailer and refusing to see anyone. Why then is Milo, who has formulated a solution to the war, specifically as a means of getting rich, a hypocrite; while Yossarian, who has also formulated a solution to the war, is "...one of the most morally vibrant figures in recent literature"?[15]

The answer is that Brustein's or for that matter any approach which suggests that Catch-22 is merely satiric fails to accept the premise of moral relativity which Heller has gone to great lengths to set up. Brustein is upset over the fact that Milo concludes a treaty with the enemy, yet it is precisely this quality of relativisim that he admires in Yossarian. It is certainly this quality which distinguishes Yossarian from Clevinger, who because of his idealism is unable to see both sides of the issue. Milo's singleminded devotion to M & M Enterprises transcends such petty considerations as our side and their side

and, as such, is perhaps more in keeping with the tone of the novel than any other action in the book.

From the foregoing it may perhaps be concluded that a satiric approach to Catch-22 demands what might be called "Eclectric moral relativity." In other words, relativized morality is acceptable in some circumstances but not in others. It would seem that if the novel as a whole were to follow this pattern of selected relativity, then perhaps Heller's philosophy and, therefore, the book itself might conceivable be termed inconsistent.

In point of fact, this is exactly what happens in Catch-22. Heller begins with a condition of moral relativity and then tries at the end of the novel to over-rule it. Even Brustein, who appears very much to favor the policy of selected relativity, admits to the weakness of the conclusion. This weakness, however, does not lie in the fact that Yossarian is allowed to escape (the sanity of total desertion has been proven by Orr who exercises the alternative implied in his name and escapes to Sweden), but the manner in which he arrives at his decision to leave.

The conclusion of Catch-22 suggests that Heller may have felt that things were perhaps becoming a little too relative and that the time had come for his protagonist to change his ways. Thus toward the end of the novel, Yossarian is sent on a hellish journey through Rome calculated to shock the senses and instill pity for those

oppressed by "mobs with clubs".

> Yossarian crossed quickly to the other side of the immense avenue to escape the nauseating sight and found himself walking on human teeth lying on the drenched, glistening pavement near splotches of blood kept sticky by the pelting raindrops poking each one like sharp fingernails. Molars and broken incisors lay scattered everywhere. He circled on tiptoe the grotesque debris and came near a doorway containing a crying soldier holding a saturated handkerchief to his mouth, ...[16]

Yossarian has gone to Rome on a mission of mercy to inform the prostitute, with whom his friend Nately was in love, that he has been killed. When she learns of the death, the girl reacts by trying to kill Yossarian and becomes subsequently a constant threat to his life. She lurks ubiquitously in alleys, airplanes, and just outside windows always ready to leap out and kill him.

The purpose of all this unhappiness is to bring Yossarian to his final revelation. The last chapter of the book is a somewhat evangelistic sequence in which Yossarian passes up a deal by which he will be sent home if he will agree to saying that he is friends with his superior officers. Instead he sees that escape is a more viable solution and, resolving to follow Orr's example, takes off for Sweden.

This last act is more in keeping with Yossarian's character. It has overtones of Huck Finn's "lighting out for the territory" and carries with it the implication of rejection of personal responsibility and involvement. One may be curious, however, as to why a person as devoted

to self-preservation as Yossarian should pass up the offer to send him home in the first place. The answer is, of course, that at this point Yossarian has become morally superior to this kind of "deal" and so winds up displaying the same kind of idealism as Clevinger or Nately.

Thus the conclusion of Catch-22 sacrifices much of the relativity which the humor of the book is based. Instead of dealing with an individual who is amorally devoted to his own survival above all consideration, the novel becomes a kind of prodigal son story in which it is revealed that, although he may seem mixed up at times, Yossarian is really a nice guy after all.

To accept Brustein's thesis, therefore, it is necessary to accept the fact that Yossarian experiences a rather substantial change of heart between the first and middle sections of the book and the last section.. It must be believed that Yossarian has abondoned his interest in himself in favor of interest in other things. In the following, for instance, Yossarian is being examined by a psychiatrist:

> "You have deep-seated survival anxieties. And you don't like bigots, bullies, snobs or hypocrites. Subconsciously there are many people you hate."
>
> "Consciously, sir, consciously," Yossarian corrected in an effort to help. "I hate them consciously."
>
> "You're antagonistic to the idea of being robbed, exploited, degraded, humiliated or deceived. Misery depresses you. Ignorance depresses you. Persecution depresses you. Violence depresses you. Slums depresses you. Greed depresses you. Crime depresses you. Corruption depresses you. You know, it wouldn't surprise me if you're a manic-depressive!"17

Such a viewpoint is undoubtedly commendable, but it seems once more to illustrate the inconsistency of Yossarian's character. In a world where survival is a full time occupation, Yossarian has no time for things such as bigots, greed, and crime. He simply has too much to do.

CHAPTER V

CANDY

"I'm just a girl who can't say no."
Ado Annie in Oklahoma

It is probably safe to say that there is no country in the world so preoccupied with sex as the United States. Where else, for example, can clinical studies such as The Kinsey Report and, more recently, Human Sexual Response, originally intended for research purposes only, make the best-seller lists? What other country manufactures dolls that date? Where else can one find a move to ban Edgar Rice Burroughs from public libraries because Tarzan and Jane are living together without benefit of clergy?

It is against this background of sexual fascination that Candy is constructed. Candy is sexy not only because it evidently arouses prurient interest (the book originally could not be published in the United States) but also because the book's incredible range of carnal activity is itself a comment on prevailing attitudes toward sex both in society and in literature.

Two basic attitudes toward sex are recognizable in the United States, the spiritual and the physical. To say that they are taken seriously is perhaps an understatement

--they might be more accurately described as organized religions. At one end of the sexual mystique are the hedonists who take sex seriously by presenting sexual enjoyment as a kind of nirvana. The spectrum of hedonists ranges from the relatively puerile "Playboy Philosophy", which poses recreational sex as a constitutional right, to the more refined views of a De Sade or a Genet whose gourmet approach suggests sex (or more specifically sexual aberration) as the ultimate aesthetic experience. The antithesis of the hedonist is the sexual spiritualist. As opposed to hedonists who concentrate on the concrete properties of sex, the sexual spiritualists tend to view it as a transcendental experience. Coitus interpreted by the sexual spiritualist, whose realm is largely that of the woman's magazine, the advice columnist, and The Reader's Digest, tends to be described in terms of slogans such as "the greatest gift", "the ultimate expression of love", etc. One can see in these slogans an obvious affinity with the previously mentioned capital letter syndrome. Indeed, the world of the sexual spiritualist is almost exclusively capital letter, concentrating as it does on Love, Marriage, Motherhood, Children, etc.

The black humor of Candy is predicated on the lampooning of sex as it takes itself seriously. Specifically Southern's technique involves incorporating the soul of a sexual spiritualist into a body made for hedonism and allowing the result to wander through an over-sexed

society.

The back cover of the Brandon House edition of Candy asks the question, "Was she VERY good -- or very, very BAD?" On one hand, Candy is the quintessence of virtue and well-scrubbed wholesomeness. (For a possible source for the character, the reader is referred to Southern's article, "Twirling at Ole Miss" in the Bruce Jay Friedman anthology, Black Humor). On the other hand, however, her sex life approaches the dimensions of Fanny Hill. The answer to the Brandon House question would seem to be then that she is both very good and very bad. To more fully explain this situation it is necessary to turn once again to Jonathan Swift.

In his essay, "The Excremental Vision", Norman O. Brown explains Swift's singular attitude toward elimination.

> The most scandalous pieces of Swiftian scatology are three of his later poems--The Lady's Dressing Room, Strephon and Chloe, Cassinus and Peter--which are all variation on the theme: "Oh! Caelia, Caelia, Caelia-------." Aldous Huxley explicates, saying, "The monosyllabic verb, which the modesties of 1929 will not allow me to reprint, rhymes with 'wits' and 'fits'.[1]

According to Brown's article, Swift in all three poems exploits the paradox of an idealized goddess who nonetheless possesses very human bodily functions.

> For their real theme--quite obvious on a dispassionate reading--is the conflict between our animal body, appropriately epitomized in the anal function, and our pretentious sublimations, more specifically the pretensions of sublimated or romantic-Platonic love.[2]

This goddess-animal conflict contains obvious parallels to the spiritual-physical paradox on which Candy is based. Thus Candy as a character is a girl whose totally spiritual nature ("Was she very good?") is constantly being assaulted by the totally physical world in which she lives. ("Was she very bad?") or, to paraphrase Swift, "Oh Candy, Candy, Candy--------." The blank in this case may be filled in with any of the dozens of slang terms describing sexual activity. The the link between Candy and Caelia lies in the fact that in both cases an idealized condition is contrasted with a physical one.

In Candy the concepts of spiritual and physical love tend to be presented in terms of giving and taking. Thus Candy's spiritual credo is the same as the thesis of her paper in Contemporary Ethics: "To give of oneself--fully--is not merely a duty prescribed by an outmoded superstition, it is a beautiful and thrilling privilege."[3] The operative word here is give, and Candy's sexuality is the essence of Christian charity. (The final scene of the book reveals that charity does, in fact, begin at home) In each of her many sexual encounters the word give or need appears.

Candy's problem, however, is that she is unable to maintain the spirit of generosity and that a certain point in the proceedings, giving has a tendency to shade into taking. "...she was prepared to undergo pain for him... but pleasure--she was not sure that could be part of the

general picture."[4] As with Caelia, the spiritual has been contradicted by the physical.

Caelia's paradox also has relevance with respect to the humorous techniques of Candy. In his line, "Oh! Caelia, Caelia, Caelia-------." Swift begins with a statement of an ideal and then abruptly counters it with the highly physical nature of the verb--a process which seems to be a fair demonstration of Kant's theory of humor as frustrated expectation. Much the same process is employed in Candy. Southern will begin a scene on a spiritual note and end it on a grotesquely physical one. Thus, for example, an almost pastoral stroll through Greenwich Village turns up a hunchback rubbing his hump against a tree. In the following, also, the sublime nature of the opening dialogue is contrasted with the ludicrous physical position at the end of the scene.

> "You won't deny me," he pleaded, "I know you are too wise and too good to be selfish....Surely you meant what you wrote." And he began to quote urgently" '...the beautiful, thrilling privilege of giving full,'" meanwhile pressing forward against her. But as he did, Candy sprang to her feet again and the professor lost his balance and fell sideways, rolling in the spilled sherry, trying to soften his fall with one hand and to pull the girl down with the other, but he failed in both these efforts; and now, having taken a nasty bump in the fall and, perhaps too, because of his unwieldy bulk, he merely lay for the moment in the pool of sherry, wallowing and groaning.[5]

It is necessary to establish at this point that the basic technique of the scene, the contradiction of the exalted by the ridiculous, is by no means an innovation of Southern's. It is a low comedy device as old as the

drama itself. The relevance to the study lies in the contradictory elements, specifically in the way in which spiritualized sex is contradicted by physical sex.

It is the lampoon of idealized sex--sex which takes itself seriously--that gives form and direction to the novel. Structurally, Candy may be envisioned as a pyramid in which the themes of physical and spiritual love converge in the last scene. Based on this distinction, it is possible to divide the sexual encounters in Candy into those intended as comments on physical love and those intended as comments on the spiritual.

Southern parodies physical love in the novel by means of the absurd grotesque.[6] The "serious" nature of sex has already been mentioned. It is so serious, in fact, that there are innumerable laws, both written and unwritten, which strictly outline the conditions under which coitus may be engaged in. It may be concluded, therefore, that in terms of technique the blackness of the novel depends on the extent to which it violates "normal" sexual propriety. Thus within the two hundred twenty-four pages of the book, one encounters in addition to normal hetero-sexual intercourse a truly astounding catalog of sexual aberrations including: homosexuality, sadism, masochism, sodomy (all varieties), onanism, and incest (again all varieties).

An example of the technique of the amusing grotesque is offered below. Again it should be pointed out that the humor of the scene derives from simultaneous reaction to

the concept of rape and to the absurd manner in which it is presented. In the scene, Mr. Christian discovers his daughter in bed with the Mexican gardener.

> ...it was a scene that had formed a part of many many of his most lively and hideous dreams--dreams which began with Candy being ravished, first by Mephesto, [Candy's Contemporary Ethics professor] then by foreigners, then by Negroes, then gorillas, then bulldogs, then donkeys, horses, mules, kangaroos, elephants, rhinos, and finally, in the grand finale, by all of them at once grouped around different parts of her,... He had even dreamed once that she asked him if it were true that there was a small uncovered opening in the pupil of the eye, because if it were, she had said, she would have room there (during the finale) for a miniscule organ, like that of a praying mantis to enter her as well.[7]

In Candy the theme of physical sex begins with the relatively mundane and moves toward the increasingly bizarre and grotesque. Thus in addition to the scene with the Mexican gardener, in the episodes which may be considered to be part of the theme of physical sex, Candy is violated variously and chronologically by her Uncle Jack under her hospitalized father's bed (he has been lobotomized by the gardener's trowel); by a hunchback, who first beats her with a coat hanger; and by a gynecologist named Johns on the pretext of examining her in the men's room.

On the other hand, Southern ridicules the idealized conception of sex as spiritual experience by elevating sexual union to the level of religious mysticism. In this regard, one sees the parallels which Southern seems to want to establish between Candy and Voltaire's Candide. In both cases, the major characters are young people whose

optimistic and unshakable devotion to an ideal causes them to be continually abused by a less sensitive world. (The obvious correspondences between these patterns of behavior and those of other idealistically commited characters such as Icarus and Don Quixote should be noted at this point.) With respect to structure, Candy echoes the picaresque style of Candide as Candy moves from her home to Greenwich Village, to Minnesota, to Calcutta, to Tibet.

As this itinerary would indicate, Candy is gradually traveling eastward not only geographically but spiritually. Armed with her talismanic Contemporary Ethics thesis statement, "To give of one self...etc.," and her overwhelming altruism she is moving toward the point where physical and religious communion will merge into one. Given this increasingly mystic tone, it seems only natural for the sexual experiences connected with this theme to be concomitantly metaphysical. Thus the episodes with Professor Mephisto and Grindle, a mystic and spiritual leader of a group called the Crackers, who takes Candy to a cove beneath a waterfall in order to practice upon her"...Exercise Number Four...the true key to Infinite Oneness...,"[8] are much less sexually grotesque than the others.

There are few books in which the term climax can be so aptly applied as it is in Candy. The final scene of the book, as Candy is simultaneously possessed by a statue of Bhudda and her father, represents the synthesis and culmination of the two themes of the novel. Thus the same

image is at once the most spiritual and the most grotesque, for the moment in which Candy experiences the ultimate spiritual communion "...the Bhudda, too, needed her!",[9] is the same moment in which she discovers, in a parody of anagnorisis, the ultimate sexual depravity. Thus to the end Candy joins the completely spiritual and the completely physical.

Southern's writing style also relies on the techique of simultaneity. The events which take place in Candy are as fantastic as those in Catch-22, but where Heller's descriptions are largely realistic, Southern's are almost childish. Mr. Christian, for example, is described at one point as "...some kind of giant insane lobster man,"[10] This kind of Thornton W. Burgess manner is especially effective in describing sexual episodes since it allows Southern to comment on the particular nature of Candy's innocence by describing her clothing and her anatomy in the most precious possible terms. Also, in keeping with the general pattern of the book, the humor of the sexual descriptions is enhanced by the contradiction between what is being done and the manner in which it is described.

Candy contains both of the basic black humor character types. Aunt Livia, for instance, is an excellent example of the lovable villain, especially in scenes such as those in the road house segment where she completely dominates more "normal" people. Mr. Christian ostensibly seems to fill the role of schlemiel, since he represents an impo-

tent parental authority and since he is victimized to the point of being lobotomized by a trowel. The last scene suggests, however, that perhaps Mr. Christian is only biding his time until the opportunity to exert himself is presented.

There is much of Candy that is admittedly satiric. As the dust jacket of the book states, "It's targets, literary and otherwise, are many: the medical world; spiritualism, evangelism, and Zen; television; Greenwich Village bohemians; sex and psychoanalysis." There are political targets also. The most terrible epithet Mr. Christian can find upon discovering his daughter in bed with the Mexican gardener is "Communist!"; there are ugly American tourists in Tibet; and Dr. Irving Krankheit seems to be more than just passingly Jewish.

It should not be interpreted, however, that because Southern is satiric he is necessarily serious. It has already been stated that there can be no such thing as serious black humor. The extent to which the book exemplies black humor is the extent to which it has no underlying purpose. Basically it seems to have no such purpose.

In view of this situation, the remarks made by Albert Goldman in his review of Candy seem particularly apt.

> 'The Put On' is a combination of the practical joke and pulling one's leg...Taken not as a joke but as an act in the current cultural situation, Candy is a perfect Put On of that liberal intellectual audience of readers and critics who are forever trying to understand and explain everything and who seem constitutionally incapable of enjoying fantasy or humor without indulging in the cant of "redeeming social value."[11]

CHAPTER VI

DR. STRANGELOVE

"Shantih Shantih Shantih"
T.S. Eliot

"Perhaps", writes Brustein in his essay, "now that Catch-22 has found its most deadly nuclear form--we have reached the point where even the logic of survival is unworkable".[1] In its treatment of the destruction of the world, Dr. Strangelove; or How I Stopped Worrying and Learned to Love the Bomb explores the comic potentials of this theme.

The plot of Strangelove concerns itself with the events occurring a few hours after General Jack D. Ripper, having discovered a Communist plot to "poison our precious bodily fluids" by introducing flouride into the nation's water supply, sends off a squadron of plans to hydrogen-bomb the Soviet Union. Having dispatched the plans, Ripper destroys first the code necessary to recall them and, later, himself. The plot is discovered by an R.A.F. officer, Colonel Mandrake, who attempts to notify the President, Muffin Merkely, but is thwarted for lack of loose change for the pay telephone. President Merkeley, once he learns of the disaster, calls the cabinet and the Chief of

Staff, "Buck" Turgidson, together to attempt to prevent the planes from reaching their destination. After a hot line call to Russian Premier, Dimitri Kissoff, it is decided to have the Russians destroy the American planes in order to prevent the activation of the "Doomsday Machine", a diabolical device designed to completely destroy the world. The "Doomsday Machine" is the invention of Dr. Strangelove, an ex-Nazi now working for our side. All the planes are destroyed except for one, commanded by Major "King" Kong who is described by Stanley Kaufman in his review for The New Republic as "...a Texan to end all Texans which--along with many others--he does."[2] Kong's bombs find their mark and the screen dissolves into a series of mushroom clouds while the sound track plays, "We'll Meet Again." The film is a comedy.

From the synopsis given above, it should be evident that Dr. Strangelove employs most of the black humor techniques which have already been discussed. There is, for example, as in Catch-22, the simultaneity of humor seen against the background of war; there is the absurd grotesque observable in characters such as Turgidson and Dr. Strangelove; there is the anarchistic overthrow of characters such as Col. Mandrake who represent normality and rational evaluation. Beyond these things, however, are additional concepts which make Dr. Strangelove perhaps the final black humor statement.

The first of these concepts lies in the nature of the

bomb. It has already been pointed out that as a man-made machine the bomb is especially ironic since it is not only man's creation, but the potential agent of his destruction. The special relation of the bomb, however, to black humor goes beyond simple irony.

To understand this relationship, it is necessary to begin with the often-mentioned platitude concerning the destructive power of the nuclear arsenal. With the bomb, we are told, it is now possible for the first time in history for the human race to be eliminated. This is, of course, a highly serious condition, but can it really be appreciated? Is it actually possible, for instance, to completely understand the concept of the annihilation of an entire city or to think in terms of mega-deaths and overkill? Is it possible to imagine a world with no one in it?

It is precisely because the mind is unable to grasp concepts such as these that the prospect of total annihilation lends itself to black humor. Nuclear war, in short, presents an illustration of the concept advanced previously that anything sufficiently expanded, will disassociate itself from normal evaluation. Thus the absurdity of nuclear war lies not so much in its results as in its size. One can imagine within limits multiple deaths and widespread destruction, but beyond a certain point the mind boggles. The concept of total destruction is potentially funny because it is disassociative and because of this disassocia-

tion can be considered with detachment; it is this detached evaluation which lead to the laugh.

It has been pointed out that to the extent that black humor is aggressive, it represents a situation in which a first person is attacked by a second for the amusement of a third; it has also been shown that almost anything may serve as an agent of aggression. However, in Dr. Strangelove the agent of aggression is the bomb and this brings about a unique situation in which the humorous destruction of the first person is also accompanied by the simultaneous destruction of the second and the third.

In the last scene of Hamlet, the dying prince gives these instructions to Horatio: "If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart/Absent thee from felicity awhile/And in this harsh world draw they breath in pain/To tell my story."[3] Hamlet's wish for Horatio to tell others of his fate is understandable, since if there is no one to profit from the example, the example itself becomes pointless. There is little danger of Horatio's being unable to accomlish his task since, regardless of the number of people killed in the play, it may be assumed that there will always be someone else left.

Until Dr. Strangelove. With a film that has as its conclusion the end of the world, a new condition is posed--one in which the audience as well as the actors are eliminated. This concept is recognized by Kaufman in his review.

> Dr. Strangelove has been made, quintessentially, from the viewpoint of another race on another planet or in another universe, observing how mankind, its reflexes scored in its nervous system and its mind enlarged in orthodoxies, insisted on destroying itself.[4]

This conclusion, though it accurately describes the detachment needed for the black humor laugh, nevertheless seems to side-step the final implication of Dr. Strangelove by once again introducing the concept of an audience, albeit extra-terrestial. To be fully appreciated, one must accept the premise that the conclusion of Dr. Strangelove entails the elimination of everything.

Philosophically considered, every meaningful thing demands an audience since nothing can be appreciated which cannot be seen. Men can be born, overcome their environments, build civilizations, create philosophies; but unless someone sees the event or some monument to it the accomplishment is meaningless. To insure a continuing audience, man has created the concept of an infinitely perpetuated race who, continuing intact, will preserve the evidence and memories of his achievements.

What, however, if man should be totally annihilated, will the Parthenon, Shakespeare, the Ford Motor Company or man himself ever have existed if no one is around to verify that existence? Can the end of the world possess any moral significance if the humanity which created morality is wiped out? Even the act of destruction is pointless

since there will be no one to remember it.

The conclusion of Dr. Strangelove, then, demonstrates the ultimate relativity not only of man but of humanity as well. On this surface, this would seem to be simply nihilistic and thus unrelated to humor. It is exactly this relativity, however, which is the basis for black laughter, and it is because of this that Dr. Strangelove can not only show the end of the world, it can also show it as a joke. At the end there may be silence, but the last sound before the silence is laughter.

In his book, The Birth of Tragedy, Friedrich Nietzche alludes to two basic modes of existence. One, the Dionysian takes its name from the god of fertility and implies, as might be expected, a tumultous, almost mad, state; the Apollonian, named for the god of music, is predicated on the ideas of serenity, control, and objectivity. Applying these terms, black humor would seem to be a very Apollonian way of looking at a very Dionysian condition. It is often savage but not meant to be taken savagely; it shows anarchy but does not promote it. It does not infuriate nor does it depress. It does not make mad guilty or apall the free. To provoke such reactions would mean that it has accomplished something and black humor stands steadfastly against accomplishing anything. In short, it is enter-

taining rather than persuasive. It makes us laugh.

FOOTNOTES

Introduction

[1]M'Naghten Rule quoted by F.A. Whitlock in Criminal Responsibility and Mental Illness (London: Butterworth's, 1963), p. 20.

[2]Bruce Jay Friedman, Introduction to Black Humor (New York: Bantam Books, 1965), p. x.

[3]This statement might be objected to on the grounds that insanity is, in fact, curable. I am, however, using the term "insane" here as in the majority of the study in its literary and philosophical rather than medical sense. Considered in this way, the implication of insanity is that the behavior of the madman is beyond human understanding and, therefore, beyond human help. In short, insanity considered in these terms is both inexplicable and irremedial.

Chapter I

[1]William Hazlitt, "On Wit and Humor", The Comic in Theory and Practice, ed. John J. Enck, Elizabeth T. Forter, and Alvin Whitney (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1960), p. 20.

[2]Aristotle, from "Poetics", The Comic in Theory and Practice, p. 6.

[3]Max Eastman, The Enjoyment of Laughter (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1936), p. 9.

[4]Ibid., p. 9.

[5]Ibid., p. 294.

[6]"On the Knocking at the Gate in Macbeth", The Norton Anthology of English Literature, ed. Alrous, Donaldson, et. al. (New York: Norton and Company. 1962), II, 553. De Quincy has several works which are relevant to this study. His essay, "Murder Considered One of the Fine Arts", is an excellent example of the black humor premise that anything disassociated from its attendant morality is potentially entertaining.

[7]Thomas Wright, A History of Caricature and Grotesque (London: Chatto and Windus, 1875), p. 4.

[8]Ibid., p. 157.

[9]Henri Bergson, "Laughter," Comedy (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1956), p.180.

[10]Ibid., p. 67.

[11]Ibid., p. 63.

[12]Martin Grotjahn, Beyond Laughter (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1957), p. 11.

[13]Eastman, p. 147.

Chapter II

[1](New York: Bantam Books, 1960), pp. 18-19.

[2]In Swift, A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Ernest Tuveson (New Jersey: Spectrum Books, 1964) -- hereafter cited as Swift.

[3]In the introduction to Swift, p. 12.

[4]John F. Ross, "The Final Comedy of Lemuel Gulliver," Swift, p. 88.

[5]Ibid., p. 89.

[6]Mark Twain, The Mysterious Stranger, in The Portable Mark Twain, ed. Bernard De Voto (New York: The Viking Press, 1946), p. 693.

[7]Ibid., p. 714.

[8]Ibid., p. 718.

[9]Ibid., pp. 736-737.

[10]Quoted by Bergson in Comedy, pp. 184-185.

[11]Joseph Heller, Catch-22 (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1961), p. 48.

[12]Robert Brustein, "The Logic of Survival in a Lunatic World," The New Republic, CXLV (November 13, 1961), p. 13.

[13]Eastman, p. 3.

Chapter III

[1]David Riesman, The Lonely Crowd (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1950).

[2]The relation of Peanuts to black humor is interesting, but should not be overstressed. The strip is useful in that it provides illustrations of some of the basic characteristics of the schlemiel and the loveable villain, but it should in no way be considered as the source of the two character types.

Chapter IV

[1]Brustein, p. 12.

[2]Quoted in The Movies by Richard Griffith and Arthur Meyer (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957), p. 321.

[3]Heller, p. 102.

[4]Ibid., pp. 46-47.

[5]Brustein, p. 11.

[6]Heller, pp. 253-254.

[7]Ibid., p. 10.

[8]Ibid., p. 86.

[9]Ibid., p. 88.

[10]Ibid., p. 79.

[11]Ibid., p. 70.

[12]Brustein, p. 12.

[13]Heller, p. 259.

[14]Brustein, p. 13.

[15]Ibid., p. 13.

[16]Heller, p. 425.

[17]Ibid., p. 312.

Chapter V

[1]Brown, p. 31.

[2]Ibid., p. 39.

[3]Terry Southern and Mason Hoffenberg, Candy (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1964), p. 22.

[4]Ibid., p. 44.

[5]Ibid., p. 25.

[6]Parody and lampoon are, I believe, more accurately descriptive than the term satire, since they do not imply the desire to reform.

[7]Southern, p. 45.

[8]Ibid., p. 194.

[9]Ibid., p. 223.

[10]Ibid., p. 45.

[11]The New Republic, CLI (July 11, 1964), pp. 18-19.

Chapter VI

[1]Brustein, p. 13.

[2]Stanley Kaufman, "Dean Swift in the Twentieth Century," The New Republic CL (February 1, 1964), p. 26.

[3]William Shakespeare, Hamlet, ed. George Lymon Kittredge (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1939), p. 128.

[4]Kaufman, p. 26.

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