

THE AMERICAN REALITY AS REFLECTED IN  
*CATCH-22* AND *ONE FLEW OVER*  
*THE CUCKOO'S NEST*

Morris Wei-hsin Tien\*

As America moved from the fifties to the sixties, the new social order of a "mass society" clearly emerged. The invisible economic and political controls of a post-industrial nation in this period implanted both "affluence" and "conformity" as the basic ingredients in the pattern of its cultural life. When Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961) and Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962) first appeared in the early sixties, it was a decade of "disorder" and "powerlessness" in the early part, but "bitter protest" and "counter-culture" in the latter part in America.<sup>1</sup>

Since the appearances of these two novels, scholars have been inclined to describe one or the other as either "absurd," or "surreal," or "one of the most bitterly funny works in the language."<sup>2</sup> However, these scholars have obviously ignored

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\*Professor, English Department, National Central University; part-time Research Fellow, Institute of American Culture, Academia Sinica.

<sup>1</sup> For the ideas of "disorder" and "powerlessness," see Charles A. Reich, *The Greening of America* (New York: Random House, 1970), pp. 3-20. For the ideas of "bitter protest" and "counter culture," see Allen J. Matusow, *The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), and Norman Mailer, *The Armies of the Night: History as a Novel, the Novel as History* (New York: New American Library, 1968).

<sup>2</sup> See the following essays: Joseph J. Waldmeir, "Two Novelists of the Absurd: Heller and Kesey," *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature* 5 (1964): 192-204; Vance Ramsey, "From Here to Absurdity: Heller's *Catch-22*," *Seven*

the fact that both novels are closely related to their authors' personal experiences in the first place, and to the American social reality of its period at large. In terms of their themes, subject matter, and morality, these novels actually are not very different from Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* or Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* in depicting the realities of their different times. What makes them appear "absurd" or "surreal" is the unique styles both Heller and Kesey have employed in writing each of their novels. My concern in this essay is with how the American reality of the early sixties is reflected in these two novels and what moral visions Heller and Kesey have expressed in them.

## I.

*Catch-22* is basically a novel based on Heller's personal experience as a combat bombardier in the U.S. Air Force. In World War II, Heller enlisted in October, 1942. Like Yossarian, the unheroic hero of *Catch-22*, he joined the Army Air Force and entered cadet school. After training he was sent to Corsica (an island in the Mediterranean) as a combat bombardier for missions over Italy. Like most of his fellow beginners, he found participation in the war fun at first. On his 37th mission, however, the co-pilot of his plane, fearing the B-25 was going to stop, panicked, grabbed the controls from the pilot, and took the plane into a steep dive. Heller found himself pressed to the ceiling of his bombardier's compartment in the nose, his headphones torn loose, helpless to act or to communicate with the rest of the crew. When the plane

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*Contemporary Authors: Essays on Cozzens, Miller, West, Golding, Heller, Albee, and Powers*, ed. Thomas B. Whitbread (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968), pp. 99-118; James E. Miller, Jr., *Quests Surd and Absurd: Essays in American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), pp. 24-25; Robert Burstein, "The Logic of Survival in a Lunatic World," *New Republic*, 145 (Nov. 13, 1961), 11-13; "Under Mad Gods," *Spectator*, June 15, 1962, p. 801; "Lunacracy," *Newsweek*, Oct. 16, 1961, 116-18; Richard Blessing, "The Moving Target: Ken Kesey's Evolving Hero," *Journal of Popular Culture* 4 (1971), 615-27.

finally leveled off, allowing Heller to plug his headset back into the intercom, the first thing he heard was the voice of the co-pilot sobbing, "Help him! Help him!" "Help who?" Heller shouted into the mike. "Help the bombardier," the co-pilot replied. Heller experienced a deathly chill, but recovered quickly enough to rejoin, "I'm the bombardier. I'm all right." Then help *him*, came the reply. Heller crawled into the rear of the plane to find the gunner wounded in the thigh. He decided then that experience was as close as he wanted to come to death. It was this kind of experience of his that provided the seed for Heller's masterpiece, *Catch-22*.<sup>3</sup>

Heller used exactly this incident in the description of Snowden's death in the novel. Although Snowden does not appear as a live character in the story, he influences Yossarian's changed attitude toward the flying missions each time he remembers Snowden's death in greater detail. When first assigned to Pianosa, Yossarian was apparently no more opposed to flying missions than anyone else. He even returns a second time to a target at Ferrara. But Snowden's death on the Avignon mission affects him profoundly. While Yossarian is treating Snowden's wound, his blood covers Yossarian, and, afterward, Yossarian refuses for a time to wear his uniform—the symbol of a war he has come to loathe.

In the novel, in which events take place at sundry times and places and are connected in an apparently random and free-associative sequence, Snowden's death appears in seven different chapters.<sup>4</sup> Particularly in Chapter Four, the narrative of Snowden's death follows Heller's personal experience the closest:

"Help him, help him," Dobbs sobbed. "Help him, help him."

"Help who? Help who?" called back Yossarian, once he

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<sup>3</sup> See Stephen W. Potts, *From Here to Absurdity: The Moral Battlefields of Joseph Heller* (San Bernardino, Calif.: The Borgo Press, 1982), p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Snowden's death appears in Chapters Four, Five, Seventeen, Twenty-one, Twenty-two, Thirty, and Forty-one.

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had plugged his headset back into the intercom system, after it had been jerked out when Dobbs wrested the controls away from Huple and hurled them all down suddenly into the deafening, paralyzing, horrifying dive which had plastered Yossarian helplessly to the ceiling of the plane by the top of his head and from which Huple had rescued them just in time by seizing the controls back from Dobbs and leveling the ship out almost as suddenly right back in the middle of the buffeting layer of cacophonous flak from which they had escaped successfully only a moment before. *Oh, God! Oh, God, oh, God*, Yossarian had been pleading wordlessly as he dangled from the ceiling of the nose of the ship by the top of his head unable to move.

"The bombardier, the bombardier," Dobbs answered in a cry when Yossarian spoke. "He doesn't answer, he doesn't answer. Help the bombardier, help the bombardier."

"I'm the bombardier," Yossarian cried back at him. "I'm the bombardier. I'm all right. I'm all right."

"Then help him, help him," Dobbs begged. "Help him, help him."

And Snowden lay dying in the back.<sup>5</sup>

Although few seemed to know what to do with *Catch-22* when it was published in 1961,<sup>6</sup> it was shortly recognized as "one of the bravest and most nearly successful attempts we have yet had to describe and make credible in the incredible reality of American life in the middle of the 20th century."<sup>7</sup> Obviously, *Catch-22* is not just another anti-war novel like *A Farewell to Arms*, or *The Naked and The Dead*, describing

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<sup>5</sup> Joseph Heller, *Catch-22* (1961; New York: Dell, 1963), pp. 51-52. Hereafter, all references are to this edition and page numbers will be given in the text.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Stern, in *The New York Times Book Review*, illustrates that point by saying *Catch-22* is both "too long, because its material . . . is repetitive and monotonous," and "too short, because none of its many interesting characters and actions is given enough play to become a controlling interest," and Heller "is like a brilliant painter who decides to throw all the ideas in his sketchbook onto one canvas, relying on their charm and shock to compensate for the lack of design." He ultimately says, "the book is no novel." "Bombers Away," *The New York Times Book Review*, 22 October 1961, p. 50.

<sup>7</sup> Norman Podhoretz, "The Best Catch There Is," in *Doings and Undoings* (New York: Farras, Straws & Company, 1964), p. 229.

the lusty evils of the battle, but it is a book written for a decade of readers who have been warned about the dangers of the military-industrial complex. It reveals a kind of institution that usurps man's maintenance of life. So, the enemy in *Catch-22* is not simply the chaos of war, but also the deadly inhuman bureaucracy of the military-economic establishment which claims to be a stay against chaos while it threatens human life more insidiously than battle itself. As Yossarian said, "The enemy is anybody who's going to get you killed, no matter *which* side he's on, and that includes Colonel Cathcart" (*C-22*, 127). Frederick R. Karl is certainly correct when he says, "The military for Heller serves the function of any large, impersonal organization, not unlike Kesey's *Cuckoo's Nest*."<sup>8</sup> In other words, Heller deals with one real terror that haunts the American novel of the sixties—the organized institution which in the name of reason, patriotism, and righteousness has seized control over man's life, and which has usurped the individual's right to face chaos and to discover his own order in life.

Within the organized institution, the military commanders constantly lose sight of the simple fact that they are supposed to beat the enemy; instead they direct their energies toward self-seeking and all sorts of personal goals and have the whole military institution absurdly corrupted. For instance, the thirty-six-year-old Colonel Cathcart is a man of one ambition—becoming a general. He always second-guesses himself on everything he does: was it a feather in his cap or a black eye? Did it please General Dreedle or offend him?

He was complacent and insecure, daring in the administrative stratagems he employed to bring himself to the attention of his superiors and craven in his concern that his schemes might all backfire. (*C-22*, 191-92)

One tactic Cathcart employs to reach his goal is volunteering

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<sup>8</sup> Frederick R. Karl, *American Fictions, 1940-1980: A Comprehensive History and Critical Evaluation* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), p. 311.

his men for dangerous missions. He also keeps increasing the number of missions they must fly. His purpose is to use the squardon's record to boost him in rank. He does not care how many men are killed if he can get a little favorable publicity. That is why Yossarian wants to be grounded after he has finished fifty missions before Cathcart increases the missions to sixty.

According to the military regulation, before anyone can be grounded, he has to be crazy. Yet after he is crazy, he will lose his sense to ask to be grounded. Here is the passage that exhibits the ridiculous logic and incidentally explains the title of the novel:

Yossarian looked at him (Dr. Daneeka) 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." (C-22, 46-47)

So, "Catch-22" is the law which the organized institution uses to bind the individual to only those possibilities which strengthen the organization rather than the individual.

If Colonel Cathcart did not want so badly to be a general, his pilots might not have gotten trapped in his escalating demands. All touch with what should be the purpose of

Cathcart's command is lost as aspiration itself becomes the final end. And why does Cathcart want to be a general? asks Lieutenant-Colonel Korn. "For the same reason I want to be a colonel. What else have we got to do? Everyone teaches us to aspire to higher things. A general is higher than a colonel, and a colonel is higher than a lieutenant colonel. So we're both aspiring" (C-22, 435). However, Colonel Cathcart has no chance at all to become a general:

Actually, Colonel Cathcart did not have a chance in hell of becoming a general. For one thing, there was ex-P.F.C. Wintergreen, who also wanted to be a general and who always distorted, destroyed, rejected or misdirected any correspondence by, for or about Colonel Cathcart that might do him credit. For another, there already was a general, General Dreedle, who knew that General Peckem was after his job but did not know how to stop him. (C-22, 220)

Like their colonels, the two generals, General Dreedle, the wing commander, and General Peckem, in charge of Special Services, are also in power struggle. Peckem is "a prick" who loves dissent and paradox, and delights in setting his subordinates, Scheisskopf and Cargill, against each other. Despite the fact that he gives Special Services authority over all other branches of the service, he still desires Dreedle's job. However, Dreedle, "a blunt, chunky, barrel-chested man in his early fifties," is "prone to long, ponderous silences" when he is not drinking too much (C-22, 220, 221). His moods are often arbitrary and unpredictable. He gives his son-in-law (Colonel Moodus) a safe job, and openly brings his mistress to the front. In his conflict with Peckem, he is aided by mail clerk Wintergreen who forwards Dreedle's communications but not Peckem's. Yet, Peckem still obtains the top post as the wing commander. Lieutenant Scheisskopf is left to command Special Services when General Peckem transfers out of the branch, but Peckem forgets to void his memorandum giving Special Services the highest command. He defeats Dreedle, only to find that he is under Scheisskopf, who has been

promoted to Lieutenant General. Scheisskopf is described as a man who wants war because he loves to wear a uniform and directs parades. When he becomes the top commander, he orders the divisions to line up for a parade.

These military commanders typify people who are obsessed with appearances and with power struggle rather than with the actual purpose of their jobs. The crowning symbol of General Peckem's power struggle with General Dreedle is the remarks made when he says,

"Dreedle's on our side, and Dreedle *is* the enemy. General Dreedle commands four bomb groups that we simply must capture in order to continue our offensive. Conquering General Dreedle will give us the aircraft and vital bases we need to carry our operations into other areas." (C-22, 332)

This kind of destructive competitiveness symbolizes America as a country fundamentally at war with itself. As Heller has literarily presented, Americans are their own worst enemy. What makes the military institution more ridiculous is that the war seems to be run by the Ex-Private First Class Wintergreen, a mail clerk, who exerts tremendous power from his hidden place in a mail room. He scribbles acceptances and rejections on papers from Dreedle, Peckem, and Cathcart, with none of them the wiser, although Peckem likes to discuss literary style with Wintergreen. Wintergreen's main interests are profit and unprolix prose.

In connection with the military institution is the economic system which develops under Milo Minderbinder. Lieutenant, mess officer, and the manipulative black market entrepreneur, Milo Minderbinder builds his empire himself. Just as his eyes do not focus properly, so his mind cannot take in any value other than profit. He is single-minded: everything he does is designed to enhance his profitable black-market syndicate, M & M Enterprises. Milo proclaims over and over again, "I don't make the profit. The syndicate makes the profit. And everybody has a share" (C-22, 236). But as a matter of fact, nobody but Milo is shown throughout as in complete control of



the syndicate's multifarious operations.

Milo starts by supplying exotic foods to the mess hall, but ends by stressing business deals above the war and the people he is supposed to serve. For business purposes he takes gas pellets from life jackets and morphine from first aid kits, leaving the drowning and the wounded without aid, but with the comforting message that "What's good for M & M Enterprises is good for the country" (C-22, 238). He draws group after group into his plan by double-talk, flattery, or blackmail. Even civilians grant him honorary titles and join his syndicate because it boosts sagging local economics. His wealth, influence, and sphere of action become enormous, until he and his profit-seeking organization are omnipotent and omnipresent. Nothing stops Milo. One of his unquestioned assumptions is that the whole reason for the existence of a government is to promote such capitalistic undertakings as M & M Enterprises. Such thinking explains how he can consistently act against the government and yet maintain his conviction that his acts serve the country's best interests.

Psychologically speaking, Milo's dominant need is to control reality, to bend it to his unruly ego. And it therefore follows that he will be opposed to anything that threatens to limit that control. Even when he makes a deal with the Germans that requires him to bomb his own squadron, he convinces his superior officers that it was good for everyone—because his syndicate made a profit on the deal:

. . . and one day Milo contracted with the American authorities to bomb the German-held highway bridge at Orieto and with the German military authorities to defend the highway bridge at Orieto with anti-aircraft fire against his own attack. His fee for attacking the bridge for America was the total cost of the operation plus six per cent, and his fee from Germany for defending the bridge was the same cost-plus-six agreement augmented by a merit bonus of a thousand dollars for every American plane he shot down. The consummation of these deals represented an important victory for private enterprise, he pointed out, since the armies of both countries were socialized

institutions. (*C-22*, 261)

To Milo, the ultimate cause of war is not freedom but free enterprise, and the battle should be finally won only when war too is controlled not by government but by industrious individuals like himself. When war becomes but one more business to be manipulated by the enterprise, Milo's control of reality will be complete. Such thinking suggests not only Milo's moral myopia but his derangement as well, in the mentally and morally unbalanced world of the novel it escapes condemnation. We learn, for instance, that when Milo raids his own squadron for the Germans the public uproar is still once he discloses the enormous profits earned in the deal for the syndicate and convinces everyone "that bombing his own men and planes had therefore really been a commendable and very lucrative blow on the side of private enterprise" (*C-22*, 219). Since, as Heller sees it, virtually everyone in America today needs desperately to believe that he has not been left out and owns a share in the enterprise, Milo's crimes can be easily enough rationalized as heroic. Here we may find what Milo has done, which is realistically incredible or absurd, is frighteningly an accurate picture of a people profoundly alienated from a government grown so big and impersonal as to make them feel powerless. As morally insane as Milo obviously is, his sentiments express those of millions of his countrymen, who rebelliously, yet somehow innocently, crave membership in an organization so large and potent as to be beyond the control of the law.

Since Milo's acts are so corrupt, it is only natural to infer that given his popularity and power he is responsible for corrupting others. In fact, the name "Minderbinder" may possibly have been contrived to suggest Milo's amazing "binding of minds through his self-serving capitalistic rhetoric." But, we might also say that Milo has actually done little more than supply the rationalization for his followers' own selfish endeavors to fulfill purely personal ends. Both Milo and his admirers are best understood as products of a system that has somehow fostered their belief that as free citizens their birth-

bright, indeed their very duty, is competitively to pursue individual interests at every opportunity. Milo merely succeeds in tempting those he deals with to follow inclinations inherited from their culture anyway. Very early in his enterprises, he is able to talk Major de Coverly into furnishing him with a plane and pilot to purchase eggs from Malta and butter from Sicily because the Major himself admits to a weakness for fresh eggs and butter. And other mess halls are all willing to supply planes and pilots in order to have fresh eggs and butter:

Then the other three squadrons in Colonel Cathcart's group turned their mess halls over to Milo and gave him an airplane and a pilot each so that he could buy fresh eggs and fresh butter for them too. Milo's planes shuttled back and forth seven days a week as every officer in the four squadrons began devouring fresh eggs in an insatiable orgy of fresh-egg eating. (C-22, 140)

The ultimate hazards posed by Milo's simple-minded transference of interest from people to profit are alluded to by Heller, who has commented on Milo's psychodynamics: "I gave him a mental and moral simplicity that, to my mind, makes him a horrifyingly dangerous person, because he lacks evil intent."<sup>9</sup> Milo's "mental and moral simplicity" enables him to find easy justifications for everything he is impelled to do so that while his acts may frequently appear hypocritical or deceitful, they are nonetheless executed with sincerity and courage. Here is how he follows his deeply felt principles:

Milo had been earning many distinctions for himself. He had flown fearlessly into danger and criticism by selling petroleum and ball bearings to Germany at good prices in order to make a good profit and help maintain a balance of power between the contending forces. His nerve under fire was graceful and infinite. With a devotion to purpose above and beyond the line of duty, he had then raised the price of food in his mess halls so high that all officers and enlisted men had to turn over all their pay to him in order to eat. Their alternative—there was an alterna-

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<sup>9</sup> "Playboy Interview: Joseph Heller," *Playboy*, June 1975, 64.

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tive, of course, since Milo detested coercion and was a vocal champion of freedom of choice—was to starve. When he encountered a wave of enemy resistance to this attack, he stuck to his position without regard for his safety or reputation and gallantly invoked the law of supply and demand. And when someone somewhere said no, Milo gave ground grudgingly, valiantly defending, even in retreat, the historic right of free men to pay as much as they had to for the things they needed in order to survive. (*C-22*, 377)

Such morally perverted reasoning occurs throughout the book. That through the course of American history the ideal of freedom should have become so corrupted as to be popularly construed to mean the right to do anything and everything not strictly prohibited by law is perhaps the most tragic aspect of the novel. Yossarian in the novel has harshly indicated this kind of “principled” opportunism as the consequence of a capitalistic ethic. He has eloquently expressed this idea toward the conclusion of the novel:

“When I look up, I see people cashing in. I don’t see heaven or saints or angels. I see people cashing in on every decent impulse and every human tragedy.” (*C-22*, 455)

It is Milo’s enterprise that helps keep the men trapped in the military-economic institution. While they languish, he profits; while they clamor to go home, he has then fly more missions; while they die, he expands. The military-economic institution rules and it is so many removes from the war itself that even the weak justifications for war do not justify its existence—it is a totally irrelevant and bureaucratic power that either tosses man to his death or stamps out his spirit. Thus Captain John Yossarian, a bombardier and the central figure of the novel, has only three alternatives: he can be fodder for the cannon; he can make a deal with the system; or he can depart, deserting not the war with its implications of preserving political freedom, but abandoning a dehumanized military-economic machine.

In addition to presenting the reality of the American

complex institution, *Catch-22* is also mainly concerned with the moral growth of its central character, John Yossarian. Yossarian is a bombardier in the 256th Squadron of the United States Army Air Force. He is twenty-eight years old, strong and big. He is a complex, intelligent, and sensitive man who has few illusions. Vance Ramsey was the first scholar who realized Yossarian's moral growth when he said that the "apparently only tangentially related scenes have their relevance to the spiritual development of the book's hero."<sup>10</sup> But I cannot agree with his interpreting Yossarian as the hero of the absurd. Minna Doskow's essay on Yossarian's walk through Rome has also recognized the importance of Yossarian's moral growth. Doskow thus wrote:

Although Yossarian may be innocent. . . at the beginning of the novel, and his belief that he can work within the establishment using their rules for his own ends is incredibly naive, he does, I believe, learn better, and after his symbolic journey to the underworld, represented by his trip through the dark streets of Rome, he comes to a new recognition of the meaning of his experience and reaches a new knowledge in the hospital after his near death, achieving what one could perhaps call an informed innocence.<sup>11</sup>

In the first place, Yossarian's learning to see the horror of war and the disregard that the Air Force has for any one man's individual safety is not after his trip through the dark streets of Rome when the novel comes to Chapter Thirty-nine, "The Eternal City," and the last few chapters. Long before this trip, there are several recurring incidents, such as the Ferrara mission, which causes the death of Kraft, the Great Big Siege of Bologna, and the Avignon mission, that have clearly marked the different stages of Yossarian's awareness and indicated the development of his moral growth. And in the second place, Yossarian's trip through the dark streets of Rome is not a

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<sup>10</sup> Ramsey, p. 111.

<sup>11</sup> Minna Doskow, "The Night Journey in *Catch-22*," *Critical Essays on Catch-22*, ed. James Nagel (Encino and Belmont, Calif.: Dickenson Publishing, 1974), p. 155.

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symbolic journey to the underworld, but a real trip in a real city.

Most critics agree that *Catch-22* is episodic and formless, and has no time sequence of any kind. But according to Clinton S. Burhans's reconstruction of the chronology for *Catch-22*,<sup>12</sup> both the Ferrara mission and the Great Big Siege of Bologna take place in May, 1944 while the Avignon mission is in June of the same year. Burhans proposes that the basic structure "can best be visualized as a kind of narrative tree, with the trunk comprised primarily of the main plot (Yossarian's efforts to get off flying status either by achieving the required number of missions or by having himself declared insane) and two sub-plots (the struggle between Peckem and Dreedle for command of the Wing, and Milo's syndicate)."<sup>13</sup> The three incidents in the time sequence as Burhans has reconstructed can clearly demonstrate the different stages of Yossarian's moral development.

At the time of the Ferrara mission, Yossarian is brave and eager to fly his missions. Colonel Cathcart is conscious of his bravery and recollects later:

Yossarian came in carefully on his second bomb run because he was brave then. He buried his head in his bomb-sight until his bombs were away; when he looked up, everything inside the ship was suffused in a weird orange glow. At first he thought that his own plane was on fire. Then he spied the plane with the burning engine directly above him and screamed to McWatt through the intercom to turn left hand. A second later the wing of Kraft's plane blew off. (*C-22*, 141)

It is in this mission that Yossarian has Kraft and his crew killed by taking his flight of six planes in over the target a second time. And Colonel Cathcart even thinks to obtain a medal for Yossarian "after the debacle of Ferrara" (*C-22*, 141).

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<sup>12</sup> Clinton S. Burhans, Jr., "Spindrift and the Sea: Structural Patterns and Unifying Elements in *Catch-22*," *Critical Essays on Joseph Heller*, ed. James Nagel (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1984), pp. 45-47.

<sup>13</sup> Burhans, Jr., p. 40.

Yossarian's early bravery, that is so much like the naive bravery of his "roomies," fully indicates that he is unaware of the important questions concerning his individual moral growth. And his immediate reaction to the death of Kraft is simply mindless:

Yossarian was leaden with fatigue and longed to remove his sticky clothing. He stepped into the briefing room with mixed emotions, uncertain how he was supposed to feel about Kraft and the others, for they had all died in the distance of a mute and secluded agony at a moment when he was up to his own ass in the same vile, excruciating dilemma of duty and damnation. (C-22, 141)

What is really important in this quotation is Yossarian's uncertainty over how he should act under the circumstances. He recognizes that he should be feeling some sort of remorse for the deaths of Kraft and the others, but he really does not. They did die, after all, off in a distance. Yossarian's callousness reaches close to the level of Cathcart's when he suggests a solution to Cathcart's dilemma:

"We're trying to be perfectly objective about this," Colonel Cathcart said to Yossarian with the zeal of sudden inspiration. "It's not that I'm being sentimental or anything. I don't give a damn about the man or the airplane. It's just that it looks so lousy on the report. How am I going to cover up something like this on the report?"

"Why don't you give me a medal?" Yossarian suggested timidly. (C-22, 142)

And Yossarian is not being ironic in the face of cold-heartedness here. He really means it. A few lines farther on, he protests against Cathcart's unwillingness to award the medal, " 'But I got the bridge the second time around. . . . I thought you wanted the bridge destroyed' " (C-22, 143).

However, before the Great Big Siege of Bologna, Yossarian changes his attitude drastically and refuses to fly his missions to support the ground troops pushing toward Bologna. It is under such a circumstance that he argues with Clevinger:

Clevinger agreed with ex-P. F. C. Wintergreen that it was Yossarian's job to get killed over Bologna and was livid with condemnation when Yossarian confessed that it was he who had moved the bomb line and caused the mission to be canceled.

"Why the hell not?" Yossarian snarled, arguing all the more vehemently because he suspected he was wrong. "Am I supposed to get my ass shot off just because the colonel wants to be a general?"

"What about the men on the mainland?" Clevinger demanded with just as much emotion. "Are they supposed to get their asses shot off just because you don't want to go? Those men are entitled to air support!" (C-22, 126)

I see two important points in this exchange of dialogue. First of all, Clevinger, who may very well be "one of those people with lots of intelligence and no brain" (C-22, 70), has come up with a very difficult question. If Yossarian does not knock out the ammunition dumps at Bologna, then the American soldiers on the mainland are going to be shot at by Germans using the ammunition from those dumps as the Americans attempt to take the city. Clevinger questions Yossarian's right to refuse to give the air support that the men on the ground "are entitled to." Now this question obviously concerns Yossarian with a moral choice.

At this stage, we have a picture of Yossarian as a man who has backed into a situation to avoid the danger faced by the ground troops pushing toward Bologna. But he also finds himself in a position that may be as dangerous as the one he tried to avoid. He now recognizes that he is caught by the very immorality he recognized in the system and had been used previously to his own advantage. He even suspected that he was wrong in the conversation with Clevinger. His suspicion that he was wrong before his flying mission to Bologna suggests that he had made serious attempts to understand the nature of the world around him. By now, he understands that there is a contradiction between the values of "Catch-22" and his own. "Catch-22" says that the highest value is the preservation of the institution, expressed in the words like



Patriotism and Service. Yossarian says that the highest value is his own survival. He finds that Clevinger is a patriot of "bad faith," who regards risking his life for his country as an objectively valid moral position. But Clevinger sees no alternatives, just living the role given him by the institution. When Clevinger asks Yossarian, "Which is more important?" "Winning the war" or "keeping alive." Yossarian's answer is: "To whom?" "Open your eyes, Clevinger. It doesn't make a damned bit of difference *who* wins the war to someone who's dead" (C-22, 127). As Yossarian sees it, whoever wants to kill him is the enemy. When his commanding officer, Colonel Cathcart, sends him into skies filled with flak, the Colonel is as much an enemy as the Germans. In Yossarian's eyes, the institution obscures its status as the enemy by justifying its use of individuals on the grounds of its own values. Thus Yossarian's refusal to participate in the mission to Bologna is his conscious choice.

The tension developed by the Great Big Siege of Bologna reaches its peak in the final scene of Snowden's death and the revelation of "his secret." As has been mentioned earlier, after the death of Snowden, Yossarian has been profoundly affected and goes naked rather than wear a uniform stained by Snowden's mortality. Naked, he attends Snowden's funeral, and naked, he receives a medal. He really thinks that refusing to wear a uniform is an adequate form of protest. The reason for Yossarian to receive a medal is that both Cathcart and Korn find that he has caused so much trouble by refusing to fly and his example has deteriorated the morale of the whole squadron. They, therefore, tell him that he can go home without a court martial if he does not reveal their part. At first Yossarian agrees, but when he realizes that he would be cooperating with the institution in the stifling of his own spirit if he were to accept a deal with Korn and Cathcart. He withdraws from the conspiracy. Instead, he defies Cathcart and Korn. And from now on he tries to seize upon an "alternative" so as not to have his soul sold to the institution.

In the course of the narrative, occasional references are

made to Snowden, a young gunman whose insides are shot out as his plane flies over Italy in the Avignon mission and who dies in Yossarian's arms. As the narrative advances, the reader is given larger and larger glimpses of the incident. But not until Yossarian decides to try another way of getting out of combat than to agree with Cathcart and Korn do we get Snowden's full story. As the boy whimpers, "I'm cold," Yossarian, horrified, sees his entrails slither to the floor. There is a message in those entrails that teaches Yossarian, finally, what he must do:

Yossarian was cold, too, and shivering uncontrollably. He felt goose pimples clacking all over him as he gazed down despondently at the grim secret Snowden had spilled all over the messy floor. It was easy to read the message in his entrails. Man was matter, that was Snowden's secret. Drop him out a window and he'll fall. Set fire to him and he'll burn. Bury him and he'll rot like other kinds of garbage. The spirit gone, man is garbage. (C-22, 450)

Each of the three early incidents both teaches something to Yossarian and reveals something to the reader concerning Yossarian. While Milo grows in the book to become the most perfect representative of the incorporate mind, Yossarian grows to be the most perfect representative of the individual mind. As Milo's evil springs from his inability to see individual human value, Yossarian's good, his moral sense, springs from his ultimate inability to ignore that value. Yossarian's morality is a worldly morality, worked out in the "battlefield" of the world after his birth. And it is a morality that, we have seen, grows in him through definite stages, particularly during his combat experience. He develops from a man who can exhibit the initial callousness of his reaction to Kraft's death over Ferrara, into a man who recognizes the responsibilities that his own actions have placed on him during the Bologna period, and then into a man who can understand emotionally, if not intellectually, the secret Snowden revealed over Avignon. And it is that growth of moral awareness that, I think, provides the

most important structural unity of the book.

However, Yossarian's character is not always in that way developing as the book progresses. *Catch-22's* chronological technique changes toward the end, as many scholars have pointed out. How early does the change occur? They do not agree unanimously. From the "death" of Orr, a skillful combat pilot and a gifted handyman who converts his and Yossarian's tent to a luxury residence, through the end of the book, it seems to me, the chronology straightens out and becomes normal, with flashbacks occurring occasionally as a result of a specific character's memory. Something else changes, too, in the book. The tone after Orr's "death" (even though he is revealed to have escaped to Sweden later, yet at this point in the book virtually no evidence has been given to indicate Orr is anything but dead), is darker. As Clinton S. Burhans has observed, "Beginning with the end of Chapter Twenty-nine, the novel darkens measurably into almost insupportable horror."<sup>14</sup> Obviously from Chapter Thirty-three on, the book moves steadily toward a darker view of the world that coincides with Yossarian's greater awareness of his physical danger and of the mental trap that he had been caught in if he does not "jump." The darkness, however, is the darkness of an all-too-real reality, and to see it we have to look at the most seemingly surreal chapter in the book.

Minna Doskow has written an allegorically oriented essay that begins with "The Eternal City" and explains why all the rest of the book works perfectly well, including Yossarian's desertion at the end. I have no intention of trying to argue with her about her conclusions. But I cannot accept her basic assumption that the walk through Rome is somehow allegorical rather than realistic, and I object to statements like the following:

The lampposts seem to curl, and together with the mists the shadows succeed in "throwing everything visible off balance"

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<sup>14</sup> Burhans, Jr., p. 42.

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(*C-22*, 423). The shimmering uncertainty of forms helps to upset Yossarian's equilibrium and enhance the unearthly quality of the scene through surrealistic distortion.<sup>15</sup>

The lampposts do not, in fact, "seem" to curl at all:

The broad, rain-blotched boulevard was illuminated every half-block by short, curling lampposts with eerie, shimmering glares surrounded by smoky brown mist. (*C-22*, 423)

A half page further on:

Now he knew where he was; soon if he continued without turning, he would come to the dry fountain into the officers' apartment seven blocks beyond. He heard snarling, inhuman voices cutting through the ghastly blackness in front suddenly. The bulb on the corner lamppost had died, spilling gloom over half the street, throwing everything visible off balance. (*C-22*, 423)

Doskow says the lampposts seem to curl, but Heller says they *do* curl. They are the typical old ironwork lampposts found in many cities in Europe, or even in America. Doskow says the curling lampposts and the mists create the imbalance Heller speaks of, but Heller says the absence of light caused by a burned-out bulb creates the imbalance and that, furthermore, Yossarian *knew where he was at the time*. The notions of the "unearthly quality of the scene" and the "surrealistic distortion" are simply not present in the passages that Doskow has alluded to. During the entire walk through Rome, Heller has done nothing but present a faithful picture of reality.

The section begins as Yossarian walks out of the police station into the Roman night, recognizes that he is at the bottom of a hill, and walks uphill toward "the glare of a broad avenue at the top of the long cobblestone incline" (*C-22*, 420) that stretches on for several blocks. He comes to Tony's Restaurant with the sign outside that says "Fine Food and Drink. Keep out," which makes him feel that "Nothing warped seemed bizarre any more in his strange, distorted surroundings" (*C-22*, 421) and leads to the line that probably

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<sup>15</sup> Doskow, p. 157.

more than any other causes this section to be misread: "The tops of the sheer buildings slanted in weird, surrealistic perspective, and the street seemed tilted" (C-22, 421). But that is *not* surrealism: that is good, hard detail. The tops of sheer buildings *do* look as though they slant if viewed from below, and the street *is* tilted. Yossarian has been walking up hill. He is simply recognizing, in much greater detail than he is normally accustomed to, the real world through which he is passing and which Heller is not allowing us to look at any more through the colored glasses of humor. Thus, the people and things Yossarian sees should be not less real but rather more real than anything else in the book so far:

A boy in a thin shirt and thin tattered trousers walked out of the darkness on bare feet. The boy had black hair and needed a haircut and shoes and socks. His sickly face was pale and sad. His feet made grisly, soft, sucking sounds in the rain puddles on the wet pavement as he passed, and Yossarian was moved by such intense pity for his poverty that he wanted to smash his pale, sad, sickly face with his fist and knock him out of existence because he brought to mind *all* the pale, sad, sickly children in Italy that same night who needed haircuts and needed shoes and socks. (C-22, 421)

The key words are "knock him out of existence." The existence in the real world of such a poor child is nearly more than Yossarian can bear. And when a nursing mother walks by "almost on cue" as he thinks of "animal udders bared insensibly to that same raw rain," he wants to get rid of her, as well. Note that unlike the workings of a dream, she appears *almost* one cue. And his reaction to seeing both the boy and the nursing mother is very real:

What a lousy earth! He wandered how many people were destitute that same night even in his own prosperous country, how many homes were shanties, how many husbands were drunk and wives socked, and how many families hungered for food they could not afford to buy? How many hearts were broken? How many suicides would take place that same night, how many people would go insane? How many winners were losers,

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successes failures, rich men poor men? How many wise guys were stupid? How many happy endings were unhappy endings? How many honest men were liars, brave men cowards, loyal men traitors, how many sainted men were corrupted, how many people in positions of trust had sold their souls to blackguards for petty cash, how many had never had souls? How many straight-and-narrow paths were crooked paths? How many best families were worst families and how many good people were bad people? When you added them all up and then subtracted, you might be left with only the children, and perhaps with Albert Einstein and an old violinist or sculptor somewhere. (C-22, 421-22)

The point behind this extended quotation is that Yossarian's awareness of the existence of so much hardship in areas that cannot possibly touch his own life, and also his growing awareness that he has had something to do with the creation of that hardship, are crucial to his development. And Yossarian is deepening his earlier realization of what an old Italian woman has told him. The M. P.'s have broken all of her apartments and run all her prostitute daughters out of Rome, leaving her penniless. The authority for the action is *Catch-22*, which says, according to the old woman, that "they have a right to do anything we can't stop them from doing" (C-22, 416). Did they show her a paper explaining *Catch-22*? "They don't have to show us *Catch-22*," she answers. "The law says they don't have to." What law? asks Yossarian. "*Catch-22*" (C-22, 416). Now Yossarian realizes, "Every victim was a culprit, every culprit a victim, and somebody had to stand up sometime to try to break the lousy chain of inherited habit that was imperiling them all" (C-22, 414). As he continues his walk, he does so "in lonely torture, feeling estranged," which is precisely what he should feel if he is becoming aware of the real corruptions of the world.

The Yossarian who begins his walk through Rome is not the Yossarian who ends it. The Yossarian who meets with Cathcart and Korn is not the Yossarian of Ferrara, when he

swung his first "odious" deal and got a medal for killing Kraft, but he is still not aware that the reality of Rome has changed him so completely. He recognizes that the only way that the circular justifications of *Catch-22* can be dealt with is by breaking out of the circle. Through the various stages of his development, Yossarian moves toward that break. He completes it by deciding to desert. In support of the morality of his deserting, he argues with Major Danby, a military operations officer and the only one who can converse with him about the ethics of desertion in his squadron.

Yossarian argues that his desertion is not to evade his responsibilities to other humans. He says that he has done his part; now it is time for someone else to do his:

"Christ, Danby, I earned that medal I got, no matter what their reasons were for giving it to me. I've flown seventy goddam combat missions. Don't talk to me about fighting to save my country. I've been fighting all along to save my country. Now I'm going to fight a little to save myself. The country's not in danger any more, but I'm." (*C-22*, 455)

If he were to die now, says Yossarian, it would not be for America, but for the hated officers of the hated institution. For Yossarian, away from the rigid pattern of the institution, he is "not running *away* from (his) responsibilities," but "running to them" (*C-22*, 461). Those who submit to the institution are the ones shirking their responsibilities. Heller wants to provide a way in which Yossarian can survive both the spiritual death of submitting to the system and the physical death of combat.

Many critics dislike the ending, and their disliking stems, generally, from one of two objections. The first objection says that Yossarian's desertion to Rome, with the hope of getting to Sweden, is too romantic and too happy an ending. Others think that if Yossarian wants to desert, that is fine, but he shouldn't spout off so patriotically to Danby before he goes. But both critical approaches have ignored the statement made by Heller in which he justifies Yossarian's leaving *only* because

the war is really over.<sup>16</sup> And further on in the same interview, Heller said that his novel is not about "the causes or results of World War II or the manner in which it was fought. . . . *Catch-22* is about the contemporary regimented business society depicted against the background of universal sorrow and inevitable death that is the lot of all of us."<sup>17</sup> On the one hand, the book, as has been analyzed, explores the reality of the military-economic establishment which claims to be a stay against chaos while it threatens human life more insidiously than battle itself. On the other, the book also explores Yossarian's initiation into a real world of complexity and corruption. As James Nagel has analyzed concerning the book's ending:

Yossarian's movement toward Sweden, which ends the novel, is nevertheless his first act of positive affirmation in the book. It is his symbol of growth, it marks the end of his initiation, it distinguishes him as the only major character who learns from experience.<sup>18</sup>

What he has learned from his experience is of course his understanding of the social reality which has been invested with absolute power over those who are taken in. By deserting, Yossarian seeks to preserve his authentic self against a suffocating system.

## II

Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is also a novel inspired by his own personal experience in a mental hospital. In 1961, Kesey volunteered for government drug experiments being performed at the Veteran Administration

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<sup>16</sup> Paul Krassner, "An Impolite Interview With Joseph Heller," *The Realist*, 39 (Nov., 1962), 28.

<sup>17</sup> Krassner, 30.

<sup>18</sup> James Nagel, "Yossarian, the Old Man, and the Ending of *Catch-22*," in *Critical Essays on Catch-22*, p. 172.



Hospital in Menlo Park, California. He was paid to take a number of psychedelic drugs, including then the little-known LSD, and report in detail their effects on him. As Stephen L. Tanner has pointed out, "Kesey was suited in several ways to be a subject for such experiments. He had a natural and lively curiosity about what the mind is capable of; and he was particularly interested in the visions, inspirations, and creative consciousness that might lie just beyond ordinary thinking and dreaming."<sup>19</sup> When the experiments ended, he took a job at the hospital, employed now as a psychiatric aide. His experience as a psychiatric aide gave him insight into the workings of the hospital, many of the Acutes and Chronics described in *Cuckoo's Nest* are thinly-fictionalized versions of patients he saw in the hospital. His own personal experiences, such as his unpleasant encounters with rigid and demanding nurses and his own fighting with a black aide, all went into his novel. Kesey once said that McMurphy was "inspired by the tragic longing of the real men I worked with on the ward."<sup>20</sup> And Kesey went even so far as to arrange a sample electroshock therapy for himself to see what the treatment was actually like. As for the drug experiments, it was his experience with hallucinogens that let him write so vividly from a schizophrenic's point of view: Chief Bromden's ominous dreams of fog and machinery have their roots in Kesey's own LSD and peyote-induced visions.

In the same manner like *Catch-22*, *Cuckoo's Nest* depicts the authentic self's fighting against a suffocating system. Since the themes of this story are so fascinating and congenial to its contemporary audience that *Cuckoo's Nest* met with immediate critical praise when it appeared in 1962. It supplied a critique of an American society that was portrayed in the late 1950s as consisting of a lonely crowd of organization men. Stephen L. Tanner has thus said, "That critique continued to suit the

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<sup>19</sup> Stephen L. Tanner, *Ken Kesey*, Twayne's United States Authors Series (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1983), p. 20.

<sup>20</sup> Ken Kesey, *Kesey's Garage Sale* (New York: Viking Press, 1973), p. 7.

mood of the 1960s and 1970s because larger themes were involved: the modern world as technologized and consequently divorced from nature; contemporary society as repressive; authority as mechanical and destructive; contemporary man as victim of rational but loveless forces beyond his control; and contemporary man as weak, frightened, and sexless."<sup>21</sup> Ruth Sullivan in a psychological analysis of the novel's appeal, suggests that it gives the reader an opportunity to feel the self-pity of being unjustly persecuted. Americans feel oppressed by Big Government and the novel provides them justifications. And the self-pity is enhanced by the anti-establishment tone. The novel "richly gratifies latent or conscious hostile impulses against authority," and also satisfies the tendency to depend upon strong, heroic figures and "to feel unjustly treated (masochistic and moral-righteousness pleasure)."<sup>22</sup>

The setting of *Cuckoo's Nest* is a mental hospital, a deliberately oversimplified symbol of society, whose "Acutes and Chronics" wards are run rigidly by the stern "Big Nurse Ratched." The narrator of the story is Chief Bromden, a Northwest Indian, who, when the Government refuses to let him live the natural life of his choices, simulates schizophrenia, pretending neither to hear nor to talk. Bromden defines the symbolic meaning of the mental hospital and Nurse Ratched when he describes them as parts of a nation-wide "Combine," organized to put the individual in bonds and to prevent him from realizing his spontaneous authentic self. Bromden's mind teems with machine-obsessed hallucinations, yet these hallucinations reveal a deeper truth: far from being a place of healing, the hospital is a place of fear. As the narrator sees it, it is a "Combine" which is mechanically controlled from a central panel so that everything in it is run by tiny electrical wires or installed machinery. People are often robots or are made of electric tubing and wiring and springs, as the "adjusted" ones

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<sup>21</sup> Tanner, p. 18.

<sup>22</sup> Ruth Sullivan, "Big Mama, Big Papa, and Little Sons in Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*," *Literature and Psychology* 25 (1975), 41-42.

seem to be. Combine, as the word implies, is not just an organization; it is a mechanism, a machine that threshes and levels; its ends are Efficiency and Adjustment.

According to Chief Bromden, the Combine had gone a long way in doing things to gain total control,

things like, for example—a train stopping at a station and laying a string of full-grown men in mirrored suits and machine hats, laying them like a hatch of identical insects, half-life things coming pht-pht-pht out of the last car, then hooting its electric whistle and moving on down the spoiled land to deposit another hatch.<sup>23</sup>

Those are the adjusted ones. The ones who cannot adjust are sent to the asylum to have things installed so that the Combine can keep them in line.

The word is a factory for the Combine. It's for fixing up mistakes made in the neighborhoods and in the schools and churches, the hospital is. When a completed product goes back out into society, all fixed up good as new, *better* than new sometimes, it brings joy to the Big Nurse's heart; something that came in all twisted is now a functioning, adjusted component, a credit to the whole outfit and a marvel to behold. Watch him sliding across the land with a welded grin, fitting into some nice little neighborhood. (CN, 38)

He is a "Dismissal," spiritually and morally empty, but "happy" and adjusted. If you do not fit, you are a malfunctioning machine—"machines with flaws inside that can't be repaired, flaws born in, or flaws beat in over so many years of the guy running head-on into solid things that by the time the hospital found him he was bleeding rust in some vacant lot" (CN, 4). That is what is called a "Chronic."

The Combine is characterized not only by mechanization and efficiency but also by sterility, hopelessness, fear, and guilt. The inmates are aimless, alienated, and bored. And at

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<sup>23</sup> John Clark Pratt, ed., *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest: Text and Criticism* (New York: Viking Press, 1973), pp. 227-28. Hereafter, all references are to this edition and page numbers will be given in the text.

the same time, they are enervated and emasculated; their dignity is reduced to something less than human. The Combine cannot tolerate uniqueness. The individual self must cooperate in the destruction of his own spontaneity. Thus the patients in the hospital are victims of the Combine. They are so completely emptied of the will to be themselves that many of them have even helped the Combine in its systematic destruction by voluntarily committing themselves to the institution. By this time, Kesey's point is clear; the true madness, the real dry root of the mental hospital is not the patients' irrationality, but the deadly order, system, and rationality of the institution. What is normal is perverted and reason becomes madness, while some small hope for salvation lies in the non-rational if not the downright irrational.

All of what the institutional means and its effect on humanity come together in the single person of the Big Nurse Ratched, who causes the patients' hopelessness, their inadequacy, fear, anxiety, and alienation. Her name, Ratched, suggests "ratchet," a piece of machinery "consisting of a notched wheel, the teeth of which engage with a pawl, permitting motion of the wheel in one direction only."<sup>24</sup> That is one of the most important clues to the character of the Big Nurse. "She walks stiff"; her gestures are "precise" and "automatic"; each finger is like "the tip of soldering iron"; she carries a wicker bag filled with "wheels and gears, cogs polished to a hard glitter" (*CN*, 4); when she is angry she blows up "big as a tractor"; her face is "smooth, calculated, and precision-made, like an expensive baby doll, skin like flesh-colored enamel, blend of white and cream and baby-blue eyes, small nose, pink little nostrils—everything working together except the color on her lips and fingernails, and the size of her bosom" (*CN*, 5). Her "big, womanly breasts" would ordinarily represent natural warmth and maternal tenderness, but she is bitter about them and keeps them tightly bound up

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<sup>24</sup> Tanner, p. 26.

within her stiff starched uniform.

The Big Nurse is continually pictured in images of machinery. She is a dedicated "adjuster" who wants her ward to run like a smooth, accurate, precision-made machine." She sits in the center of a "web of wires like a watchful robot," tending her network with mechanical insect skill" (CN, 26). And she also dreams:

What she dreams of there in the center of those wires is a world of precision efficiency and tidiness like a pocket watch with a glass back, a place where the schedule is unbreakable and all the patients who aren't Outside, obedient under her beam, are wheelchair Chronicles with catheter tubes run direct from every pantleg to the sewer under the floor. (CN, 27)

She controls clock time, has all the rules on her side to control and manipulate the patients, who are described variously as "arcade puppets" (CN, 30), "mechanical puppets" (CN, 35), and "shooting-gullery targets" (CN, 48).

The Big Nurse's menace comes from the fact that she has convinced herself that if some control is good, complete control will be better. And any threats to her complete control must be destroyed. Thus by putting her goal of complete power ahead of everything else, she perverts the good intentions of the hospital. In order to debilitate and emasculate her patients, the Big Nurse has well planned in her power control. In addition to her own sitting before her steel control panel to manipulate, she has handpicked her aides, three shadowy sadistic black men who also have "equipment" inside and their eyes glitter out of their black faces "like the hard glitter of radio tubes out of the back of an old radio." Bromden interprets their mumblings as the "hum of black machinery, humming hate and death" (CN, 3). So they are hooked to her by electrical impulse of hate. They have been twisted by white brutality, and their response is savage. As weapons in the Big Nurse's arsenal, they serve as symbols of the force of guilt which she uses to torment her patients.

Even the doctors are under the Big Nurse's control. In this

hospital, doctors do not have the authority to fire or hire nurses—that power lies in the hands of a woman who is a friend of Nurse Ratched. There, the doctors are too timid to cure anyone. The Big Nurse has, over a period of years, created a constant turnover of doctors before finding Dr. Spivey, a man weak enough to be manipulated. Dr. Spivey is as timid as his patients. As Dale Harding, the best educated of the men on the ward and intelligent enough to explain to McMurphy how the Big Nurse maintain her power, but lacking courage to defend against her oppression, answers McMurphy's question about the doctor:

“Doctor Spivey . . . is exactly like the rest of us, McMurphy, completely conscious of his inadequacy. He's a frightened, desperate, ineffectual little rabbit, totally incapable of running this ward without our Miss Ratched's help, and he knows it. And, worse, she *knows* he knows it and reminds him every chance she gets.” (CN, 60)

One of the doctor's weaknesses is that he is a morphine addict, which completely debilitates him to act against the Big Nurse's “orderly” system.

Setting patients spying on one another and turning a useful therapeutic technique, the Group Meeting, into an orgy of shameful psychological backbiting are the other oppressive means for the Big Nurse to assure her power control over the patients. When it is time for the daily Group Meeting, she leaves her watchful position in the Nurse's Station and joins the patients in the day room. During the group meetings, patients are encouraged to discuss their problems with each other, under the supervision of her and Dr. Spivey. Such group therapy is a common psychiatric treatment and often helpful. Dr. Spivey explains:

The goal of the Therapeutic Community is a democratic ward, run completely by the patients and their votes, working toward making worth-while citizens to turn back Outside onto the street. Any little gripe, any grievance, anything you want changed . . . should be brought up before the group and discuss-

ed instead of letting it fester inside of you. Also you should feel at ease in your surroundings to the extent you can freely discuss emotional problems in front of patients and staff. Talk, . . . discuss, confess. And if you hear a friend say something during the course of your everyday conversation, then list it in the log book for the staff to see . . . . Bring these old sins into open where they can be washed by the sight of all. And participate in Group Discussion. Help yourself and your friends probe into the secrets of the subconscious. There should be no need for secrets among friends. (CN, 47)

He always ends by saying, "Our intention is to make this as much like your own democratic, free neighborhoods as possible." The doctor's description of the community contradicts itself—what kind of democratic free neighborhood" forces citizens to spy on each other? Usually the meetings end when the doctor grows bored; he is less interested in curing people than in theories, and for this reason, too, he is useful to the Big Nurse. The patients feel ashamed that once again they have been goaded into attacking one of their own. So it is easy to see that, despite the democratic facade, the Big Nurse manipulates the meetings to maintain her control over the patients.

The novel is divided into four parts. At the beginning of Part I, the Big Nurse is in full control. But the narrative movement of the novel is built around McMurphy's growth in knowledge and his progress toward liberating Chief Bromden and the ward's other inmates. As he decides to train the patients to assert their inviolate identity and to overthrow the tyranny of the manipulating Big Nurse, McMurphy moves toward death while Bromden moves to new awareness and rebirth. The functions, such as struggling against the system and escaping to save one's authentic self, performed alone by Yossarian in *Catch-22*, are now in *Cuckoo's Nest* carried out by McMurphy, hero of event, and Bromden, hero of consciousness, separately.

Randle Patrick McMurphy is introduced in the second section of Part I. His initials (R.P.M.—revolution per minute)

suggest the motion and energy characteristic of his personality. He is thirty-five, has never been married, and is a wanderer up and down the West. Since *Cuckoo's Nest* is set in Oregon, and it is very much a novel of the American West: the dream of the free and open frontier is contrasted with the drab and regimented world of the hospital. McMurphy has worked as a logger and as a carnival wheel man. Mostly he has been in and out of jail for brawling, disturbing the peace, and repeated gambling. He has been committed by the state from the Pendleton Correction Farm. Ironically, McMurphy enters the hospital supposedly on a request for "transfer" to get "new blood" for his gambling. As he introduces himself, "My name is MuMurphy, buddies, R. P. McMurphy, and I'm a gambling fool" (CN, 11). But from that very entrance, as he laughs, winks, and goes around shaking limp hands, it is he that does the transferring and the giving of blood. Bromden is first profoundly impressed by his laughter:

He stands there waiting, and when nobody makes a move to say anything to him he commences to laugh. Nobody can tell exactly why he laughs; there's nothing funny going on. But it's not the way that Public Relation laughs, it's free and loud and it comes out of his wide grinning mouth and spreads in rings bigger and bigger till it's lapping against the walls all over the ward. (CN, 11)

Bromden suddenly realizes that it is the first real laugh he has heard in years. Everyone in the ward, patients and staff, is stunned by it; and "even when he isn't laughing, the laughing sound hovers around him, the way the sound hovers around a big bell just quit ringing—it's in his eyes, in the way he smiles and swaggers, in the way he talks" (CN, 11).

One of the most significant thematic distinctions between McMurphy and the Big Nurse is their way of laughing. While the Big Nurse's smile is chiseled or painted on her plastic face, McMurphy's laughter is genuine and all-encompassing. One of the Big Nurse's main weaknesses is her lack of a sense of humor. In this sense, McMurphy's laughter is one of the



most effective weapons to defeat her from the very beginning. The first thing McMurphy notices when he appears on the ward as a new admission is the absence of laughter. Although the men often "snicker in their fists, . . . nobody ever dares let loose and laugh" (CN, 14). According to Bromden, the institution itself prevents it: "The air is pressed in by the walls, too tight for laughing" (CN, 46). Indeed, the whole book is in some ways a vision of a world without laughter, and it is McMurphy's job to restore laughter, and thus health, to this sterile, humorless world. He explains, "I haven't heard a real laugh since I cam through that door, do you know that? Man, when you lose your laugh you lose your footing. A man go around lettin' a woman whop him down till he can't laugh any more, and he loses one of the biggest edges he's got on his side" (CN, 68). But merely laughing is not in itself enough. PR laughs, Dr. Spivey laughs, and their laughter is ineffectual. What McMurphy learns in the course of the novel is how to control and direct his laughter, how to use it as an effective counter to repression and sterility. As Ronald Wallace has expressed, "In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, laughter releases repressed energies in the patients, helping them to recover a portion of their atrophied instinctual lives."<sup>25</sup>

McMurphy's hands are also given frequent emphasis. He makes a point of shaking everybody's hand when he arrives. This human touching contrasts with the cold and sterile treatment the patients receive from the Big Nurse, but there is more to it than this. Along with his laughter, his hand symbolizes his strength and represents his power to save. It becomes a helping hand indeed. The first foretelling of his effect on Bromden comes as McMurphy seizes his hand:

That palm made a scuffing sound against my hand. I remember the fingers were thick and strong closing over mine, and my hand commenced to feel peculiar and went to swelling up out

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<sup>25</sup> Ronald Wallace, *The Last Laugh: Form and Affirmation in the Contemporary American Comic Novel* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1979), p. 100.

there on my stick of an arm, like he was transmitting his own blood into it. It rang with blood and power. It blowed up near as big as his." (CN, 23-24)

He brings contact, the human touch, to a place sterilized of all but inverted relationships. His giving and his sacrifice are not, however, a continuous unbroken process, but correlated to his learning. He launches into full battle with the Big Nurse and begins pulling the patients out of their tranquillized fog. At a climatic point near the end of Part I, Bromden says, "It's like . . . that big red hand of McMurphy's is reaching into the fog and dropping down and dragging the men up by their hands, dragging them blinking into the open" (CN, 134).

The teeth-brushing episode is McMurphy's first victory over the Big Nurse. When McMurphy questions the ward policy of locking up the toothpaste and unlocking it at a specific time only, the black aide absurdly insists, "What you s'pose it'd be like if *evahbody* was to brush their teeth whenever they took a notion to brush? . . . My *gaw*, don't you see?" Instead of reacting hostilely, McMurphy enthusiastically agrees, his very agreement ridiculing the rule and the aide. "Yes, now, I do. You're saying people'd be brushin' their teeth whenever the spirit moved them . . . And, lordy, can you imagine? Teeth bein' brushed at six-thirty, six-twenty—who can tell? Maybe even six o'clock. Yeah, I can see your point" (CN, 90). Prepared for a fight, the aide doesn't know how to respond to McMurphy's agreement and retreats.

McMurphy then uses a similar strategy on the Big Nurse. When she approaches, "her lips are parted, and her smile's going out before her like a radiator grill. . . and every step hits the floor she blows up a size bigger" (CN, 93). But McMurphy, apparently dressed only in his cap and a towel, is as polite as can be, pretending ignorance and full of cooperation. When she asks him where his clothes are, he sadly replies in all innocence that they were stolen. The Big Nurse is confounded until she realizes that "that outfit was *supposed* to be picked up" and McMurphy should be wearing his hospital "greens,"

not a towel. McMurphy apologizes and obligingly begins to remove the towel, flustering the Big Nurse into commanding him to leave it on. McMurphy pretends confusion and redirects her anger against the aide by insisting that he neglected to issue McMurphy a uniform. Then McMurphy casually removes the towel to reveal his black-with-white whales undershorts, ridiculing the Big Nurse's fear that he was naked underneath. By using the methods of pretended ignorance and self-deprecation, McMurphy defeats the Big Nurse, turning her humorlessness against herself.

The book is filled with similar, smaller examples of McMurphy's strategy. In the group therapy sessions, he pretends to worry about his excessive sexual appetite, provoking a laugh out of Dr. Spivey (CN, 44). Several times he "forgets" about the glass in the Big Nurse's station and runs his hand through it. When the Big Nurse criticizes his failure to clean the toilets properly, insisting, "This is an outrage," he replies politely, "No; that's a toilet bowl" (CN, 151). McMurphy has emerged victorious from all these battles. The most serious battle of Part I is the battle of the World Series. McMurphy had planned to watch the World Series on TV even though the games will not be shown during the ward's scheduled TV time. The Big Nurse, of course, says that he can't watch the World Series, a refusal that does not surprise McMurphy at all. What does surprise him is the patients' complete agreement with her. He is disgusted at the patients' cowardice. He is so mad that he makes a bet on lifting the control panel in the tub room.

Since he cannot convince most of the patients to vote with him to watch the World Series, why does McMurphy make an attempt to lift the control panel? The answer lies in the example it provides. "His whole body shakes with the strain as he tries to lift something he *knows* he can't lift, something *everybody* knows he can't lift" (CN, 120-21). To the patients, this manifestation of an all-out exertion in the attempt that obviously appears futile is inspiring. It causes them to re-examine their commitment to passive weakness and generates

a flicker of hope that asserting themselves might not be futile. And furthermore, the control panel has a symbolic implication, for although it is not presently in operation, it is a *control* machine and representative of the Combine. Later, McMurphy tells Bromden that he will make him strong again so that he can lift the panel. He does and Bromden lifts it, and eventually he throws it through the window to obtain his escape.

After this incident, in their next group meeting, McMurphy tries to persuade the patients to vote with him against the Big Nurse again. This time he has won a major victory. Here is Bromden's description of their voting:

The first hand that comes up, I can tell, is McMurphy's, because of the bandage where that control panel cut into him when he tried to lift it. And then off down the slope I see them, other hands coming up out of the fog. It's like . . . that big red hand of McMurphy's is reaching into the fog and dropping down and dragging the men up by their hands, dragging them blinking into the open. First one, then another, then the next. Right on down the line of Acutes, dragging them out of the fog till there they stand, all twenty of them, raising not just for watching TV, but against the Big Nurse, against her trying to send McMurphy to Disturbed, against the way she's talked and acted and beat them down for years. (CN, 134)

Slowly, McMurphy teaches the patients in the wards to be less afraid, first forcing them to assert themselves, then persuading them to do so voluntarily. The results of his early successes are manifest: "all the machinery in the wall is quiet" and "there's no more fog any place" (CN, 141). On the surface nothing has changed; underneath everything has. The patients have asserted themselves; the Big Nurse has lost control. Now she is the one being watched—and not just by the patients, but by her staff, who for the first time see that she, too, is vulnerable.

However, Bromden sees quite clearly: although McMurphy has some early victories, both the Big Nurse and the Combine can afford a few losses. At the beginning of Part II, the Big Nurse returns, "clear-headed," and begins to

reassert her control. Even before the incident with the television, the Big Nurse had scheduled a meeting of the hospital staff to discuss McMurphy and intended to move him to the Disturbed Ward. At this point, she persuades the doctors and other staff members in the meeting that McMurphy should not be sent to the Disturbed Ward. She does not agree that McMurphy is "some kind of extraordinary being—some kind of 'super' Psychopath" (*CN*, 148). She wants him left in her ward so that she can prove to the other patients that he is not. If she permits McMurphy to be moved to the Disturbed Ward, she knows that he will appear a martyr who has sacrificed himself for the other patients. If, on the other hand, the Big Nurse can keep him in her ward, she will be able to prove that he is just a selfish, fearful, ordinary man. She will have ample opportunity to break him, and she may thus remind everyone: McMurphy has been committed to the hospital, and she and the other staff members are the ones who decide when he will be released.

As Stephen Tanner has clearly observed, "One of Miss Ratched's most effective tools of intimidation is the threat of indefinite confinement that faces a patient who has been committed."<sup>26</sup> After a conversation with the lifeguard at the swimming pool, McMurphy realizes for the first time that patients committed to the hospital do not have a set sentence. They can be held for as long as the hospital wants to hold them. McMurphy now becomes fully conscious of his own vulnerability. Immediately thereafter he puts aside his rebelliousness and becomes pliable and cooperative. He won't help anyone in the ward for fear that it might endanger his chances of being released. When one of the patients, Cheswick, attacks the Big Nurse at Group Meeting, McMurphy declines to back him up, so upsetting Cheswick that he is marched off to the Disturbed Ward. The other patients sense immediately that he is no longer standing up for them. Bromden thinks that he is finally "getting cagey" like the rest of them. But

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<sup>26</sup> Tanner, p. 35.

when Cheswick drowns himself after McMurphy's failure to back him up, McMurphy begins to realize that his actions have generated obligations. He has pulled the men out of the fog and increased their vulnerability. A sense of responsibility begins to dawn in his essentially self-centered nature. And furthermore, McMurphy is beginning to understand the truth that the Big Nurse is only one representative of the forces of fear that control too much of modern society. And the patients' weakness comes not so much from their illnesses as from the fear planted in them by society and by the hospital, the Combine. He also understands that although he has been committed, many of the other patients have not; therefore, while his struggle can only destroy himself, it may save others. McMurphy gradually gets it straight in his mind and proposes for another battle against the Big Nurse again. And Bromden immediately notices McMurphy's change, too:

He was the logger again, the swaggering gambler, the big red-headed brawling Irishman, the cowboy out of the TV set walking down the middle of the street to meet a dare. (*CN*, 189)

Like the final section of Part I, the final section of Part II shows McMurphy in full battle against the Big Nurse. To signal his renewed challenge to the Combine and his acceptance of commitment, McMurphy stands up at what looks like the Big Nurse's decisive victory, strides mightily across the ward, and runs his fist through the Big Nurse's enormous glass window, a symbol of all the power the Big Nurse and the Combine possess. McMurphy knows where his gesture will lead; he was told in the very beginning that making trouble and "breaking windows" and all like that will lead to the shock treatment on the table and destruction by lobotomy. However, he has weighed the situation carefully and has chosen to save his fellow patients regardless of the peril to himself. For a time, McMurphy is again in the ascendant. The patients begin to gain confidence and the Big Nurse "was biding her time till another idea came to her that would put her on top again" (*CN*, 193). By now, Bromden has also come

to a new understanding. He understands that McMurphy's strength comes from the fact that he lives his own being, not a being foisted on him by the Combine.

The greatest source of inner strength comes from nature, and this McMurphy teaches the patients on a fishing trip, which becomes the climax of the novel. Laughter and outdoor nature are the dominant elements in that climatic section. The Big Nurse opposes the trip from the start. Far from seeing its value as therapy, she sees the trip only as a threat to her control. To retain that control, she tries to destroy the patients' growing self-confidence, telling them repeatedly of the ocean's dangers. However, the trip turns out to be exactly what the Big Nurse feared it could be: therapeutic. Out on the open sea, the men are provided with the opportunity at last to engage in an honest struggle. Nature does not, like the Combine, seek to imprison; it invites struggle to survive. McMurphy observes their uninhibited struggle—the enthusiasm over fish caught, the tangled lines, the shouting and cursing—and begins to laugh:

Rocking farther and farther backward against the cabin top, spreading his laugh out across the water—laughing at the girl, at the guys, at George, at me sucking my bleeding thumb, at the captain back at the pier and the bicycle rider and the services-station guys and the five thousand houses and the Big Nurse and all of it. Because he knows you have to laugh at the things that hurt you just to keep yourself in balance, just to keep the world from running you plumb crazy. (*CN*, 237-38)

The laughter becomes infectious and takes on cosmic proportions at this moment: "It started slow and pumped itself full, swelling the men bigger and bigger . . . a laughter that rang out on the water in ever-widening circles, farther and farther, until it crashed up on the beaches all over wave after wave" (*CN*, 238). McMurphy gives the men not only self-confidence and a renewed sense of virility, but also what Kesey sees as man's only weapon against the modern dehumanizing institution—laughter. As has been examined earlier, on the first day of McMurphy's arrival at the hospital,

he notices that there has been no laughter in the Combine. But by the end of the fishing trip, everyone is laughing. It is ultimately their laughter that the men cram down the Big Nurse's throat in their brief moment of victory.

However, the price of restoring these men's self-confidence is high—it is no less than the destruction of McMurphy. And he seems to sense what impends. On the way back to the hospital from the fishing trip, Bromden describes him as “beat and worn out” and “dreadfully tired and strained and *frantic*, like there wasn't enough time left for something he had to do. . . .” (CN, 243, 245). As his struggle with the Big Nurse nears its climax, McMurphy puts his life in greater and greater danger. In the final section of the book, he fights with the Big Nurse's aides. McMurphy causes the fight “sounding more tired than mad,” and everybody could hear “the helpless, cornered despair” in his voice (CN, 261). This is a premeditated act, done from a sense of duty. McMurphy has weighed the consequences. Even the Big Nurse orders electric shock treatments to break his spirit, he still refuses to surrender. McMurphy now works with growing fatigue and resignation toward his inevitable sacrifice.

So far the Big Nurse has not been justified in calling forth the Combine's ultimate weapon—lobotomy, the operation which transforms the struggling human being into a vegetable. But finally McMurphy gives her justification. He promotes an illegal party in the ward, complete with liquor and a couple of warm-hearted and humanly virtuous prostitutes, clear contrasts to the frigid mother figure of the Big Nurse. Whole-some, fun-loving rebellion here reaches its maddest peak. This laughing scene is a modulation of the one on the fishing boat and is necessary as a part of the falling action of the plot, in order to demonstrate that the patients are now able to laugh within the stronghold of the Combine as well as in the open freedom of nature. Even the stuttering Billy Bibbit, long dominated by an overpossessive mother who treats him like a lover, sleeps with the young prostitute Candy, who went with McMurphy on the fishing trip, significantly in the cleansing



atmosphere of the laundry room. He seems to have gained self-assurance, for he is calm, happy, and unshuttering when the Big Nurse discovers him. This is the work of McMurphy. Through an act of spontaneous love and independent behavior Billy has escaped the Combine. But the strength of the Combine to regain control of its victims is huge. When the Big Nurse admonishes Billy for not thinking of the shame he would cause his mother and threatens to tell her of his indiscretion, Billy collapses. Unable to face such a possibility, he commits suicide by cutting his throat with a scalpel.

Billy's death suggests that something more than the rebelliousness of parties inside the hospital is needed to break free, and that something more is the sacrifice of the great life force of McMurphy. McMurphy must risk his own consciousness for that of others. The Big Nurse accuses him of driving Billy to his death by playing God. Perhaps he is a kind of god, but not in the sense as she sees. Feeling cornered by the Big Nurse's accusation, he at last sees there is no other way to free the men. He rips open the Big Nurse's starched uniform down the front so that "the two nipples started from her chest and swelled out and out, bigger than anybody had ever imagined, warm and pink in the light" (CN, 305), and knocking her backward, crawls atop her and sinks his fingers into her throat as if to choke her. This is McMurphy's final attempt to release the natural from the perverted restrictions of a regimented and mechanistic system. He is pulled off of her, but he has finally exposed the weakness of the Combine in the Big Nurse. Shocked and unnerved, she will never be the same again. But McMurphy has brought on his own death, condemned himself to a lobotomy. Bromden has also finally realized that it is not the Big Nurse's defiance but the patients' need that determines his actions:

It wasn't the nurse that was forcing him, it was our need that was making him push himself slowly up from sitting, his big hands driving down the leather chairarms, pushing him up, rising and standing like one of those moving-picture zombies, obeying orders beamed at him from forty masters. It was us that had

been making him go on for weeks, keeping him standing long after his feet and legs had given out, weeks of making him wink and grin and laugh and go on with his act long after his humor had been purched dry between two electrode. (CN, 304-305)

McMurphy's actions have led to the rehabilitation of the patients in his ward. Several check out, some make plans to leave, and others transfer to different wards.

Bromden is the representative beneficiary of McMurphy's sacrifice. After the lobotomy, McMurphy is wheeled back into the ward, and Bromden recognizes that the Big Nurse intends for his vegetable body to be a monument of the Combine's power. Rebels, she would warn future inmates, never succeed. Now in command of his own consciousness and stronger as an individual, Bromden refuses to allow the Big Nurse her victory. He smothers McMurphy and then escapes from the institution.

As has been said, *Cuckoo's Nest* is not only concerned with McMurphy's growth and his sacrifice for the liberation of the patients in the Combine but also intends to show, particularly, how Chief Bromden, through the example of McMurphy, recovers from his mental illness and regains self-confidence to live an authentic life again. The progressive development of these two characters cannot be said to parallel one another, definitely complement each other. While McMurphy's strength wanes, Bromden moves toward the ascendant. But the two developments proceed simultaneously and are integral to one another, until the transfer of power from McMurphy to Bromden is complete. As the narrator of the story, Bromden holds a pivotal position in the novel. He is closely associated with McMurphy and torn by ambivalent feelings of disapproval and admiration for him. During the course of the novel, Bromden learns and develops through the tutelary example of McMurphy's life and death.

As an American Indian, Chief Bromden is really the son of a tribal chief, a once-powerful leader whose Indian name meant "The Pine-That-Stands-Tallest-on-the-Mountain." "Bromden" is the maiden name of his mother, a white woman; and the fact that his father allowed himself to be hen-

pecked into adopting it is invested with great significance. The loss of pride in the Indian-heritage brought about by the pressure of white American society lies at the heart of the twentieth-century problem of Bromden, his father and their people. Bromden, a six-foot-eight-inch former high school football player and combat veteran of World War II, has been robbed of identity and sanity by the various pressures brought to bear on him by twentieth-century American society. At the beginning of the novel, he is literally cut off from even the most fundamental communication. He is so fearful of the changes of dealing with people that he has feigned total deafness and has maintained absolute silence for years. And he has suffered from fear, paranoia, and schizophrenia. Considered incurable by the medical staff, he is forced to perform menial janitorial work by the Big Nurse's aides, who ridicule him with the title "Chief Broom" imposed upon Bromden by the matriarchal and mechanistic elements of society diminishes him enormously. The first robs him of his masculine pride and his racial identity, the second of his very humanity.

When we first meet Bromden in the opening lines of the book, he is a potential paranoid who is extremely subjective and full of hallucinations:

They're out there.

Black boys in white suits up before me to commit sex acts in the hall and get it mopped upon before I can catch them.

...

They laugh and then I hear them mumbling behind me, heads close together. Hum of black machinery, humming hate and death and other hospital secrets. (CN, 3)

Mumbling behind backs and the almost classic line, "they're out there," point to Bromden's paranoia and his fear. Paranoia is a curious disorder in which the afflicted person typically imagines the existence of organizations that are systematically persecuting him. Bromden's Combine is a classic example of the paranoid's typical persecuting system. During the earlier part of the novel, Bromden, who is subject to frequent hallucination, cannot draw a clear distinction between

illusion and reality. However, his hallucinatory perspective serves extremely well the purpose of the novel. For example, the imaginary machines Bromden describes in the walls and in the people are significant images used to develop the central theme concerning technological manipulation. In addition to the Combine, the fog machine is obviously another creative ingenuity of Bromden. Whenever he loses touch of reality and his hold upon his individual personality and spiritual strength weakens, the fog increases. Throughout the novel the fog serves as a barometer of his emotional and psychological state and thickens and dissipates according to the fluctuation of his mental and spiritual health.

We also feel that Bromden has told us the truth about McMurphy with penetrating insight. Upon McMurphy's arrival at the hospital, Bromden realizes immediately that the new man is no ordinary Admission. He does not "slide scared along the wall" or submit meekly to the aides. "He sounds like he's way above them, talking down, like he's sailing fifty yards overhead, hollering at those below on the ground. He sounds big" (CN, 10). At the same time, from the outset, McMurphy pays more attention to Bromden than anyone has in years. Where others have belittled him, McMurphy marvels at his size and recognizes the latent strength it represents. Almost immediately, McMurphy begins to establish contact with him, although it is at first superficial and unarticulated. When he offers to shake hands with Bromden, Bromden, unwilling to relinquish the protection of his feigned deafness, remains passive and stares dumbly at the outstretched hand. McMurphy picks up Bromden's limp hand. Bromden immediately feels that "my hand commenced to feel peculiar and went to swelling up out there on my stick of an arm, like he was transmitting his own blood into it. It rang with blood and power. It blowed up near as big as his. I remember" (CN, 24).

Bromden is mute and completely intimidated when the Big Nurse is in full control at the beginning of Part I. But as McMurphy starts his campaign against the Big Nurse and has won several battles, Bromden also begins to see his own

change. He recognizes the power of laughter and may establish some sense of control of himself. When it comes to vote for watching the World Series for the second time, Bromden raises his hand to join the vote against the Big Nurse. He now takes the first action that commits him to fight back against the Combine. He is able to do it now because he thinks McMurphy has put "some kind of hex on it with his hand" when they shook hands the first day (*CN*, 136). He now may also manage to escape from the fog machine. The fog is a way for him to find safety and comfort from the terrifying reality of life under the manipulative control of the Combine. "Nobody complains about all the dog," he says, "I know why, now: as bad as it is, you can slip back in it and feel safe. That's what McMurphy can't understand, us wanting to be safe. He keeps trying to drag us out of the fog, out in the open where we'd be easy to get at" (*CN*, 123). Obviously, McMurphy's healing influence and touch cause him to act despite his fear. Although he still has a long way to go, Bromden, after McMurphy's pulling him out of the fog with his "big red Hand," has taken the first step toward recovering his self-confidence.

Even though it is through McMurphy's help that Bromden comes out of the fog machine to act in Part I, Bromden thinks McMurphy is the "brawny red-headed Irishman" with cut and callused hands that are simply powerful. And such a single-edged view of McMurphy is what influences Bromden's narration during the first part of the book. But in Part II, after McMurphy has won his bet and has upset the Big Nurse not only by watching a blank television set with as much enthusiasm as if he were actually watching the World Series but also by leading the rest of the men into a similar insubordination, the simplicity of Bromden's image of McMurphy begins to break down:

I was seeing him different than when he first came in; I was seeing more to him than just big hands and red side burns and a broken-nose grin. I'd see him to things that didn't fit with his face or hands, things like painting a picture at OT with real

paints on a blank paper with no lines or numbers anywhere to paint, or like writing letters to somebody in a beautiful flowing hand. (CN, 153)

And the language in this passage points directly away from any kind of change having really occurred in McMurphy, even though he does learn and change, but directly toward a change in Bromden's perception of him, Bromden is "seeing him different . . . seeing more to him." And the things McMurphy is doing that cause Bromden to see him differently are things that cannot be learned in a few weeks. The development of "beautiful flowing" handwriting takes time and effort and indicates more strongly that McMurphy's entire life had not been spent in the harsh physical activities that he speaks about so much and that he had thought were McMurphy's only experiences.

Once Bromden has recognized the complexity in McMurphy, he reassesses the simplicity that had previously been determined as being at the core of everything on the ward. For instance, in Part I, he describes the ward:

Like a cartoon world, where the figures are flat and outlined in black, jerking through some kind of goofy story that might be real funny if it weren't for the cartoon figures being real guys. . . . (CN, 31)

But in Part II, "For the first time in years," he says, in direct relation to the previous remarks had made about living in a cartoon world, "I was seeing people with none of that black outline they used to have, and one night I was even able to see out the window" (CN, 154). Thus, when McMurphy grows from the swaggering logger who just may be a psychopath to a stylized Christ who gives his life for the good of mankind, Bromden, emerging slowly from his protective fog, looks out the dorm window and re-establishes contact with the outdoor world. Leaning against the protective mesh, he says:

The wire was cold and sharp, and I rolled my head against it from side to side to feel it with my cheeks, and I smelled the breeze. It's fall coming, I thought, I can smell that sour-

molasses smell of silage, clanging the air like a bell . . . . (CN, 154-55)

The awareness of the world that Bromden reaches here is important because of the variety of senses that he uses correctly. He feels the cold wire, and he smells so much on the breeze. He relates the sharp smell of the silage to the difference between silence and the clanging of a bell, thereby establishing his recognition of the sense of hearing. But all the time he's had his eyes closed:

I had shut them when I put my face to the screen, like I was scared to look outside. Now I had to open them. I looked out the window and saw for the first time how the hospital was out in the country. (CN, 155)

Then Bromden sees something a good deal more significant than trees and pastureland. As he looks up into the sky, he sees the moon and the stars:

The stars up close to the moon were pale; they got brighter and braver the farther they got out of the circle of light ruled by the giant moon. (CN, 155)

And, of course, the relationship of the stars and the "giant" moon is very much like the relationship of the men on the ward and the Big Nurse, since they must leave her domineering white presence in order to shine.

From this point on, Bromden begins his conscious trip back to reality. And he sees in McMurphy a man whom the Combine has not been able to mold. The fishing trip, as has been examined earlier, allows Bromden to see how the Combine can be actually beaten. And McMurphy's laughter finally spurs the laughter of the rest of the crew. Bromden is now the first convert to laughter. It is a pitiful performance. He tells us his experience of his first laughter for years in the hospital:

It didn't sound like much because my throat was rusty and my tongue creaked. He told me I sounded a little out of practice and laughed at that. I tried to laugh with him, but it was a

squawking sound, like a pullet trying to crow. It sounded more like crying than laughing. (*CN*, 206)

He is not only able to laugh but also to laugh at himself. This laughter clearly indicates Bromden's recovery. In fact, it is not until he has laughed that he is able to speak. Therefore, Bromden, in particular, is greatly strengthened by the fishing trip and restored to a sense of harmony with nature, from which the machines have separated him for so long. When, however, he notices the restoration of his own strength, he also notices McMurphy's exhaustion and the cost of McMurphy's sacrifice.

In Part IV, Bromden's restoration of his strength is complete enough that he can withstand the test of shock treatment: "It's fogging a little, but I won't slip off and hide in it. No . . . never again . . . this time I had them beat" (*CN*, 275). After killing the lobotomized McMurphy, Bromden realizes that even he himself is bigger than that fallen man:

When I finished dressing I reached into McMurphy's nightstand and got his cap and tried it on. It was too small, and I was suddenly ashamed of trying to wear it. (*CN*, 310)

He feels "ashamed" at trying to wear McMurphy's hat because he knows that McMurphy has taught him that one must find one's own identity. By now the transfer of power is complete. Then he picks up the control panel, which McMurphy tried to lift but failed, and smashes through the window to obtain his freedom, "the glass splashed out in the moon, like a bright cold water baptizing the sleeping earth" (*CN*, 310).

It is not until the very end of the novel that it becomes clear that Bromden has surpassed McMurphy in the capacity to survive in American society and to maintain personal identity in spite of the Combine. He has gone full circle. Disgusted and alienated by an impersonal government, he retired from the human race. But through the example of McMurphy, he regains his integrity and returns to life determined to live out the rebelliousness that McMurphy has taught him. Bromden intends to return to his own life of an Indian on the Columbia



River. He has therefore been brought back to the land of freedom, consciousness and individuality by McMurphy's rebellion. While McMurphy is the hero of event in the novel, Bromden is the hero of consciousness.

### III

While the military for Heller serves the function of any large, impersonal organization, the hospital for Kesey is "a little world Inside that is a made-to-scale prototype of the big world Outside" (CN, 47). *Catch-22* deals with World War II, but even more directly, as Heller has said, with the military as it exists within a post-war, peacetime society, when it combines with the economic forces represented by Milo.<sup>27</sup> And *Cuckoo's Nest* is concerned with that same combination of forces from just a little different angle. Bromden's wartime experiences and the militarism of the Combine are joined to produce the dehumanizing institution like the Big Nurse's ward. Both novels express the defiance of authority and characterize America of the 1960s. What made these two novels so popular and important in the sixties and then in the seventies is their glorifying of individual solutions, the only way in which the mass lunacy of the mass society can be contained.

At the beginning of their moral growth, both Yossarian and Bromden are governed by "deformed consciences," and by misplaced sets of values. Yossarian tries to beat the system by playing the system; thus he requests a medal for his going over Ferrara twice and having Kraft and the others killed in that mission. Bromden tries to beat the system by allowing the system to masquerade as all-powerful, maintaining only within his own mind the idea that he is being caged. So Yossarian is nearly absorbed into the system by playing the system, and Bromden comes too close to accepting his own myth about the system's infallibility, comes too close to

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<sup>27</sup> Krassner, 30.

drifting off into his mental fog forever. However, the moral visions of these two novels might echo Mark Twain's assessment of *Huckleberry Finn*. In each case, a "sound heart" collides with a "deformed conscience," and in each case the deformity of conscience and the soundness of heart are revealed. Both Yossarian and Bromden eventually react with Huck's "sound heart" and overcome their tendencies to play within the rules of the mass society. Both, like Huck, literally "light out for the Territory ahead of the rest,"<sup>28</sup> Yossarian to Rome, with his eye on Sweden, and Bromden toward The Dalles and maybe Canada. For both Yossarian and Bromden, "the territory" might appear not so enduring as a permanent goal, but their move toward free territory is definitely an important developmental stage in their renewed idea of authentic individual life.

Unlike many other contemporary novels, such as Barth's *The End of the Road*, Pynchon's *V.*, or Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*, which mostly end in a situation of "no hope at all," both *Catch-22* and *Cuckoo's Nest* end with qualified optimism. Yossarian's flight is precipitated by the proof Orr provides that the system can be beaten. Even a single chance is infinitely better than no chance at all. Bromden's revelation on the last page of *Cuckoo's Nest* indicates his return not only to the world of nature from the world of machines, but, more importantly, to the world of humanity from the world of caginess. He shows that he cares about the people he used to know, and the hint is allowed to remain at the end of the book that he will help restore the humanity of other patients of the Combine, as McMurphy helped restore his humanity.

Thus, both books have revealed that America of the sixties has become a lonely crowd of organization men, offering its affluence only to those who are willing to pay the price of strict conformity. Increasingly hierarchical, technological, and efficient, society has become that dehumanizing machine

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<sup>28</sup> Samuel L. Clemens, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, A Norton Critical Edition, ed. Sculley Bradley (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977), p. 229.

which Chief Bromden calls the Combine while Yossarian names it a military-economic complex. McMurphy is a cultural revolutionary whose function is to smash the "mind-forg'd manacles" of his time. Both novels have certainly predicted the later social protests and cultural revolution. As a matter of fact, both *Catch-22* and *Cuckoo's Nest* did later perform some actual social functions. As Charles Ruas said that during the whole Vietnam protests, *Catch-22* was "the basic text of the movement."<sup>29</sup> And Kesey actually adopted the same strategies he had created in his book for his group of Merry Pranksters. As Tom Wolfe has recorded in his *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1968), which records Kesey's search for new awareness and his activities with the Merry Pranksters,<sup>30</sup> Kesey and his group saw the possibility for initiating radical changes through their living examples. Their basic assumption is that "violent, temporary alteration of a too-rigid system can be liberating. Since the system at question is uniform, unimaginative, overly conditioned mentality of corporate America, the mental games of the Pranksters seems an obvious way to begin the process of changes."<sup>31</sup> And so we can see that *Catch-22* and *Cuckoo's Nest* are concerned with the topics of the day. They are highly moral, dealing with some of the most pressing questions of the sixties. As Frederick R. Karl has justly observed, "If *The Catcher in the Rye* was the cult novel of the fifties, *Cuckoo's Nest*, along with *Catch-22*, expressed enough of the sixties to become 'in' novels of that decade."<sup>32</sup>

In order to "make credible the incredible reality of American life in the middle of the 20th century," both Heller and Kesey have created the unique styles of their own. The disjointed narrative structure of *Catch-22* allows the reader to

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<sup>29</sup> Charles Ruas, *Conversations with American Writers* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), p. 153.

<sup>30</sup> Tom Wolfe, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1968).

<sup>31</sup> James F. Knapp, "Tangled in the Language of the Past: Ken Kesey and Cultural Revolution," *Midwest Quarterly* 19 (1978), 401-402.

<sup>32</sup> Karl, p. 60.

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experience Yossarian's moral growth non-linearly as we really remember things in our mind. *Cuckoo's Nest's* mingling of reality and hallucination also gives the reader the chance to see Bromden first as a paranoid schizophrenic and then his restoring to a healthy individual as his language gradually straightens out and becomes clear again. Their styles are thus not only thematically necessary but also are designed to carry to the American audience of their time the kind of reality they should recognize as their own. As this essay has so far demonstrated, there is no reason for us to consider either of these two books as "absurd" or "surreal," but utter reflection of reality. And furthermore, neither *Catch-22* nor *Cuckoo's Nest* is "just a story." Both Heller and Kesey are aware that the novel can be more than a story, that it can reflect reality and in such a way that it advocates the moral stance society should take. They also recognize that the novel can be, and in fact must be, a kinetic art form, pushing its audience in what its author sees as the right direction.

## 空炸任務二十二與飛越杜鵑窩 所反映之美國現實

田 維 新

### 摘 要

六十年代初海勒 (Joseph Heller) 所出版的**空炸任務二十二**與凱希 (Ken Kesey) 所寫的**飛越杜鵑窩**，至今均已銷售數百萬冊，並仍受到學者的重視及精心研究。本論文主要在研究這兩部作品所反映的美國六十年代的社會現實及二書中主角的自我覺醒。

**空炸任務二十二**是以二次大戰時海勒自身在美國空軍服役經驗為背景，描述該空軍之腐敗與荒謬的權力鬥爭情形。飛行大隊長為了想升為將軍，竟無止境地增加飛行員的飛行任務。空軍將軍之間也為了爭權求功，置飛行軍官之生命於不顧。更荒謬的是負責伙食補給的軍官，竟以運送補給品名義，做起生意來，甚至與德軍簽約轟炸自己的基地以貪圖德軍所付的代價。書中主角由於無法忍受此一腐敗荒謬的組織，在完成七十次飛行任務之後，就逃棄以求保護自身之安全。

**飛越杜鵑窩**也以作者凱希在美國加州精神病院工作的經驗為主幹，敘述病院內病人所受到的控制及虐待。護士長控制病人就好像是控制機器的零件一樣；病人沒有個人的意志與行動，院內規條像是繩索，捆綁住每一個病人的身心。經一新入院病人的掙扎與搏鬥，雖犧牲了自己，却拯救了其他的病人，尤其是一印地安混血病人，擊破院內鐵牢之窗，逃往他處，以求取與自然接近的自由生活。

兩部小說均反映了美國六十年代的社會文化。經過高度科技

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發展，美國人雖多獲得了富裕，却失去了往昔的個人自由之身。在僵硬的社會結構組織裏，人都變成失去人味的機械零件。一味追求財富，貪得利潤，人因而墮落失去了人性。這也正是引起六十年代「反文化運動」的主要原因之一。