



Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

Opponent's Report:

Kryštof Beták, "Absurdity and Crisis of Identity in Heller's *Catch-22*," BA thesis

Choice of Topic:

The interpretation of *Catch 22* in terms of the absurd and in relation to existentialist thought is a well-trodden path and not easy to make one's own in a novel way. A cursory search online reveals several recent BA theses on aspects of the topic and a steady stream of student essays, while in more scholarly domains one might turn to *Contemporary American Novelists of the Absurd* by Charles H. Harris (1971), *From Here to Absurdity: The Moral Battlefields of Joseph Heller* by Stephen W. Potts (1982), *Tilting at Mortality: Narrative Strategies in Joseph Heller's Fiction* by David M. Craig (1997), or even *Joseph Heller's Catch-22* edited Harold Bloom (2008). Although the task of a BA thesis is not to necessarily break new ground, what is somewhat troubling is the fact that the author fails to acknowledge or discuss any of this work as a means of launching his own investigation which, were it to have restricted itself to a Heideggerian appraisal of the novel, might have been really quite innovative.

Thesis statement / aims and objectives:

The project is constructed around a generally articulated aim: "to analyse the absurdity of the novel and consequently to scrutinize the identity of three protagonists - John Yossarian, Doc Daneeka and Chaplain Tappman. The way in which the theme of identity is approached in the novel will be compared with the way the philosophy of existence deals with the question of being of individuals, so that it can be consequently considered, whether Heller's process of writing *Catch-22* was directly influenced by existentialism or not, which is the aim of the thesis to decide" (p.10). To a degree, this objective is realised; however, the problem that dogs the project is the fact that the grounds for, and limits of, the conceptual field are so dispersed and potentially incompatible. The impression is that Mr Beták lost himself in some wide ranging, complex and potentially interesting research, connected to a set of multifunctional keywords, all of which is incorporated in the final product. Consequently, there is a heady cocktail of summarised aspects of Heideggerian philosophy, existentialism, a dash of psychology from some unexpected quarters, along with a decorative addition light literary theory (drawn from Jonathan Culler's *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*) that has a detrimental effect on coherent discourse. There are also some serious logical flaws in some of the associative claims developed. First among these is the 'fact' that Heller was influenced by the Theatre of the Absurd, a designation coined by Martin Esslin a year after Heller's novel was published. Second, that with no concrete archival evidence it is presumed that Heller "was influenced directly by the philosophy of existence and its interest" (p.57-8). The vocabulary of influence and implied authorial intention thus hamstrings a potentially viable re-reading of the text.



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Structure and development:

The organizational schema of the thesis indicates the conceptual overstretch and subsequent unevenness of the discussion. After the introduction, *Catch 22* is barely mentioned until page 31. The “Theoretical part” runs from page 12 to page 37, the discussion of the novel is afforded only a scant 16 pages in the “Practical part.” This extended theoretical section plays but an implicit role in the textual description and analysis. There seems little commitment to positioning discussion of Heller’s novel in relation to existing discourse, or exploring it in aesthetic terms.

Research:

The philosophical research undertaken for this project is certainly ambitious and challenging, and shows initiative. A certain intellectual journey has undoubtedly been undertaken here. But this is to be balanced against a dearth of literary scholarship on the thesis’s purported focus. Bizarrely, there is very little up to date research on the literary subject of the thesis – the closest we get is Adam J. Sorkin’s *Conversations with Joseph Heller* (1993), all the sources on Heller in the bibliography date from 1960s and 1970s.

Use of sources:

There are no major formal or stylistic issues concerning the use of sources; Materials have been cited appropriately throughout and there is a strong effort to engage with the philosophical ones, in particular.

Stylistics and language:

Mr Beták’s writing style is strong—fluent and consistent. Linguistic errors are minimal, typographical errors are rare. Care has obviously been taken with this aspect of the work.

Format:

Although the Works Cited diverges from the designated template, the thesis has been consistently formatted throughout.

Suggested areas for discussion at the defence:

1. While the thesis strives to connect Heidegger with Camus, a strange absence here is Sartre, especially since Sartre engages directly with Heidegger’s work. What lead you to make this decision?
2. Why are there so few scholarly works on Heller in your bibliography? And why leave so little space for textual analysis?
3. How does the status of the novel as a satire on war affect your reading of the characters? How would this interact with an interpretation that foregrounds the philosophy of existence?

I recommend the thesis for defence and propose to grade the work “VERY GOOD”/2 or “GOOD” / 3 depending on the result of the defence.



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