AN ANALYSIS OF THE MAJOR CHARACTERISTICS
OF AMERICAN BLACK HUMOR NOVELS

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of the
North Texas State University in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

By

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May, 1974
Tyler, Alice C., An Analysis of the Major Characteristics of American Black Humor Novels, Master of Arts (English), May, 1974, 113 pp., bibliography, 57 titles.

This thesis serves to classify Black Humor as a philosophy, which holds that the world is meaningless and absurd, and as a literary technique. Historical origins are discussed and the idea is related to a reflection of the middle-class syndrome of twentieth century man. Close philosophical and literary relatives are presented and a pure work is defined.

Black Humor literary characteristics are described in terms of style, theme, plot, setting, chronology, and characteristic ending. Black Humor characters are classified as "non-heroes" divided into four categories. Prevalent use and treatment of traditional forbidden subjects of sex, defecation, money, violence, emotionlessness, religion, death, and "illogical" logic are stressed.

In summary, Cat's Cradle is examined in light of the Black Humor characteristics described and found to be other than a pure Black Humor work.
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CHAPTER I

AN OVERVIEW OF BLACK HUMOR

The Black Humor Philosophy

Twentieth-century man, in interacting with society and in his search for some meaning to life, finds himself facing a wall of frustration in a seemingly absurd realm.

The world around him seems controlled by greed and senseless violence. Sex is disguised as love and millions of people are virtually controlled by a lighted screen and a volume switch. He hears the president of his country tell the nation that another country was bombed in order to "save lives." He turns on his television set to watch the political candidate of his choice assassinated, then turns to another channel to watch the same scene repeated in slow motion. In Pavlovian fashion, he is reminded that it is time for supper when he sees starving children on the six o'clock news.

All attempts to change conditions seem absurd, as even these are filled with hypocrisies. People give to charities for "tax write-off" purposes. Movies are graded according to levels of corruption. "The John Birch Society promise[s] to Ronald Reagan that it [will] either support or attack his bid for Governor of California, whichever would do him the most good" (36, p. 119). Peace negotiators argue over whether to use a round or oblong table in their talks while thousands are being killed in an undeclared war.
The twentieth century man is a commuter spending hours of his day in traffic with other twentieth-century men. His car is air-conditioned, as are his home and office, relieving him from excessive contact with the outside air which his fellow men have polluted. The things he was taught were taboo have now become social norms, such as a sexual affair outside of marriage or lying on an income tax form. Going to a cocktail party, he is just as liable to be offered a marijuana cigarette as an alcoholic drink. Apathetic patriotism is acceptable as was going to college to escape the military draft, when the draft was still operable.

New discoveries have made into realities what were only a short time ago plots for science fiction writers. Men on the moon have become a boring affair. Society has discovered how to lengthen life through cures for supposedly incurable diseases and the transplanting of parts of the body, but man has yet to discover what to do with his longer years of living. Television has become the most prevalent means of entertainment, and many people consider it acceptable to spend a third of their waking hours before the TV. With the popularity of television came the ability to view on-the-spot pictures of natural and unnatural disasters, in color, and to live vicariously through involvement in the plight of quiz show contestants and situation comedy and dramatic actors.

Society is constantly faced with new shocks about which to become indifferent. Political figures are assassinated while surrounded by bodyguards; later, accused assassins are assassinated while in protective custody. Elected heads of the country are proven guilty of gross corruption while in office. People accept the fact that they
should not walk in certain sections of a city and should not be outside their homes alone at night. If one is attacked on the street, he is instructed to yell "fire" instead of "help," as the first cry will bring more assistance. Popular opinion is completely disregarded by popularly elected officials. Opinion polls showing a majority of people in favor of complete withdrawal from an "undeclared war" are ignored by an elected president who seeks an undefined "peace with honor."

Mobility and changing values have caused family units to disintegrate and many parents and their children to fall into the "generation gap," a difference in values leading to a breakdown in communication. There is constant concern over obtaining and conserving money. Twentieth century man tries to maintain a high standard of living which he wears like a shield, hiding from the rest of the world the fact that he is living beyond his means. He takes out loans to buy new cars and better houses. He opens charge accounts in order to buy now and pay later. He is expected to meet monetary household emergencies such as unexpected doctor bills and his children's education. He is behind at the end of every month and worse at tax time. He is afraid of leaving a mediocre job for fear of being without money. He finally gets ahead only to want more. The possession of a large amount of money becomes his ultimate goal, but one he never expects to reach.

But most importantly, the middle-class syndrome of the twentieth century man brings with it an overwhelming feeling of boredom. The modern man works from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. at a job he does not like and spends two hours a day getting to and from that boring job. He eats lunch and takes coffee breaks at prescribed times with his fellow
workers who talk about last night's television shows, the latest sports scores, or the availability of the boss's secretary. He returns home from work to his wife, whom he finds boring; his children, whom he does not understand; and his television set, before which he sits until time for him to go to sleep. His wife fares no better. She sees her husband off to work and tends the children all day, sometimes not even finding it necessary to change out of her houserobe. She cleans the house as quickly as possible, a task made even faster by the invention of modern household conveniences, watches daytime television, and spends time on the telephone talking to her "girl friends" about last night's television shows, the latest fashions, or the newest neighborhood gossip. When her husband comes home from his hard day at the office, all she has to talk to him about is her day with the kids and the housework. The husband feels that he is getting nowhere with his job and family, and the wife feels that she deserves better than her role as a housewife. The result is a sense of purposelessness.

Even a man who tries to live alone, without society, finds his life meaningless. To achieve companionship, he finds he must interact with some form of society, and an avoidance of any such companionship brings about an aching feeling of loneliness. Besides companionship he finds he must interact with others to obtain his basic food and shelter. Were he to move by himself into a part of the country to lead a "simple life" off the land, he might soon find himself surrounded by land developers selling the space around him to other twentieth century men trying to find a secluded spot of their own. Soon he would face paved roads, telephone poles, country clubs, and the other aspects of the middle
class syndrome of twentieth century man described above. He would find the value of the land he obtained for his "simple life" risen to high proportions following an increased value tax rate. Forced to seek a means of employment within society to support himself and his simple lifestyle, he would soon encounter face-to-face the middle-class syndrome.

There seems no answer to this unending confusion and boredom. Man does not grow out of it as society makes old age a time of ugliness, loneliness, and the ultimate in boredom. The possible alternative of insanity seems unappealing. The twentieth century man might consider suicide but for the feeling that this act too would be pointless as he would only be leaving his body to be viewed in a "drive-in funeral home" (35). He concludes that perhaps all the things which should be important are really not important. The only result of modern-day life is inevitable despair. As the critics see it, it is this despair which may ultimately lead one to adopt the Black Humor viewpoint.

Black Humor is a theory about life which interprets conditions as hopeless and meaningless. A believer in the Black Humor philosophy can find no reason and no sense in what he sees around him. He has arrived at these views through a daily exposure to things he cannot understand. His relations with religion, wealth, love, hate, power, violence, cruelty, and even death seem to him to be pointless. Ambition is of no consequence; status is irrelevant. Life itself holds no future, but death gives no hint of a better existence. His attempts to discover the ultimate meaning of life have proved unfruitful. He is constantly in
limbo, existing in a world he does not understand and which he feels he is unable to change.

This reality seeker faces two choices: he must either succumb to the weight of circumstances and fall victim to despair, or he can become indifferent to the mire by perceiving and accepting the world as an absurd madhouse. By taking the former view he is led only to disappointment and disillusionment, as by his own definition all action is meaningless. By adopting the latter view, he is able to exist in his troubled world by accepting the state of things while telling himself that all attempts at change are futile.

In order to exist with this view of life, the Black Humor devotee must arm himself with some means of defense, so he turns to humor. Humor allows him not to take the pointlessness of the world seriously. Through laughing at what is around him he is able to accept life's conditions as meaningless, hopeless, pointless, but also as unimportant. He feels enlightened and apart from those he sees seeking the ultimate truth to life. Instead of bemoaning the human condition or attempting to make people understand the truth he has come upon, acts which would be pointless, he laughs. He is entertained by the absurd activity of all those around him. Their dramatic concern with things he knows to be absurd is funny. Even their seeking of the nonexistent purpose in life is humorous.

The term "Black Humor" is an appropriate description for this philosophical viewpoint. "Black" indicates that the world is seen as a dark and hopeless place with no light in any direction—a setting void of color and excitement. Its symptoms have been described above.
"Humor" indicates a special type of defense whereby the devotee to Black Humor is able to survive in his absurd world. Through the aid of humor, the viewer of the world in a Black Humor perspective is able to laugh at things others consider important, things he has justified in his own mind as unimportant. In this way he is able to relax into a comfortable, pessimistic state of existence.

Black Humor is used in literature to express the Black Humor philosophy. The term "Black Humorist" to describe an author of Black Humor literature is misleading, as a true devotee to the Black Humor philosophy would not be an author, as the act of writing would contradict his philosophy. If the Black Humor devotee unswervingly believed in his philosophy, he would find writing as absurd an occupation as he finds everything else in the world. A true Black Humorist would publish a book with totally blank pages, and through his belief in an absurd world, expect it to sell to an eager public which would view the work as a perceptive masterpiece. Therefore, the term "writer of Black Humor" will be used to indicate an author who writes a particular work from a Black Humor perspective. This person is merely portraying a picture of what he sees around him. The exaggerated characters and fantasized situations are only used as emphasis of the absurdity of all things. The "humor" in the works causes the reader to laugh, but analysis of that humor reveals laughter at things which are unusual, absurd, cruel, or sad.

The History of Black Humor

There are two prevalent views about the origins of Black Humor as both a philosophy and a literary technique. One view considers Black
Humor as the current form in a gradual progression of humor through the ages. This progression follows from Roman satires, Renaissance narratives, and eighteenth-century satiric novels. The other view holds that Black Humor represents a distorted view of life which is the direct result of the brutality, destructiveness, and outlook-shattering scenes of World War II.

Robert Scholes, in his work *The Fabulators*, presents the former historical view. He sees all literary techniques as present at all times throughout history. The dominant technique for an epoch arises through a particular society's view of itself. Other techniques lie dormant until other conditions and society call them forth as an appropriate means of expression.

What can be called the "satiric technique" is one of these modes of expression. This technique has appeared in a cyclic manner throughout history whenever conditions and societies deemed its reappearance appropriate. Although the general technique was used, its form usually differed as one style was more appropriate to one society than another. In this way, Black Humor is seen as simply another variant of the satiric technique, and as such seems "allied with those periodic waves... which rolled through Western culture... for over two thousand years" (31, p. 38). Roman satires, medieval allegories, narratives of the Renaissance, seventeenth-century metaphysical poems and satires, Age of Reason satiric fiction, and Black Humor are all interrelated as varieties of satire (31, p. 38).

The view of Black Humor as an outgrowth of World War II and the post-war era holds that it was the ultimate brutality, display of
power, and realization of potential worldly annihilation resulting from World War II and the lack of concern displayed for these discoveries after the War which caused the appearance and popularity of the Black Humor outlook. This view is more popularly held by Black Humor critics. One Black Humor analyst refers to the philosophy as the "post-Auschwitz, post-Hiroshima, post-war experience" (21, p. 509). Another characterizes Black Humor novels as representing a "delayed reaction to the stupidities and horrors of the Second World War, as well as the idiocies of the postwar era. . . . That in the face of the stupidities, inanities, and obscenities of our countrymen, all one can do is bay at the moon" (34, p. 15). Two others also directly associate Black Humor with this post-World War II reaction: "The mammoth holocaust [World War II] had destroyed the novelist's faith in human perfectibility and philosophical absolutes, and therefore put into question all spiritual, social, and moral values" (12, p. 368). "Black . . . humor . . . is assuredly a phenomenon of degree in postwar America. Never before has this strain of humor exhibited itself in so broad and continuous extent" (5, p. 293).

During the War, the public was exposed to cruelties previously thought unimaginable. Concentration camps, scientific experimentation on humans, new forms of torture, and gas chambers constructed to destroy thousands of human beings made men aware of what they were capable of doing to one another. "Who can calculate the effect on the imagination of those images out of Buchenwald of bulldozers shoveling the piles of entangled, nude, emaciated bodies, men, women and children, into huge trenches serving as common graves" (22, p. 7). No one escaped these
images, as for the first time improvements in communication allowed the presentation of facts in grotesque detail.

New design in war weaponry carried efficiency, in the form of mass annihilation, to the battlefield. Advancing technology produced such holocausts as the firebombing of Dresden, and victims were sacrificed for this "progress." The ultimate weapon in this technology and destruction was, of course, the atom bomb. It had the capability of killing thousands in a matter of seconds and affecting hundreds more located miles from the blast and even unborn generations through an unseen destructive force known as radiation contamination. The idea that this piece of modern technology could, if used in relatively small numbers, reduce the entire world to rubble in a matter of minutes boggled the imagination of a public which, for the most part, could not conceive of such total destruction.

The creation and use of the atom bomb in 1945 is, thus, one of those events, like the discoveries of Copernicus or Darwin, that radically changed man's image of himself and his possibilities. In a sense, it represented man's final takeover of power from God and Satan: from God in the discovery of the ultimate mysteries of the origin of energy; from Satan in use of the released energy for diabolical purposes (22, p. 6).

Before the war, man held the belief that only God had the might and right to create energy and release that energy to kill others. Creation was God's function alone and taking another's life was often viewed as an evil connected with Satan. After the creation of energy in the form of the atom bomb, man began to realize his takeover of power from God. Now, what was a sacred right of only God became an accepted defense in war-time. Man began to reanalyze his view of Satan so as not to connect himself with evil.
Nothing could excuse the destructive use of the atom bomb, nor the use of other equally bizarre forms of human elimination. Technological advancement, which had hitherto been considered a positive sign of human progress, was now viewed in terms of destructive efficiency. The ability of one human to destroy another became a measurement of a nation's success in terms of advancement and power. As such, how could the phrase "love of fellow man" become anything but hypocrisy; religion and a belief in God anything other than a false means for escaping reality.

Just as important as the War, the post-war era became a relevant factor in producing Black Humor. A country which had undergone exposure to such change in values should have rightfully experienced an economic and moral slump as viewpoints were readjusted to accept the brutality of that which had been experienced. However, this decline did not occur. Instead, the country prospered as never before. People became more affluent, lifestyles improved, and personal material gain became commonplace.

The result was an overriding sense of guilt amid "the grotesque incongruity between the tenuous spiritual plight of modern man and his fat, vacuous unrippled life..." (22, p. 8). Man began to feel a helplessness over his situation and his inability to cause change. He was sympathetic toward the suffering of others caused by the destructiveness of the war, yet did not want to lose his own new-found prosperity and good health. He felt pride in his nation as a victor in war, yet confused over its lost image of protector of the peace. He understood that the invention and use of the atom bomb was a necessary
evil, yet he feared its new destructive abilities. He became confused and guilt ridden. He desired change but was not sure in what direction. He began to think of himself as a small cog in a huge continuing machine.

No matter whether the critic views Black Humor as a variation of the satiric technique or as a direct result of the guilt feelings arising from the war, the philosophy is seen as a direct reflection on twentieth century man's lifestyle today. As described earlier, this middle-class syndrome is made up of the routine and the logically absurd. Air-conditioned cities, a home in the suburbs, and modern time-saving conveniences have become the expected. Fading of family unity, loss of personal objectives, and a feeling of helplessness are the disagreeable side effects. It is evil to kill another except when dropping a bomb on the enemy. Promiscuity is bad, except more divorces appear in marriages where the partners have no previous sexual experience. "Life was not grand and heroic. Life was neon wilderness, the bourgeois milieu, the domesticated suburb. Here good and evil were not distinct, opposing forces" (12, p. 368). Life has become absurd and meaningless to the twentieth century man and one result is the emergence of Black Humor.

Black Humor as a Literary Technique

The literary technique closest to Black Humor in conventional literature is satire. As mentioned earlier, Black Humor is thought by some to be a development of the satiric technique which has always been present in literature. But there are important differences. Through
a comparison with satire, a better understanding of Black Humor in literature can be gained.

The basis for both satire and Black Humor is dissatisfaction. However, the one basic distinction which differentiates one from the other is the attitude in which the work is written. Most satirists seek to ridicule society and through that ridicule point out a method whereby society can better itself. Black Humor literature laughs at rather than ridicules society, but contains no notion of a method whereby things may be improved.

The dominant trend among satirists is that of moralists striving to reform society. They write with an "ideal" in mind, desiring to show their readers the evils in society as viewed by the satirist and through ridicule present an idea of the "good" and the "moral." This good and moral is something in the mind of the writer, and the satirist's "right" is held in direct contrast to the "wrong" presented in the satire.

Usually . . . he operates within the established framework of society, accepting its norms, appealing to reason (or to what his society accepts as rational) as the standard against which to judge the folly he sees. He is the preserver of tradition -- the true tradition from which there has been grievous falling away (18, p. 153).

The satirist points out the positive by ridiculing the negative so as to teach his readers by example. He knows what is right and only strives to point out to the reader the "error of his ways" in an attempt to "bring all deviants back into conformity with his standard" (15, p. 240).

The reader of satire is usually entertained and laughs at the situations presented, but may be insulted at the idea the satire
presents as reality. At the end of the work, however, the reader un-derstands the satirist's innuendoes and is led to believe that through taking the satirist's suggestions he will adopt a correct moral standard. The reader is dissatisfied with what he has read, yet he has the alter-native the satirist has left him--an "ideal" under which the evil pictured may be diminished.

Other satirists may only seek to point up what they see as ridic-ulous conventional models in society. They may not be functioning as moralists in this role, however, as they will not have an "ideal" in mind to which they desire the reader to conform. Nevertheless, their ridicule, although sharp and biting, will not present the idea that everything in the world is absurd and meaningless.

The writer of Black Humor, like the satirist, ridicules society's conventions and morals through a general feeling of dissatisfaction, but this ridicule is perpetrated with no ultimate purpose. The reader of Black Humor may be entertained and may laugh, but at the end of the work he is left with no moral and no action to make things right. The writer of Black Humor has no "ideal" in mind toward which he aims with his writing; consequently, he leaves his readers with no impression of a moral "ideal," as this concept is unknown to Black Humor. His work can only point out to the reader the "wrongs" in society, but as Black Humor sees no redeeming qualities in the world, the writer of Black Humor can leave no impression of "right." As a result, one of the main charac-teristics of a Black Humor work is that it has no logical resolutions to action. Problems are encountered, but ultimate conclusions are never reached. Most Black Humor characters are unchanged throughout
the work, and at the end are faced with the same insurmountable problems under which they had fallen at the start.

The satirist is dissatisfied with what he sees and so writes in an honest attempt to make his society more aware. Although the satirist is discontented with his world, he does not see it as hopeless. It has certain inequities which can be clarified by the satirist and corrected by his readers. The satirist sees problems, but ultimately his world is bright with hope, promise, and faith in his fellow man. His work is positive, and through contrasting the presented caricature with the projected "ideal," a picture of a better society appears.

The view the writer of Black Humor has of society is somewhat different from the view of the satirist. The world of Black Humor is bleak, dark, pointless, and hopeless. The writer of Black Humor's role is that of an apathetic reporter of the times, recording the absurdities and inequities around him but knowing no solutions. The writing has no moralistically redeeming purpose, as the Black Humor philosophy recognizes a futility in life. In writing, the Black Humor author is merely pointing out society to itself in an effort to make himself laugh. The reader's laughing with the writer is of no importance to the writer. His work is very negative, describing the hopeless situations and solutionless problems the writer encounters.

Both satirists and Black Humor writers gather material on which to write from the society around them and both use laughter, but the material and the laughter are used toward different ends. Satire's "moral norms are relatively clear, and it assumes standards against which the grotesque and absurd are measured." However, it is this very
grotesque and absurd which Black Humor considers the norm. "Some phenomena, such as the ravages of disease, may be called grotesque, but to make fun of them would not be very effective satire" (18, p. 155). On the other hand, it is Black Humor's very purpose to make fun of such pathetic abnormalities as these in an effort to project the ultimate futility of normality.

Philosophical Relatives to Black Humor

Black Humor as a philosophical viewpoint has as its kin many philosophical attitudes during the period following World War II. Existentialists, Nihilists, "Angry Young Men," and the "Beat Generation" all shared the quality of despair so necessary to Black Humor (22, p. 10). Existentialism stressed the individuality of human action and the importance of the personal experience in line with the limitations of human reason in seeking answers to the ultimate meaning of things. Nihilism took this viewpoint one step further believing, as Jean-Paul Sartre expressed in *Nausea* (30), "All existing beings are born for no reason, continue through weakness and die by accident. . . . Man is a useless passion" (29, p. 125). This view is very close in philosophy to Black Humor, but Nihilism saw nothing humorous in the world situation. England's Angry Young Men and America's Beat Generation were a result of this existential viewpoint which highlighted dissent and despondency, characterized in such terms as "irreverence, . . . impatience with tradition, . . . vulgarity, . . . adventurousness, . . . a general intellectual nihilism, . . . a neurotic discontent and a defeated reconciled acquiescence that is the last flimsy shelter against complete
despondency" (2, p. 10). Literature of this philosophical viewpoint consisted of lost and near insane characters, Sartre's Antoine Roquentin (30), Albert Camus' Meursault (8), and Jack Kerouac's portraits of his wandering self (19), all struggling to find some secure identity in an insecure world. These philosophical movements gave literature such terms as "anguish, absurdity, and nausea" (22, p. 10), terms essential to Black Humor.

Another literary relationship to Black Humor is the Theater of the Absurd. Writers of this mode (e.g., Eugene Ionesco, Samuel Beckett, and Edward Albee) presented on stage a realization of a nihilistically meaningless, Black Humorishly absurd world (22, p. 11). Albee's grandmother in An American Dream (1) and Burt Blechman's grandmother in How Much? (6) seem cast from the same mold. Both have the ultimate despair and loneliness of the aged in common. Both characters end their lives for absurd reasons: Albee's character dies in order to keep playing the game; Blechman's character dies to be less trouble to her family. Both reflect a meaninglessness to life.

Thesis Limitations in Discussing Black Humor

The term Black Humor, according to Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. and Robert Scholes "is a sales promotion label . . . applied to nearly everybody who writes nowadays, at one moment or another" (20, p. 96). This thesis, however, does not consider the term in that broadest sense. It is because of such continued broad usage that the term needs clarification so that in succeeding pages a discussion of Black Humor
characteristics in literature will become more meaningful. In this regard, three points will be clarified and limited.

1. What is a "pure" work of Black Humor?
2. Is a work to be called Black Humor because its author is considered a "Black Humorist"?
3. What is the best written genre for Black Humor?

1. **What is a "Pure" Work of Black Humor?**

   Many works have apparent Black Humor episodes or Black Humor characters which when isolated and analyzed seem to fit the Black Humor mode. However, to create this feeling of Black Humor, these episodes or characters must be completely isolated from the remainder of the book. Such isolated parts do not accurately reflect the author's writing perspective, and often do not in themselves reflect all the necessary qualities to be considered pure Black Humor. It is for these reasons that all works discussed in this thesis will be considered in their entirety when they are assessed as Black Humor works.

   Many other works which are noted by critics as Black Humor are not such in truth due to some defect which reveals hopeful philosophical underpinnings. This defect usually discloses some character, situation, emotion, or positive scene from which the reader is able to grasp some small inkling of a brighter tomorrow. If one quality is apparent to which the reader can point as some example of good, thereby nullifying the view of the world as pointless and absurd, the work is not Black Humor.
One of the best known authors of "near" Black Humor is Bruce Jay Friedman, who is commonly considered to be an authority on Black Humor. All of Friedman's novels seem to be consistent with Black Humor philosophy, placing dull characters in an absurd world facing pointless situations. One major point, however, keeps these works from being pure Black Humor: they all end with a feeling of hope.

For instance, in Friedman's novel A Mother's Kisses, the main character, Joseph, is an inconsequential teenager caught in an apparently absurd world presented through Black Humor technique. He is constantly plagued by a domineering mother who herself is an absurd character, pinching and slapping people, calling others brilliant who dupe her out of money, and constantly telling her son, who is worried about getting into college, "you're going through some period" (13, p. 100). Joseph rides from situation to situation throughout the novel in a constant state of indecision and misunderstanding, prodded by his mother into one meaningless situation after another. If it were not for the last scene, the reader would be led to believe that these episodes would continue endlessly with no salvation in sight for Joseph. In this scene, Joseph seems to at last be awakening, or perhaps maturing, into his own individuality. He is seen shouting after a retreating figure of his mother, "I never enjoyed one second with you" (13, p. 286), and with these words Friedman plants some hope in the mind of the reader that perhaps Joseph will at last be bold enough to decide his own fate instead of letting other absurd people and events decide it for him.

Another novel by Friedman, Stern (14), presents a downtrodden mouse of a man, despised by his wife, teased by his child, and
terrorized by his neighbor. However, at the end of the novel, as in *A Mother's Kisses*, the main character begins to change to a positive attitude. Suddenly, he takes responsibility for his family, expects love and respect from them, and stands up to his neighborhood bully. With this ending there is hope that this man may yet come to feel that life has some meaning, thus ending the picture of a Black Humor world.

This hopeful ending prevents serious consideration of these works as pure Black Humor. When some hope can be found in the ending of the work, one cannot believe in the philosophy of a totally and unchangeably hopeless world. All of Friedman's novels end happily and thus destroy the atmosphere of Black Humor.

*Death on the Installment Plan*, by Louis-Ferdinand Céline, another work considered by many to be an early classic in Black Humor, cannot be considered as such due to two elements: the appearance of a "good" character, one on whom life is not taking its toll, and the un-Black Humorish guilt this character causes the main character, Ferdinand; and the presentation of admirable emotion on occasion from Ferdinand. The one redeemable character is Ferdinand's Uncle Edward. Throughout the novel, Uncle Edward is not pictured as doing anything outrageous, dastardly, absurd, underhanded, dumb, or unkind. He is not rich, but he is not poor either, and seems to be doing the best he can with life. Worse yet, from a Black Humor perspective, he seems to be fairly happy. He is the one who bails Ferdinand out of scrape after scrape with money, support, and reassurance. This love and assistance is directed not just toward Ferdinand but toward Ferdinand's mother as well. He does not even seem to harbor any evil toward Ferdinand's father, who hates him
because Edward gives so freely and willingly of himself. Further evidence of his redeeming qualities comes from Ferdinand's descriptions of his Uncle in the narration of the book. "Uncle Edward was genuinely devoted to his sister [Ferdinand's mother]--honest Injun--and it saddened him terribly to see her hurt. . . . He was always thinking of her" (9, p. 288). "He was a good sort, Uncle Edward. . . . He had done this thing on his own . . . out of sheer goodness of heart" (9, p. 247). (Uncle Edward sent Ferdinand money to stay in England and learn English, so Ferdinand would not have to tell his parents he had failed.) When Ferdinand attacked his father and as a result was shunned by his family and the neighbors, it was Uncle Edward who stood up for him and took him into his own home. "I didn't feel at all hunted in the home of Uncle Edward. Once again I began to breathe. . . . It wasn't a bad life. . . . Every day before he left he'd say to me, Uncle Edward would: 'Run along, Ferdinand! Go out for a walk. Go right ahead. Don't you bother about anything. Just trot off wherever you wish!' . . . He'd also give me some money extra, a couple of francs or so" (9, pp. 325-329). At the end of the novel, when Ferdinand has no other place to go, it's back to Uncle Edward. "He [Edward] came back from next door with a complete suiting of his own, out of the wardrobe in the corridor. It was in perfect condition . . . and a bear skin coat . . . I'd been magnificently refitted" (9, p. 581). In his kind heart of hearts. . . . "(9, p. 584). "I'm very fond of you, Uncle you know that. . . . You're very good, you are, to me. . . . I don't deserve it, Uncle! I don't deserve it" (9, p. 589).

It seems that Celine has placed the character Uncle Edward in the novel to verify that there can be hope in the world--the world need not
crush everybody. Edward is described as a character who gives freely and willingly of himself. In the novel he serves as a source for reader admiration and exemplification.

Other Black Humorless qualities are seen through occasional emotional references made by Ferdinand. He feels guilt over taking advantage of his Uncle, "What with him [Edward] so generous, and me stranded there on his hands, I began to feel a louse. . . . There's no denying it--he was extremely sensitive" (9, p. 329). Ferdinand also thinks kindly of other characters who make cameo appearances throughout the novel. "Luckily there was also Old Visios, the sailor, who was much kinder-hearted. He understood that I was really doing my best and maintained the opposite view to everyone else, claiming that I wasn't after all such a bad youngster" (9, p. 152). "At last we spotted a real light in the narrow door of a shelter. The nightwatchman chap was squatting inside. . . . He cleared his throat for quite a while. Then he surged out into the mist, he flapped and shook himself like a duck. . . . He was very kind" (9, p. 215). Also, Ferdinand misses his grandmother after she dies, thinks well of hardworking Irene after he leaves her, and reminisces kindly about Courtial after he is dead. A truly Black Humor character would think kindly of no man. All actions and people to him would seem absurd and the expression of emotion irrelevant.

Other emotional responses arising from Ferdinand include feeling enlightened by the approach of spring: "Clear spells became more frequent; fresh breezes blew, laden with soft, delicious scents. . . . Daffodils and daisies quivered in every field" (9, p. 247). He feels peace in a cathedral: "The candles anyway make it pretty, their delicate foliage
quivering in the great sombre velvet of the arches. . . . It hypnotized me. Little by little I'd fall asleep. . . . The tinkle of bells would wake me. And of course it never closes. . . . It's the nicest place there is" (9, p. 308). He also expresses guilt over his own mistreatment of a dog which he had tried to punish as his parents punished him: "It didn't give me any pleasure to beat him, I much preferred fondling him" (9, p. 61).

The reader can easily identify with and admire such emotions. These scenes portray a redeeming quality in Ferdinand even though he is surrounded by an absurd world. The reader is able to lean on these scenes as proof of and hope in Ferdinand's ultimate redemption. Such hope negates the Black Humor presented throughout the rest of the novel.

\textit{V}, by Thomas Pynchon (28), is another novel commonly considered to be Black Humor, although in close analysis it fails to match the criteria for pure Black Humor. The novel is actually divided into two parts. One story involves Benny Profane and the "Sick Crew" in a "Beat Generation" adventure of wild parties, pathetic interrelationships, and humorous practical jokes. The other story concerns Herbert Stencil, spies, and the mysterious V, complete with riots, torture, grotesque cruelty, and death. The first story is highly humorous with practical jokes the main fare; the second story is exceedingly dark and grotesque with intrigue and violence. The book as a whole contains both blackness and humor, but each is in a different section. Seldom do the two elements meet to form what could be considered true Black Humor.

Joseph Heller's \textit{Catch-22}, on the other hand, is a Black Humor work which, because of its seemingly hopeful ending, is considered by many
not to be pure Black Humor. At the conclusion of this novel, the unhappy soldier, Yossarian, sails off on a simple raft to join Orr, who, he has heard, is living happily in peaceful Sweden. Although Yossarian's chances of actually making it to Sweden in the raft are very slim, many would say he has at least some chance of finding happiness away from the war. If this were true, it could be said that Heller was indicating some hope in a peaceful society.

However, one incident in the earlier part of the book negates the above conclusion. In a rather short but meaningful scene, Yossarian is walking down the back streets of Rome. His walk and the scenes he sees are not directly connected with the war in any way but appear to be everyday occurrences of that city and are intended to be everyday occurrences of every city and society.

The night was filled with horrors and he thought he knew how Christ must have felt as he walked through the world, like a psychiatrist through a ward full of nuts, like a victim through a prison full of thieves. What a welcome sight a leper must have been! At the next corner a man was beating a small boy brutally in the midst of an immobile crowd of adult spectators who made no effort to intervene. Yossarian recoiled with sickening recognition (16, p. 405).

It is the two words "sickening recognition" which relate to and capture the novel as pure Black Humor. They indicate that these scenes, uncon- nected with the war, are real and are happening in Rome every day. With the presentation of this scene, Heller introduces the idea that these events happen not only in Rome but in every other place in the world, including the place where Orr has taken refuge. There is no place Yossarian can go to escape these sights; they will always await his sickening recognition. They make up the world around him, leaving no
way to escape and no hope for a better tomorrow. Therefore, if, as the end of the novel implies, Yossarian does join Orr, he will be joining Orr away from the absurdities of war but in the midst of the absurdities of the rest of the world.

2. Is a Work to be Called Black Humor Because Its Author is Considered a "Black Humorist"?

As mentioned earlier, the term "Black Humorist" as author is a contradiction in philosophy. A true Black Humorist would see writing as absurd, irrelevant, and pointless. Therefore, the term "Black Humorist" as applied to authors is meaningless. Nevertheless, many critics seem to place authors and not their individual works under the classification of Black Humor. As such, it is implied that an author of one Black Humor work will always use the Black Humor technique. This is not the case, and no such implication can rightfully be assumed.

An example of an author who has published one Black Humor work out of several novels is J. P. Donleavy. His work *A Singular Man* (11) is a good example of Black Humor, presenting an absurd main character in ridiculous situations surrounded by grotesque individuals. On the other hand, Donleavy's *The Ginger Man* (10) presents a meaning to life: the obtaining of money. The main character seems happier when he is presented with money, and the novel leads the reader to believe the main character will achieve his monetary ambitions in life when he reaches a certain age.

Heller is considered by many to be the father of Black Humor with the publication of *Catch-22*, but his second published work, *We Bombed in New Haven* (17), uses a satiric rather than Black Humor technique.
John Barth and James Purdy are two more authors who have written some Black Humor works and some satires. Barth's *Giles Goat-Boy* (3) is unmistakably Black Humor in its presentation of a meaningless world, while his *The Sot Weed Factor* (4) is a parody of eighteenth-century satires. Purdy's *Malcolm* (26) and *Cabot Wright Begins* (24) are Black Humor works picturing Black Humor heroes in absurd situations, yet his works *Jeremy's Version* (25) and *The Nephew* (27) are very much straightforward novels with acceptable characterization, theme, setting, and most of all recognizable plot and action.

3. What is the Best Written Genre for Black Humor?

Black Humor in some sense can be found in a variety of written artistic forms including plays, short stories, poetry, and film scripts, as well as novels. However, it is the novel which is most adaptive to the narrative developments necessary for a well formed work of pure Black Humor. The play must be written for the stage and as such may not be able to present a view of hopelessness in all things. Short stories and poems are, for the most part, too brief in form to produce the desired effect of total absurdity. Films, similar to plays, must take into consideration not only written script but direction, actor portrayal, and other elements, and as such are dependent on more than just the written word.

Black Humor plays, at least those which have been produced thus far, tend to be either too absurdly unreal, such as some plays produced under the Theater of the Absurd, or more satirical than black. A play, written ultimately for stage presentation, is unable to utilize all of
the elements available to literature written only to be read. As such, a play loses the written descriptive detail and character stream of consciousness familiar, and many times necessary, to the development of true Black Humor, where such techniques are used to more closely pinpoint elements of absurdity. A Black Humor play must be written in such a form as to present on stage all elements as Black Humor without leaving any hope for a brighter future. While a Black Humor novel need only imply that elements not covered in the basic plot action are without hope, a play is a visual art which makes the technique of implication harder to achieve. As such, a play tends to make an audience feel discontent with the action viewed but not to project from that presentation a feeling of hopelessness implied for all things. This makes the form of a play, for the most part, incomplete for the technique of Black Humor.

Although there are some very good Black Humor short stories, as a general rule the short story form does not have the necessary length to produce the desired effect of a total feeling of absurdity. The same is true of the poetic form. In general, an author is forced to cover a great deal of ground in his effort to prove the futility of man in all quests. If the author were simply to present one Black Humorish episode or one such characterization, the reader would be tempted to assume that this presents one isolated case in a world which is generally healthy. Only a highly skilled author can negate all of society in the abbreviated form of the short story or poem.

Film has recently been used as a new method to express Black Humor, and several Black Humor works have been adapted into rather effective
Black Humor films. Works such as Terry Southern's *The Magic Christian* (33) and *Catch-22* (16) have lent themselves to excellent screen portrayals of a meaningless Black Humor world. Other Black Humor novels, such as Southern's and Mason Hoffenberg's *Candy* (32) and Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (23), have not fared as well in their screen adaptations. Still another film, *A Clockwork Orange* (7), which in novel form lacks a totally absurd and hopeless outlook on life and so is not considered true Black Humor, has been adapted very well to a film presentation of Black Humor. However, the study of film requires special consideration and interpretation not only of film scripts but also film direction, actor character portrayal, and production of scene effects. As such, it is not the written word alone which is the sole consideration in the screen version produced for view but the written word combined with the other elements necessary for film. As noted above, in several instances film has been used to effectively portray Black Humor, but it is the written word combined with other elements that produces the desired effect.

The novel, then, is the best means of written expression for the basic Black Humor philosophy. Although there may be exceptions, for the most part, the other forms described either lack elements necessary to a clear presentation of Black Humor or rely on elements in addition to written word to produce the desired effect. The novel need not be unrealistic or satiric. It is long enough to express precise rather than implied Black Humor so that a picture of a completely meaningless world can be achieved. It is written to be read only and is, therefore,
not dependent on adaptations and abilities of performers and directors to create a picture of Black Humor.
CHAPTER BIBLIOGRAPHY


CHAPTER II

BLACK HUMOR AND THE TRADITIONAL NOVEL

As Black Humor sees the common acceptance of a belief in a meaningful lifestyle as an absurdity, so it sees the acceptance of a meaningful pattern in literary technique. Black Humor has no "form" to which all works with that philosophy must conform, but instead represents a breaking away from the traditional concepts of the acceptable in a literary work.

As Black Humor writing is, per se, a contradiction in terms, as noted earlier, it cannot be anticipated that all Black Humor novels will follow this idea of a breaking away from the expected pattern of the novel. The same can be said for the "traditional novel" as today's novels represent a huge range of techniques. What is referred to here, then, is the majority of both Black Humor novels and traditional novels.

The most notable thing about a traditional novel is that it follows a recognizable pattern, one with which the reader is familiar. It has a discernable plot, even though the plot may not be the most important element in the novel. Its characterizations are understandable by the reader whether they be classic heroes, anti-heroes, non-heroes, or simple supportive characters. Characters in a traditional novel inspire and contribute to the novel's plot, and the plot in turn flows along with them to the conclusion of the book. Action revolves around a recognized setting, which may often figure extensively in the plot. The
style is easily comprehensible, although it may vary from the simple to the complex. Chronology may involve a variety of forms from the chronological growth of a character to a flashback technique, all in some easily comprehensible ordered form. There is usually a recognizable conclusion to plot elements, and a termination to plot action is predictable.

In general, the traditional novel is concerned "mainly with the revelation of objective characters through the unfolding of a narrative plot. The pattern of exposition, conflict and final solution mirrors a view of the world in which solutions are possible." This pattern is anticipated by those reading traditional novels and is recognized as a guide in following ideas and movements presented in the novel. Besides this pattern, however, it is ultimately the lean toward realism "based on a recognizable and generally accepted pattern of objective reality that can be apprehended so that the purpose of man's existence and rules of conduct it entails can be deducted" (14, p. 8), which places these novels in the minds of their readers. This realism lends a familiarity to the proceedings and allows the reader to assume that the world around him, as reflected in the novel, has some pattern, a proper moral stance, and a general condition of worthiness.

For the most part, Black Humor works do not follow any recognizable literary pattern; their authors seem to make up their own novelistic blueprints as they go along. These new patterns are often seemingly incomprehensible to the reader. Those who write Black Humor are "members of no national school, no coherent and continuous system of influences and imitations" (13, p. 250). Their works owe allegiance to
no acceptable pattern of literary style nor defined pattern among themselves. Some writers of Black Humor find the acceptable mold of the traditional novel the best means for achieving their purpose, while others use a style difficult for the reader to understand. These unpatternable modes of expression themselves point up the Black Humor outlook of total absurdity.

In many Black Humor novels the plot element could be said to be unintelligible, boring, or even nonexistent. Black Humor heroes are referred to as "non-heroes" due to their unheroic qualities and their inability to arouse favorable emotion from the reader. Settings in most Black Humor novels are completely irrelevant, as relevancy would tend to pinpoint the hopelessness so as to make the rest of the world, with the exception of the location for the Black Humor action, look hopeful. The one uniting factor of Black Humor novels is the common theme of despair.

Style in Black Humor novels varies greatly and may include many elements with which the reader is unfamiliar and with which he will have some difficulty becoming acquainted. Composition may range from a traditional type of monologue or dialogue to one-word thoughts, ten-page sentences, or simple rhythmic verse. Chronology may also vary from ordered clarity to a shotgun approach so totally scattered as to be almost nonexistent. Black Humor novels always conclude either in blackest despair or in a continuing pattern which suggests despair. This termination of action serves to underscore the Black Humor outlook present throughout the book, reflecting a view that existence consists of never-ending episodes of hopeless absurdity. These works must never
contain a "happy ending," as to do so would negate Black Humor which insists that the pursuit of happiness itself is absurd.

In a traditional novel, plot action is essential. The action holds all elements of the story together into one unit of continuing thought present throughout the novel, leading to a conclusion or set of conclusions marking a termination to parts of the action and finally the narrative itself. Without the movement of action, this feeling of something happening, the traditional novel would be meaningless. Even in such a novel as Crime and Punishment (7), which concentrates on the psychology of one character, there is interaction between the main character and others in the book, forming side plots and intrigues which keep the action rolling and the reader interested. It is this plot which is the essential ingredient in the traditional novel, holding all the other elements, including characterization and setting, together, and developing and expressing the effect at which the writer is aiming.

A Black Humor novel is not highly dependent on plot for continuity of story line or development of theme. Many Black Humor plots consist of nothing more than the detailing of the daily events or thoughts of a particular character. This character may think about a great deal during the course of the novel, but all of these thoughts will appear to be irrelevant in terms of story action. He may interact with other characters but only on a superficial level. In other words, with reference to traditional plot action, the Black Humor character is frequently immobile.

For example, in A Singular Man (6), George Smith spends most of his time in mind-ridden fear, deserved or undeserved. He is afraid of
the person writing notes to him, afraid of women, and afraid of the snooping general public. Most of the book concerns his thinking processes, which lead to no real objective. His interaction with other people, with the exception of his secretary, who becomes pregnant, is irrelevant as far as the movement of the story is concerned. The irrelevancy of everything in the novel as well as the total meaninglessness help to develop the Black Humor theme of total despair.

The Beetle Leg, by John Hawkes, takes the idea of plotlessness even further. This novel has no main character and instead revolves around a particular western town or the way of western life. As concerns a unifying plot, this novel could not even be described as consisting of small episodes but rather a collection of unrelated paragraph narratives. Plot movement, as such, is well exemplified by the following dialogue between a local town character and a local collection of old men:

"What are you fellows doing here?" . . .
"Leaning, Luke."
"Just leaning."
"Watching the people driving by."
"Seen many on the road?" . . .
"About three hours back there was one. Four door."
"Two door."
"I reckon it was four." (9, pp. 93-94)

The passing of the car, and this particular dialogue, has little relation to other action in the book. The car's occupants are seen again here and there throughout the rest of the novel, but as relates to plot, it is entirely irrelevant for the old men to have seen or not seen the car and its occupants. The importance of the above dialogue reflects the theme of unimportance and irrelevancy of fact in the novel.
Plot movement, so important to the traditional novel, is deemed unnecessary in a Black Humor novel as every movement is seen as pointless, by the terms of the philosophy.

Many Black Humor novels are written in an episodic form and may resemble a collection of short stories, or short episodes concerning a particular set of characters, rather than a novel. The episodes are independent units and can stand by themselves, having their own independent plots, settings, and sometimes even characters. These episodes can be picked out of the novel by the reader indiscriminately and read separately so that the section which makes up the end of the novel can be read, with little loss in meaning, without his having read the beginning or middle of the novel. Plots in these separate sections are self-contained and do not rely entirely on details revealed in earlier sections of the novel. These sections are usually held together into a novelistic form by a common set of characters and always by a common theme of hopelessness.

The Magic Christian is an example of an episodic, "unifyingly plotless," Black Humor novel. Each chapter is an independent unit following a recognizable pattern. This pattern and the unchanging characters are the only unifying elements holding the chapters of the novel together. Each chapter is essentially divided into two parts. The first part consists of narrative from five pages to two paragraphs in length detailing background material on the main character, Guy Grand, or part of a continuing conversation between Grand, his two elderly aunts, and a female friend of the aunts. These bits of background material and irrelevant dialogue have no connection with the
second part of each chapter, a description of some episode in which Grand has used his unknown source of wealth to make fools of the public. These separate parts in each chapter are divided each from the other by asterisks as if one part was not to be considered connected with the other. Each chapter ends with a short explanatory sentence stating that the episode described cost Grand a lot of money: "Back in New York it cost him two million to keep clear" (20, p. 35), "When the ruse was discovered, Grand had a spot of bother clearing it" (20, p. 109), "... he had already sunk plenty into the project, and just how much it cost him to keep clear in the end, is practically anyone's guess" (20, p. 133). The reason Grand acts as he does is never explained.

This reoccurring pattern of dialogue, situation, and account of expense holds the novel together into a collection of episodes rather than a collection of short stories. However, each episode is a completely separate unit, and each narration of Grand's pranks is entirely independent from all action in the next or preceding section.

Snow White (2), by Donald Barthelme, is a different type of episodic novel. The only unifying characteristics in the book are that each section uses the same characters, Snow White and her seven lovers. There is no "action" in the novel in the traditional sense of plot action. The characters never do anything that could lead to some point or conclusion. They simply exist, and their thoughts concerning Snow White and the thoughts of Snow White herself provide the only motion of the novel.

Settings in a Black Humor novel have little influence on story action, as the Black Humor philosophy justifies a universal setting.
As mentioned earlier, these novels must not isolate and rely on one location, otherwise the reader could dismiss the Black Humor by projecting freedom from despair in other locations. This insignificance of setting can be seen in several Black Humor novels. Catch-22 (11), which is set in the Mediterranean during World War II, need only be set around the military during wartime; the exact location is irrelevant. "The idea of a comic war novel is in itself paradoxical" (22, p. 859), as no war which involves human sacrifice can be called humorous. Catch-22's picture of absurdity, however, is not limited only to the military. The Saddest Summer of Samuel S (5), by Donleavy, is set in Vienna, although the cosmopolitan setting could have just as easily been Paris, Berlin, or Hong Kong. I Am Elijah Thrush (17), by Purdy, is set in New York although the story could have been placed in any large center of culture. The only advantage to the New York setting is that the absurdity of art as presented is even more highlighted when the characters who appreciate it are considered to be in the cultural center of the United States.

The general details of setting in Black Humor novels are of some significance, but the exact points are, for the most part, irrelevant. For that matter, Black Humor novels could borrow a technique from Jonathan Swift, fabricating imaginary settings to achieve the same effect, as long as these fabricated settings could be amplified to represent absurdities in the real world.

The one point of relevancy in a Black Humor novel, and that which defines it as Black Humor, is its recurring theme of absurdity. "Despite the diversity of the method in form and spirit within the
tradition of the absurd, its unitary principles revolve around the theme of an all-prevading sense of anguish at the absurdity of the human condition" (24, p. 151). It is this theme of anguish which unites these works under one banner. They do not lead to any moral, solution, goal, or conclusion. They have only one purpose, one statement: the world is absurd and meaningless. Black Humor "literature does not discover meaninglessness; from its opening moments it accepts the condition and presents it as a theme" (25, p. 3). Although some Black Humor novels may concentrate on pointing out the absurdity of money, employment, sex, society's regulations or accepted roles, they all leave the impression that not only the subject stressed but also the world in its entirety is meaningless. All techniques of characterization, plot, setting, or style serve only for this purpose.

The style of a Black Humor novel serves the author's presentation of an absurd world. Where the writer of a traditional novel may choose any style to complement his action, characters, or theme, the writer of Black Humor has only one central notion, a theme of absurdity, and chooses his style only to represent this theme.

Black Humor works are written from either an objective or subjective viewpoint, as are traditional novels. If an objective viewpoint is used, the author narrates the story from an omniscient angle presenting the facts and making no direct critical judgments about the characters or action. Black Humor works, such as Candy (19), Orpheus On Top (21), by Edward Stewart, and Malcolm (18), use this objective technique.
Other Black Humor novels, such as *Giles Goat-Boy* (1), *Second Skin* (10), by Hawkes, and *Lolita* (15), by Vladimir Nabokov, are written from a subjective point of view. The subjectivity, however, is not representative of the author's views but comes instead from one of the characters in the novel. The author "approach[es] his story from inside the consciousness of his characters. . . . The language of the characters [is] a natural expression of their personalities . . . and not that of the writer" (8, p. 369). In these books, the reader is shown the action from a third-person limited point of view. Dialogue, narration, and much monologue characterize the style of these works.

*How Much?* (3) takes advantage of both the objective and subjective viewpoints. The novel is purportedly written by a character in the story, Berney Halpern, but Halpern refers to everyone objectively, even referring to himself in the third person. *Cabot Wright Begins* (16) uses both objective and subjective narration in another way. Objective narration is used for most of the book, with a switch to the subjective in the middle of the narrative as a character gives an autobiographical account of himself.

*Snow White* (2) presents an extreme in subjective-objective variation. In this novel, viewpoint varies from chapter to chapter with no apparent pattern. One chapter gives an objective presentation on the background or lifestyle of one of the participants in the novel, while the section directly following it may be a subjective comment from one of the novel's characters on the actions of another character. This may yet be followed by a third chapter presenting stream-of-consciousness monologue by the main character concerning her observations or feelings.
Each chapter has its own originator, so that the reader cannot depend on the views presented being that of the main character. Often it is hard to distinguish exactly which character's point of view is presented. The book as a whole includes not just one character's subjective views but all the characters' subjective views, plus objective narration by the author.

In *A Singular Man*, points of view are changed throughout the novel, flowing from objective "she" to subjective "I" without break in the narration:

She stood still and tall and strange under the pines, lips apart. Eyes crinkling, Looking into the eyes of George Smith. At his lips. Nose and into the left eye and then the right. Hers with flecks of so many colors, yellow with green making a magic blue. Dripping rain drops spotting her dress. One silver slipper, one gold. How do I say now, forget it. I was kidding. Just one of those things you suddenly blurt out. Just wanted a port to be safe. And it sounds so stark and maybe even sneaky. Speak. I take it back. Right into my mouth again, down my throat and into my heart where it came from near the bottom. Let me go Miss Tomson. Let me run (6, pp. 209-210).

In this passage, the author has presented two characters to his reader, a man and a woman. First, the reader is shown the picture of the woman as she appears physically, "lips apart, eyes crinkling" looking at the man. Next, the author begins to delve minutely into these details, "Hers [eyes] with flecks of so many colors. . . ." He begins concentrating more on what the man sees in studying the woman, but still the author presents the scene from an objective viewpoint. Finally, the passage switches entirely to the subjective, "How do I say not, forget it," and presents the man's thoughts about the woman. The passage concludes with the man's thoughts near panic as he begins to feel that
he must break away from the woman. In this scene the author has taken his readers from an objective view of the characters to a subjective in-depth probing of the thoughts of one of them.

Whatever the point of view used in a Black Humor novel, the author seldom becomes philosophically above the story movement or comments personally on the action. This lack of authorial comment in Black Humor works coincides with the philosophy on which they are based. Writers of Black Humor novels only present the problems; they have no solutions. In writing traditional novels the author feels justified in presenting a character's qualifications and background, and then putting forth some narrative comment on the character's virtues and vices. A Black Humor novel, on the other hand, may fill in a character's background, but the author presents this background as if it were a factual newspaper account. If some comment is to be made concerning a character's qualities, the view is presented as a comment of one character concerning another and does not portray the author's opinion.

For an example of this authorial comment technique, here is Charles Dicken's description of one of his characters in *Bleak House*:

> He is not one of Mrs. Pardiggle's Tockahoopo Indians; he is not one of Mrs. Jellyby's lambs, being wholly unconnected with Borrio-boola-Gha; he is not softened by distance and unfamiliarity; he is not a genuine foreign-grown savage; he is an ordinary home-made creature of the common streets, only in soul a heathen. Homely filth begrimes him, homely rags are on his ignorance, the growth of English soil and climate, sinks his immortal nature lower than the beasts that perish. Stand forth Jo, in uncompromising colours. From the sole of thy foot to the crown of thy head, there is nothing interesting about thee (4, p. 485).

In this passage Dickens first describes the character as he might be viewed and considered by the other characters in the novel, then switches...
to calling forth the character as he might a Muse, "Stand forth Jo."
Dickens then announces his personal condemnation of the character,
"there is nothing interesting about thee," which is to be considered
the view of the author, and through him, what should be the view of the
rest of the characters in the novel.

Contrast Dickens with the following description of the main
caracter in Snow White. This is the only physical description given of
any character in the book.

She is a tall dark beauty containing a great many beauty
spots: one above the breast, one above the belly, one above
the knee, one above the ankle, one above the buttock, one on
the back of the neck. All of these are on the left side,
more or less in a row as you go up and down:
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The hair is black as ebony, the skin white as snow (2, p. 3).
This very stark physical description, which comprises the first page of
the novel, contains only basic external information about the character.
No information is ever given as to how the author considers Snow White.
The reader is left to form his own opinion about the worth or worth-
lessness of the character; such an opinion on the author's part would
be pointless, as the author sees no sense in detailing a description.

Many Black Humor novels seem to stress stylistic "gimmicks" as a
means to counteract what may be boring or slow plot action. Instead of
plot movement, technique is used to move the story along, and the
language must be vivid enough to keep reader interest high. The reader
moves along with the narrator or a character even though little real action may be taking place.

Second Skin consists of a combination of complete, simple sentences interspersed with single words and questions which serve to direct story movement.

But I stopped. Listened. Because the air seemed to be filled with low-flying invisible birds. Large or small I could not tell, but fast, fast and out of their senses, skimming past me from every direction on terrified steel wings and silent except for the unaccountable sharp noise of the flight itself. One dove into the snow at my feet--nothing but a sudden hole in the snow--and I stepped back from it, raised my hands against the unpredictable approach, the irregular sound of motion, the blind but somehow deliberate line of attack. Escaped homing pigeons? A covey of tiny ducks driven berserk in the cold? Eaglets? I found myself beating the air, attempting to shield my eyes and ears... and I was relieved with the first hit. It caught me just behind the ear... and still it might have been the ice-encrusted body of a small bird... I was turning around, stooping, trying and of course failing to find the body. With the second hit--quite furious, close on the first, snowball full in the face--my relief was complete and I knew that this time at least I had nothing to fear from any unnatural vengefulness of wild birds (10, pp. 86-87).

Described here are the main character's thoughts as he is hit by snowballs. While being pelted, his mind wanders to thoughts of being in the midst of a flock of "berserk" birds. The snowball barrage and the picture of "low-flying invisible birds" are not related, but the vividness of the description awakens the reader's attention, although this attention is drawn to fantasized rather than real action.

The following descriptive narration comes from The Beetle Leg, and although another of Hawkes' novels, it employs none of the single-word sentences and questions used above. The action described, however, is no less vivid and dramatic.
He pulled and the lower half of the Mandan's face followed the swing of his arm, then back again, elastic, cross-eyed, an abnormal craning of the skull to the will of its tormentor, stretched sightless over the shoulder with each plaguing timeless yawl. Leech pulled in waltz-like slow arcs, now breaking the pressures of motion to apply a series of lesser, sharp tugs which caused the Indian's head to nod obstinately up and down and one knee, wide and soft, to fold slowly backward into the privy bronze stomach (9, p. 149).

This highly descriptive scene may describe almost any sort of hard struggle between two objects; however, in the novel this colorful dramatization is used to describe a dentist pulling a tooth. This vivid narration of rather inconsequential action again demonstrates story movement through use of the picturesque.

In *Snow White* (2), Barthelme goes beyond vivid phrases and descriptive passages and appears to do away with structure altogether. The novel is made up of a collection of sections varying in length from four pages to four lines. There are no paragraphs in the book, although the first word of each section is capitalized. The form varies and includes such techniques as straight narrative, dialogue, monologue, and notes from one character to another. Occasionally, the author interjects historical facts into the narrative represented in capitalized, bold face type. At the end of "Part One," Barthelme inserts a questionnaire concerning the reader's view of the story, current political events, and other topics:

14. Do you stand up when you read? ( ) Lie down? ( ) Sit? ( )
15. In your opinion should human beings have more shoulders? ( ) Two sets of shoulders? ( ) Three? ( ) (2, p. 83)
Barthelme also liberally uses elipsis dots to suggest thinking on the part of a speaker. Sometimes it seems the author is more concerned with creating a pleasing page layout than with using the words to present plot action or characterization.

Many Black Humor novels present communications of the characters: letters, speeches, telegrams, poems, and songs. This technique is prevalent in works such as *The Saddest Summer of Samuel S* (5), *Second Skin* (10), *Giles Goat-Boy* (1), *Lolita* (15), *I Am Elijah Thrush* (17), and others. These variations on the straight prose style are either intermingled throughout the regular narration or appear at the end of a chapter as a concluding thought. Often these additions play no significant part in the action of the novel and seem to have been added only for the sake of variety.

Several Black Humor works do not follow an orderly chronology. They jump from past to future to present mentioning situations and characters at the first of the work which do not reappear until much later in the novel. The most widely known work of this type is *Catch-22* (11). In this novel, Heller uses a variation on the flash-back technique which may seem rather confusing to the reader. The narrative follows one story line concerning one set of characters and then suddenly another situation with another set of characters may be briefly mentioned. The new incident, which may seem to figure prominently in the total story, may not be mentioned again until a hundred pages later, when it may or may not be discussed in great detail. One incident treated in such a manner is Yossarian's involvement with the death of Snowden. Although it is mentioned many times in brief throughout the novel, complete
details are not supplied until twenty pages from the conclusion of the work. Frequent use of this technique causes the action to vary back and forth in time, leaving holes in the complete story line for periods throughout the narrative.

*Second Skin* (10) has the same type of confusing chronology, although it is not quite as hard to comprehend as the chronology used in *Catch-22* (11). At the beginning of the novel, the reader is told of the death of the main character's father in a one-line statement. This incident is left undescribed until a hundred pages later in the novel, when complete details are supplied. Also in the beginning of the novel, the reader is led by the flow of the conversation to believe the character narrating is the husband of the woman to whom he constantly refers. It is not until later in the book that the reader learns that the man is actually the father of the woman. Details concerning the death of the woman's husband are also supplied by means of delayed chronology, with a brief mention of the incident followed later in the narrative by a detailed explanation.

Other works seem to follow linear chronological order, but the understanding of the action is hampered through use of another technique. In *A Singular Man* (6), the main character, George Smith, fantasizes situations, making it difficult to tell what is real and a part of the plot and what is simply a part of Smith's imagination. *I Am Elijah Thrush* (17) also presents reality and unreality as equals. The reader is shown two characters, Elijah Thrush and Millicent De Frayne, and told they are both elderly. However, during the narrative, other characters comment on the youthful appearance of these characters,
and it appears that somehow they are, at times, magically transported backwards in age. They are referred to as being both aged and grotesque, young and beautiful.

One item which notably sets Black Humor novels apart from most traditional novels is that Black Humor works seldom end with a completion of action. There are no conclusions to these novels, as the Black Humor philosophy sees no finales in life. Black Humor novels represent a world which is absurd in the past, present, and future. There is no point to the world, as far as Black Humor is concerned; therefore, Black Humor novels can come to no point or stopping place. Instead of a conclusion, the characters simply continue in their absurd ways, leaving the impression that they will always continue as such. Characters in Black Humor novels seldom die, as to die would be an end of sorts, although the Black Humor philosophy sees dying as no solution. For the most part, the characters continue living their stale lives, reaching no conclusions, gaining no salvation through maturity, and finding no hope for a brighter future. They find no ultimate meaning to their lives, as Black Humor sees no meaning. If the characters are confused throughout the novel, they are usually still confused at its conclusion. If the situations presented were cold and emotionless, they seldom change. No solution or hope is found in Black Humor works.

For example, *How Much?* (3) concludes with the same emotionless pattern maintained throughout the novel, with one of the main characters hurrying to a store sale oblivious of her chauffeur, who is trying to inform her that her mother has died. *The Loved One* (23), by Evelyn Waugh, ends with the main character sitting contentedly by the crematory
fire of the remains of a girl with whom he has been involved, thinking of returning to his native country with a "great, shapeless chunk of experience" (23, p. 163). His emotions are as undisturbed by either the death of the girl or his own past experiences at the conclusion of the novel as at its beginning. (Although The Loved One is not written by an American author, it exemplifies many points presented in this thesis. It has an American setting, and its characters, although steeped in British custom, are in American surroundings and adapt themselves accordingly.) The Magic Christian (20) concludes describing a new, outrageous phenomenon taking place around the city, leaving the reader assured that Guy Grand is again "making things hot" for people and will continue doing so into eternity. Candy (19) also ends in a continuing pattern with the heroine in yet another sexual exploit, this time with her father.

One of the few Black Humor works that can be said to end positively--from a Black Humor perspective only--is Giles Goat-Boy (1). At the conclusion of this novel, the main character realizes the absurdities and pointlessness of the world and becomes resigned to these facts. This, according to Black Humor philosophy, is the only way to approach and accept life.
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CHAPTER III

CHARACTERIZATION IN BLACK HUMOR NOVELS

The effectiveness of a Black Humor novel often depends on its presentation of characters. The thought processes of a major character are often the only "action" in these novels. Although the types of characters used in Black Humor novels vary as greatly as does the style used to present them, many fall into discernible classifications.

The main character, or "hero," in Black Humor novels is not at all the "hero" of traditional literature. A traditional literary hero was "a purely social creation . . . [representing] a socially approved norm" (9, p. xii). He was strong, masculine (or feminine), forceful, courageous, and conscientious. He was to be first admired and then imitated as an exemplary character. He represented what was commonly considered to be acceptable and admirable social behavior, and his life-style "expressed firmly and clearly what the majority of people meant by a good or wholesome life" (9, p. xiii). The character Jane Eyre is a good example of this type of traditionally feminine, wholesome, and courageous hero. As literature progressed, the hero became more human in his weaknesses and faults but still possessed admirable, imitable qualities and was considered to fall within the socially accepted view of wholesome behavior. For example, the character Huckleberry Finn, although often devilish and less than exemplary, wins the reader's admiration and approval through his selfless acts and boyish appeal.
Later literature developed the idea of the "anti-hero" out of a dissatisfaction with life and loss of the idea that life is always good. Later novelists "finding that the world about them provided . . . no satisfying pattern for living . . . could not see in that social world's hero a satisfying symbol of the good life" (9, p. xxix). Therefore, they developed the anti-hero, a figure who attempted to establish himself in a world found to be less than admirable. This anti-hero was "a much less tidy and comfortable concept than the social hero since--being deprived of social sanctions and definitions--he [was] always trying to define himself, to find his own sanctions" (9, p. xxix). As this new form of hero no longer had a socially approved, wholesome lifestyle to follow, he was "always represented as groping, puzzled, cross, mocking, frustrated, isolated in his manful or blundering attempts to establish his own personal suprasocial codes" (9, p. xxix). Holden Caulfield, in The Catcher in the Rye, is such an anti-hero. Throughout the novel, Caulfield is seen clashing with society while searching for a place for himself in what he finds to be a less than admirable world.

In Black Humor novels, there is no need to consider life as either good or bad. There is no need to search for "social definition" or identity. Black Humor sees life as a meaningless and purposeless void. Therefore the main character in a Black Humor novel is a "non-hero," a character whose existence represents no "wholesome lifestyle" and no "suprasocial code." These terms mean nothing in the Black Humor philosophy, as the philosophy views life not in terms of social patterns, but in terms of haphazard happenings. The non-hero is a "hero of negative action" (6, p. 177). His every action is pointless and the world
around him absurd. He is often presented as being weak, conniving, stupid, perverted, or just obnoxious. He is unworthy of admiration, imitation, or identification. He represents some of the worst in life and serves to point up the Black Humor view of a world empty of hope. Although the non-hero may appear in other types of literary works, his use in Black Humor works is the rule and not the exception.

One type of absurd and pointless non-hero prevalently used in Black Humor novels is a sexual deviate. Of this type, an older character with an obsession for a prepubescent child is often seen. One such famous Black Humor novel, Lolita, has lent its name to the common description of this malady, the Lolita Complex. The novel's main character, Humbert Humbert, is a very well educated, older man whose object of affection is a not too bright, very immature twelve-year-old girl. What he sees with a loving, worshipful admiration is in reality nothing but a very awkward, sometimes offensive little girl. With Humbert as narrator, Nabokov presents this infatuation with florid descriptions. The result is a highlighting of the absurdity of Humbert's attraction:

She wore a plaid shirt, blue jeans and sneakers. Every movement she made in the dappled sun plucked at the most secret and sensitive chord of my abject body. After a while she sat down next to me on the lower step of the back porch and began to pick up the pebbles between her feet ... and chuck them at a can. Ping. You can't a second time--you can't hit it--this is agony--a second time. Ping. Marvelous skin--oh, marvelous: tender and tanned, not the least blemish... And the little bone twitching at the side of her dust-powdered ankle (8, p. 43).

Humbert speaks of Lolita as both a girl and a woman, "dust-powdered ankle" might refer to both a child's ankle covered with dust from dirt and a woman's ankle covered with perfumed powder. As he sits next to
her, her every action is watched with true devotion. The reader, on the other hand, should see through Humbert's own description the ridiculousness of the scene, realizing that Humbert's overpowering admiration is actually for a little girl in "a plaid shirt, blue jeans and sneakers," a costume not normally considered to be provocative.

Another Black Humor character whose "fatherly" love for a younger girl becomes an obsession is Skipper in Second Skin (6). Skipper allows his daughter to use him as the butt of all her jokes and tantrums and seems more like an indulgent husband than father. In I Am Elijah Thrush, the old-young love relationship is seen in two males: an older character is "hopelessly in love" with his great grandson. The older character stands in front of a window of an asylum, where the great-grandson is kept locked away from his great-grandfather, acting like a Spanish serenader, while the mute great-grandson answers with bird imitations (11, p. 25).

Other sexually abnormal characters range from rapists to masochists. As stated earlier, these character types may appear in traditional novels, but they appear frequently in Black Humor works. Orpheus On Top (16) contains homosexual, as well as heterosexual, relationships between major and minor characters. I Am Elijah Thrush (11) presents homosexual relationships as well as a masochistic attachment one character has for a Golden Eagle. Cabot Wright Begins (10) concerns a main character who is a retired rapist. Snow White (2) is a fairy tale expanded into a real-world presentation showing the legendary innocent living with seven men whom she controls through a system of sexual permissiveness and denial.
Types of Characters in Black Humor Novels

Basically, major characters in Black Humor novels can be divided into four classifications, all representative of a pointless world. The first two types are directly opposed, and one could be considered the victim of the other. The first type is the ignorant innocent who has no control over his own destiny and to whom everything bad happens. This type's opposite is the cynical opportunist who utilizes people and events to his best advantage, oblivious of the consequences. The third and fourth types of characters are also opposites. The third type accepts the Black Humor philosophy and observes and endures the absurdities of the world undisturbed. In contrast to the third type, the fourth type is constantly seeking to understand and being confused by the absurdities around him.

The innocent Black Humor character fails in everything he attempts. He fails in affairs with the opposite sex, in financial dealings, in his job, and in his attempts to cope with the rest of the world. He is weak, cowardly, uncommunicative, and frequently just stupid. Life's intricacies escape him, and he stumbles through a daily routine of being duped, ignored, and mistreated.

The character Malcolm, in the book of the same name, is considered as a social commodity by the other characters in the novel. As a young boy, he is discovered sitting on a bench in front of a hotel doing nothing. His overdependence on his father has made him incapable of independent action of any sort after his father's departure. Another character, a "famous astrologer," on seeing Malcolm's condition, decides Malcolm has no right to do nothing and should be introduced to
society. Malcolm is given a series of addresses. He goes from one address to another, and in spite of his resulting confusion becomes a social phenomenon. At the end of the novel, Malcolm is still incapable of making an independent decision and is sought after by the other characters simply as a social oddity, "I discovered him, and I claim him" (12, p. 106). Malcolm is not considered by other characters as an adolescent needing guidance, but as if he were a mechanical invention with special talent, social tact, or endearing quality. Malcolm does not know what to do with all the social prominence he receives, and his common response on being involved in emotional incidents or in making decisions is to fall asleep.

Jenny, the grandmother in *How Much?* (3), is another example of this innocent character type. She is accepted into her daughter's household because of a vague moral obligation the family feels toward her. Nonetheless, Jenny is treated as an aged nuisance while family members scurry around in pursuit of and concern for money and possessions. Jenny is treated as an ignorant child, made to live in a closet, confined in an old folks' home (where she is manipulated by the other occupants), and in the end forced to seek out death as a convenience to others.

Candy, in the book of the same name (14), is another character who is used because of her own ignorance. She jumps from one sexual encounter to another, exploited by every male with whom she comes in contact, with all such liaisons justified by her slogan, "They need me." She is duped and controlled by all but is completely unconscious of others' maneuvering of her. Throughout the novel she continues in her
wide-eyed ignorance, and the reader can assume she will continue in this ignorance well after the narrative has been concluded.

The innocent character type is pathetic, unaware, and ridiculous. He is absurd in his confrontations, inadequate in his abilities, and dull-witted in his dealings with other people and events. He has no strength to deal with life and as a result is life's victim.

The second type of character, unlike the innocent type, takes advantage of people and events ruthlessly instead of allowing those elements to take advantage of him. He is acutely aware of his surroundings and uses them to his best advantage. He is on top of every situation, and in reaching that position of dominance, he utilizes and crushes everything in his path, a feat which he performs without the least feeling of guilt. In the performance of these sometimes heartless maneuvers, he has no ulterior motive or hidden desire to injure others. This malevolent utilization of people and events seems to have no ultimate purpose. This action only marks the character's way of dealing with life.

The epitome of this type of character is "The Magic Christian," Guy Grand. Grand likes to "make it hot" (15, p. 10) for people. For him, life is a rich man's playpen; he uses other people's foolishness as entertainment for himself. He creates absurd situations which cause people to grapple over his money, and simply watches these acts. The author offers no rationale behind either the creation of the situation or Grand's reaction. In one incident, Grand establishes a heated vat of money and animal excrement on a busy street in a big city. He advertises it with a sign reading "FREE $ HERE" (15, p. 25) and enjoys
watching the chaos that ensues. In another situation, Grand appears at a high-society Madison Square Garden thoroughbred dog show with a dangerous panther as an entry (15, p. 42). Concurrent with this type of entertainment, Grand carries on a meaningless running dialogue with his old aunts and their friend, who seem unaware of Grand's eccentricities.

In Blue Movie (13), also by Southern, a "famous director" produces an artful pornographic movie. The director is unaware of the conflicts and trials endured by the persons around him and is totally oblivious to such incidents as a film-related death of a young actress. His only objective is to create his absurd movie, and he considers the concerns of all others involved irrelevant.

Alex Underland, in Orpheus On Top, is completely oblivious to the desires and feelings of those around him unless such concern benefits him. His involvements with women are motivated by his desires to get whatever he can from them. One such involvement concerns the death of a girl with whom Underland has been living. While in a state of total exhaustion from an abortion forced upon her by Underland, she drives Underland, who lies hidden in her car, past the borders of various countries, using her passport as their admission paper. At one border point she is stopped for the lack of one paper, pushed around by border guards, and finally dies clinging to a wire fence separating her from Underland. "Her fingers gripped the mesh above his and her nails brushed his knuckles. He resisted the impulse to move his hand. . . . Her breath was stronger than the wind from the ocean. He turned his face away, only a degree" (16, p. 183). Guilt-free and relieved of
association with the dead girl, Underland leaves the scene, but not before reaching through the fence and taking the dead girl's passport.

Milo Minderbinder in *Catch-22* is another ruthless, unconcerned character. While fighting in a world war, Milo establishes a profit-making business enterprise by creating a system of trade for products between his comrades and any other interested and useful party, including the enemy. The main objective is to make Minderbinder rich. His unique plan creates such situations as the commissioning of his own troops to bomb themselves as part of a business association with the enemy (7, p. 253) and the replacement of a much needed syrette of morphine in a first aid kit with a note reading "What's good for M & M Enterprises is good for the country" (7, p. 426). Throughout the novel, Minderbinder expresses the belief that he performs his deeds for the good of his fellow man, and, therefore, harbors not the slightest guilt.

This type of Black Humor character's strength in withstanding the meaningless pressures of the world arises from his indifference. He stands apart from the absurdities by becoming oblivious to the needs and suffering of others around him, while, at the same time, capitalizing on the maladies of his fellows to take advantage of situations.

The third type of character in a Black Humor novel is a practitioner of the Black Humor philosophy. The character is shown to be at ease with his absurd surroundings and apathetic to everything. His complacency may have been derived from a long fruitless struggle with the absurdities of life, which the reader may be made aware of by flashbacks throughout the novel, or may just exist with no explanation. Whatever the origins of the state, this character is perfectly aware of
the pointlessness of life but has come to disregard such pointlessness, allowing life to utilize him, ignore him, or whatever, with little concern.

Cabot Wright, a retired rapist in Cabot Wright Begins, is a complacent character type. Wright's transition to complacency is revealed through narrative flashbacks. The reader is shown Wright's conversion, through psychotherapy, to his profession as a rapist, his successful career as a criminal, his capture and conviction, and finally the transformation to the complacent figure presented in the novel. According to Wright, many writers had tried to write the story of his life, but Wright, due to his apathetic state of mind, had such a hard time remembering the details of his past exploits that writers soon got bored with the lack of sensual incidents and violence and left for brighter fields. As a complacent figure, Wright is an old man with a bad memory, a hearing aid, a giggle, and numerous clocks by which he measures his own heartbeat. His only excuse for his past exploits as a rapist is "I fell into the part out of there being nothing better to do" (10, p. 96).

In The Loved One (17), Dennis Barlow is a failed poet, now an employee of "The Happier Hunting Ground," a mortuary for animals. Barlow has become complacent with his career as animal undertaker, and his only interest lies in the intricacies of a fancier mortuary. Life holds no fascination for him, and death holds no mystery. He is incapable of love and is so lackadaisical toward his own emotions that he sees no distinction between the cremation of a goat and the cremation of a girl with whom he has been involved.
In *A Singular Man* (5), George Smith complacently rides around in his chauffeur-driven car, building himself a tomb, more or less oblivious to everything around him, even though his involvements include impregnating his secretary and the death of his girl friend. (He acknowledges the latter with a wave of his hand [5, p. 398]). His concern is aroused only by notes he receives in the mail from an anonymous person or persons. The origin and purpose of these notes are kept secret from the reader as well as Smith.

These characters accept life as absurd and see no sense in struggling to obtain order or joy. They are insensitive and lack concern for others. They are seen as accepting whatever happens as an unquestionable aspect of a pointless world.

The last type of character is simply confused. He tries in vain to find some purpose and meaning in the absurdities which surround him, but the world's complexities escape him and events happen around him and to him with which he cannot come to terms. This character's role is always to seek and never to find the answers he assumes must be at the heart of life's mysteries. The other three character types deal with life in one way or another; the innocent character has his ignorance, the utilizer type uses his insensibility, and the complacent character has his indifference. The confused character, however, seeks an explanation for the absurdities around him, and since the Black Humor philosophy insists that no explanation exists, this type is doomed to dissatisfaction and unhappiness in his vain attempts to deal with life.

In *Catch-22*, Yossarian is a confused seeker of explanations to life's absurdities. Things happen which seem to him to be cruel and
unnecessary. At the end of his walk through the back streets of Rome, described earlier, he finds a comrade who has raped and killed a girl. Yossarian is unable to accept his comrade's excuse for the event. (He only raped the girl once [7, p. 408]). In another incident, Yossarian is forced into playing the role of a dying soldier, who in reality had already died, for the benefit of the soldier's relatives who had "traveled all the way from New York to see a dying soldier." When Yossarian protests he is not the soldier the relatives have come to see, he is told "they'll have to take what they can get" (7, p. 181). Every time Yossarian asks why something must be the way it is, he is presented with the rule, "Catch-22," which states "things are the way they are."

In Giles Goat-Boy (1), Giles spends seven-eighths of the long book as a confused character. The son of a computer, raised as a goat, he is convinced that his mission is to save the world. Every seemingly helpful action and philosophical thought only succeeds in causing confusion and turning the people he tries to help against him. Giles finally satisfies himself, however, when at the conclusion of the narration he realizes and accepts the fact that the world is absurd and meaningless or, in other words, when he becomes a complacent figure of the third character type.

The confused Black Humor character represents a character in revolt against the Black Humor world. He tries in vain to search out some meaning in a meaningless world and as a result becomes frustrated and discouraged. It is only when this character comes to understand, like
Giles (1), that there is no point to the world and that contentedness can only be found in the acceptance of "Catch-22" that he can be satisfied with his life's condition.
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CHAPTER IV

BLACK HUMOR AND TRADITIONALLY FORBIDDEN SUBJECTS

The Black Humor philosophy underscores the absurdities and pointlessness of the world, and Black Humor novels, in order to develop this same point, must be believable. If the reality presented in a Black Humor novel were too fantasized, the reader would dismiss the inherent Black Humor philosophy as unrealistic. However, according to the basic philosophy, presenting a realistic view of the world from the perspective of Black Humor is no problem. This point is well expressed by Paul Levine in an article reviewing contemporary American fiction. "The actuality is continually outdoing our [writers of Black Humor] talents, and the culture tosses up figures daily that are the envy of any novelist" (9, p. 508). A good example of the similarity between the real world and Black Humor fiction is an article, "Twirling at Ole Miss," by Terry Southern, author of three Black Humor novels. In this article, Southern interviews several girls participating in the Dixie National Baton Twirling Institute at the University of Mississippi. The girls are so engrossed in their craft that they see it in professional terms as an all-encompassing way of life and a means by which to obtain social success. These girls seem to measure success in their lives in terms of success in the baton twirling "profession," and they regard their dexterity with a metal stick as a very serious matter. Although the girls view their baton twirling as essential, most of the
real world would view it as irrelevant. From a Black Humor perspective measuring one's success in terms of baton twirling is as relevant as judging one's success by business achievements or monetary gain. As noted by William Zinsser in an article on American humor, "Ordinarily Terry Southern is one of the most far-out of our black humorists, but in this case he had to come back in, to retreat into mere reporting. In effect he is saying, 'You guys have got me beat for fantastic material..." (21, p. 120). Although this article is factual reporting, its content seems almost too unrealistic to believe. By making fiction appear as fact, Southern and other writers of Black Humor novels only seem to present the facts in a reportorial account of their perception of the real world.

Writing fiction to resemble fact may appear to be closely aligned with the writing of traditional novelists who, for the most part, also write realistically. The one big difference is that Black Humor novelists hold nothing as a forbidden subject not to be mentioned. The traditional novelist writes realistically, yet with social taste. He finds it inappropriate to mention or dwell on such subjects as sex, the details of death, and the natural functions of the body. His books are carefully organized to avoid subjects like obscenity, the worthlessness of money and the struggle for money, and a negative view of religion. These are twentieth century man's "taboos." To use or abuse any of these subjects would brand the traditional novelist as a writer of pornography or "cheap" books. The reason for this avoidance of topics is that the public has been instructed to consider as in "poor taste" discussion of certain topics. The mention of these subjects in
public causes either scorn or an embarrassed titter. In reviewing past humor it is found that "most of the topics which enlisted laughter from our parents were based on major no-no's [subjects not to be mentioned in public]" (10, p. 218). Society has certain acceptable patterns of social behavior and any deviation from the norm, either by an actual person or by a character in a novel, is unacceptable.

Although a move toward naturalism has appeared in literature, this move has not presented reality in the same tone as now viewed by Black Humor. The idea behind naturalism was to present natural human functions bluntly without the frills and pretenses of the traditional novel. Black Humor takes these traditional literary taboos one step further: it presents them, emphasizes them, glorifies them, and then laughs at them. It is this emphasis on the "forbidden" and the humor derived from it that differentiates Black Humor from "naturalism."

The writer of Black Humor writes with these very taboos as his subjects. To him nothing is sacred--rather, everything is absurd. It is pointless to forbid certain topics for discussion, and such a guise is simply another part of the absurdity Black Humor philosophy delineates. As a result, some of the most prevalent topics in Black Humor novels are sex, bathroom scenes, money, religion, and death, their absurdity emphasized and touched with laughter. Words such as "love" and "compassion" are useless in Black Humor philosophy, which sees no meaning, but rather humor in them. Stories are told with extreme violence and gore; characters lack emotion and consideration for others. What appears to be logical in Black Humor works is twisted illogically, as befits an irrational world. All a writer of Black Humor need do,
according to the philosophy on which his work is based, is examine and report a part of the world around him: a realistic part with no beginning or end, no rhyme or reason, no point or purpose.

The Sexual Taboo

Black Humor finds sex as a very real and absurd part of the real world. In traditional novels, the subject of the sexual act between man and woman is not considered, but instead the word "love" is used to indicate something above lust. Society itself admits the existence of the sexual act, but with the exception of prostitution and the unclear term "free love," both held in the lowest esteem, society insists on a ritual of seduction before sex is acceptable. This seduction binds ties between sexual partners, whether those ties be as loose as a "toss in the hay" after a dinner date or as formal as an affair between "lovers." The move toward naturalism in literature allowed for sexual bluntness but still "love" was respected. In Black Humor novels, however, "love" has no meaning, and sex is an act carried out only for physical satisfaction or personal gain. Seduction is considered a humorous aspect of an absurd world. Black Humor novels simply present sex as a fact of life.

Candy (16) is one of the best Black Humor novels dealing with the absurdities of society's sexual conventions. The novel itself has been classed as pornography by many. (The movie adapted from the novel was rated "X.") Actually, Candy presents all of the procedures involved in society's acceptable sexual seduction and reveals their absurdity. The novel resembles Voltaire's Candide (19), substituting Candy's "he needs
Candy has sex with her family's Mexican gardener to spite her father by having sex with a member of a minority race. She takes on a Greenwich Village hunchback to prove to him that she isn't above him simply because of his deformity:

How he wants me! she thought. Well it's my own fault, darn it! And she tried to imagine the raging lust that the hunchback felt for her as she touched her curls lightly. Then she cast a last glimpse at herself in the glass, blushing at her own loveliness, and trembling slightly at the very secret notion of this beauty-and-beast sacrifice, she went back into the bedroom (16, p. 145).

She is almost successfully seduced by her favorite professor to further her education and taught "Cosmic Rhythm" by "the most spiritually advanced person she had met" (16, p. 182), as a means to spiritual advancement and sex. She is molested by a physician in the performance of his job and used by police officers. At the conclusion of the novel, she is physically caught between the nose of a statue of Buddha, beside which she had been meditating, and the genitals of a dung-covered holy man who turns out to be her father (16, p. 220). Through all these exploits, Candy has nothing but noble ideas in her mostly empty head and feels herself spiritually above all the commotion of sex for sex's sake. (Black Humor philosophy states that society does the same thing when it hides sex behind the word "love.") However, others around her look on Candy as a sex object and think only of how best to seduce her or of how strange it is that she is so "easy."

Another novel by Southern, Blue Movie, presents the absurd situation of a noted movie director and famous film stars combining to
produce a stag film "genuinely erotic and beautiful" (15, p. 31). Parties are given where sex is a group project assisted by exotic rooms and large mirrors. The mirrors are connected to outer rooms equipped with one-way glass, cameras, and microphones. An adversary of the group is pacified by two girls in the back of an ambulance on the way from the airport to the movie studio, and an actress is judged by the number of times she has "gone down."

In *Orpheus On Top*, Underland uses his sexual prowess to assure himself of a roof over his head, food in his stomach, and money in his pocket. In one episode he goes to bed with a dismembered countess who is all woman except for the loss of both her legs, one eye, all her teeth, her hair, and her breasts:

One spiderweb caught his neck and the other his thigh. She arched against him, and he felt the ghost of rhythm. He acquiesced to it, held his watch in front of his eyes, and tried to read the phosphorescent dial.

After a rattle that passed for orgasm, she put her head against his shoulder and dozed off. He held her until her breathing became like sandpaper on stone, and then he dis-engaged himself... He got out of bed, stole the six hundred she had in her purse, and quietly left the apartment (18, p. 139).

Alex appears to be all sexual concentration and concern to the countess while secretly reading his watch. He is acquiescing to society's rules of seduction and sexual behavior while furthering his own aims. At the end of the act, he indifferently steals money from the countess and departs.

*Skipper in Second Skin* is also concerned with sex, but his role at the end of the novel is less than admirable. He is "much esteemed as the man who inseminates the cows" (7, p. 47), and he enjoys many
contented days hard at work surrounded by a crowd of children and old people. He turns his sexual attention not to the seduction of women, but to the seduction of cows, by whom, it must be said, he is held in high regard.

Almost every Black Humor work has one sexual exploit or seductive encounter between a male and female. Snow White (2) is involved with her seven men, Samuel S. (4) has several sexual affairs, Lolita (11) revolves around the sexual fascination of an older man for a young girl, Cabot Wright (12) is a retired rapist, Millicent De Frayne (13) keeps her youth by extracting semen with a siphon from young men, Giles (1) both in his role as a goat and in his role of saviour of the nation has sexual adventures, and even innocent Malcolm (14) becomes involved with a singer who makes him her fourth or fifth husband.

These Black Humor sexual encounters make a farce of society's seemingly sacred ritual of sex and love. No honest, socially approved emotion is needed by these characters, who realize or utilize the absurdities of the sexual game.

Black Humor's Fascination With Bathroom Scenes

Writers of Black Humor novels seem to have a fascination with the anus and the processes of defecation. This quite natural body function has long been disregarded by most traditional novelists, who, following the dictates of "good taste," consider it a forbidden subject. Writers of Black Humor find this overlooking of a quite common occurrence absurd, and so use the bathroom image often in their writing. Many revelatory scenes in Black Humor novels take place in the vicinity of a
lavatory. Lives are changed and dreams shattered with the absurd image of the flush of a toilet.

Candy (16) is sexually confronted while standing on the seat of a toilet and being given a physical examination by her doctor. One of Underland's plays, in *Orpheus On Top*, is titled "The Latrine," and in it a character flushes himself down a toilet during a monologue of a woman who has lived in a bathroom for eighty-three years (18, p. 229). Underland is also forced to listen to a conversation in a bathroom in which he is told another character's life story and future plans and learns of his own wife's abortion at the hands of Underland's father. (The scene is very graphic, with stall sketches of male and female genitals described and a background sound of urination and flushing toilets.)

*Second Skin* employs an image of a lavatory throughout the novel. The main character, Skipper, learns of another inhabitant in the house where he is staying through the appearance of a black brassiere "hanging in the john upstairs" (7, p. 65). A creaky old elevator smells like a flooded lavatory (7, p. 151). A meal is prepared "on a wobbling card table squeezed into the dirty porcelain lavatory of our cheap hotel" (7, p. 28). But the most horrifying, yet absurd, picture in the novel is the image of Skipper as a young boy sitting outside his family's lavatory door listening to his father commit suicide.

"Papa," I cried, "No, Papa. Please..."
"I shall do it, Edward, I tell you. 'See if I don't..."...

And crouching at the keyhole of the lavatory door, soft little hands cupped on soft fat knees and hot, desperate hopeful, suddenly inspired: "Wait, Papa, wait, I will play for you, poor Papa."...
... Was he caught off guard? Uncertain? Or stricken even more deeply with despair, sitting on the old brown wooden toilet seat with vacant eyes and pure white boneless mortician's hands clasped vacantly between his knees... 

... I played my cello to him and later fished from the trembling cupfuls of water in the bottom of the toilet bowl the little unused bullet which was companion to the one he fired (7, pp. 158, 7).

Although a tragic scene, the idea of a man sitting on a toilet seat committing suicide is comic. A lavatory toilet is not considered a usual place for a death scene, and the reader can well imagine the feelings of the boy Skipper after this episode each time it was necessary to use the lavatory.

Black Humor bathroom scenes point up yet another absurd facet of society's forbidden ground. The writers of Black Humor who created the scenes described above could have placed the action in any other setting without loss of plot detail. Instead, the scenes were portrayed in or connected to bathrooms, adding another absurd element to the action and humorously sacrificing a "forbidden subject."

Black Humor's Concern With Money

Writers of Black Humor are highly concerned with money, because the world seems to rate money and its acquisition so highly as a purpose of life. Writers of Black Humor novels are fascinated by the power of the dollar and the control over people's thoughts and actions money can bring. Characters in Black Humor works are constantly seeking new and easier routes to obtain money, or if they already have an abundant amount, finding more ways to use it in a ridiculous manner.
The Black Humor novel *How Much?* is concerned with, as its title suggests, the question "how much is it going to cost?" The novel concerns the buying power of money and the inadequacies felt because of lack of it. Mrs. Halpern, the mother in the novel, is literally obsessed with the thought of what can be bought. She hurries from sale to sale buying things simply because they are great bargains.

... a sale like this, as the ad says, is the chance of a lifetime and life is short.... Her eyes turn to the polished glass door. A tall young man approaches. His fingers fasten to the chromium latch.... She tenses--thirty seconds--as if preparing for an orgasm--ten. The fingers squeeze. The door opens. Go!

A hundred customers rush ahead of her. She stands in front of the crowded counter screaming "How much?" ... if she buys three, she'll lose out on the special. "Four," she cries, affirming her faith in the future.... "Four for $1.99, right" (3, pp. 48-49)?

Mrs. Halpern's spending becomes a religion to her, and she worships the power of money as she might a god. She considers her spending "a duty, a sacred obligation" (3, p. 59). She is oblivious to everything else including the laments of her husband as he pays the bills and the sorrows of her mother, who has become old, forgotten, and inconvenient. In fact, the family only considers the grandmother as another bill to be paid, and, as Mr. Halpern tells his wife, "if I have to shell out more for her ... that means less for you" (3, p. 59). Even the grandmother, locked away in an old folks' home, is not free from worries about money. She is told by the other inmates that if she wants to be taken care of adequately she had better tip the help well.

Underland (18) comes out "On Top" by financially wheeling and dealing through a variety of romances, friendships, and career choices. His main concern is to better himself financially, and the other
characters around him have no use for him until he does. His wife finds him a bore and deserts him when he is a poor starving medical student but returns to try to recapture him when he becomes a successful playwright and theatrical agent. His aunt, who raised him, considers him worthless until she can make money from his plays. Alex lives with a European girl, watches her work ten hours a day to support him, goes to bed with a deformed countess to steal her money, and has an affair with the boss' daughter and winds up controlling the firm after the daughter goes into a "schizoid depression" and kills her father and the woman who may have been Alex's mother.

George Smith (5) and Guy Grand (17) are two men for whom money is no problem. They are both independently wealthy, although the reader is never told where either obtained his money. Instead of seeking money, the two waste it in absurd ways. Smith spends his money to build himself a lavish tomb containing such embellishments as plumbing, air conditioning, elevators to raise the casket, and other "modern innovations." He also rides through town with a siren in his limousine going full blast scattering people left and right before his speeding auto. "Police always salute. Think I'm the chief. Chief thinks I'm the commissioner. Commissioner thinks I'm the mayor. Mayor thinks I'm the governor. That's how God was made. Head of heaven" (5, p. 349). Smith also has a bit of fun throwing off a balcony money which spreads among the avaricious public.

[The police captain] said it was a crying shame to see the human teeth marks on some victims and a sad comment on people's greed that hardly a note survived intact, and the only ones to gain were the pickpockets who swarmed to the neighborhood and
had a field day. Three income tax inspectors were also in evidence in the area but refused comment (5, pp. 303-304).

Although Smith was not concerned about the money, it seems that other people were. From the viewpoint of Smith and the Black Humor philosophy, the action of the people in the free-for-all was only another ordinary occurrence of an absurd world.

The Magic Christian details Grand's attempts to entertain himself through others' grappling over his money. Grand is described as completely oblivious to the bedlam and destruction each of his incidents causes, and one could say that his knowledge of the absurdity of money causes him to enjoy the scenes he creates even more.

These money related episodes demonstrate the pointlessness of seeking money as an objective in life. The characters portrayed as lacking money believe that if only they were rich they would be "happy," and as a result they rob, hate, and push aside others in their absurd quest for what they consider to be the answer to all things. In reality, they only succeed in making absurd fools of themselves by seeking financial gain and believing they can solve all their problems by obtaining wealth. On the other hand, the characters who do have money exemplify what the ones without wealth are trying to achieve. These are unhappy men indifferent to their wealth and the greed of others around them. They have achieved what the others are fighting for, yet they are no more satisfied, less absurd, or knowledgeable of the world's purpose than the others.
Black Humor's Use of Violence

The writer of Black Humor presents a realistic picture of violence and gore, as is presented in naturalistic works, but infers that this brutality is both unnecessary and pointless.

I Am Elijah Thrush presents a situation which is both grotesque and absurd. One of the main characters, Albert Peggs, is in love with a Golden Eagle which requires living flesh to sustain it. "Rather than lose him, I [Peggs] became his living host. . . . There was no pain like it . . . but there was no pleasure so great either" (13, p. 97). That a person should love a bird with such intensity is ridiculous enough, but that he should allow this creature to feed off his body is even beyond absurdity.

In Catch-22, Heller uses violence and descriptive gore to heighten the feeling of absurdity of events both connected to wartime incidents and even those unconnected. Heller's description of Snowden's wound, "... yawning, raw, melon-shaped hole as big as a football in the outside of his thigh, the unsevered, blood-soaked muscle fibers inside pulsating weirdly like blind things with lives of their own, the oval, naked wound that was almost a foot long . . ." (8, pp. 325-326) intensifies Yossarian's and the reader's horror at the scene and their knowledge that it was derived from, as Yossarian put it, the "preposterous madness [of floating] in thin air two miles high on an inch or two of metal, sustained from death by the meager skill and intelligence of two vapid strangers" (8, p. 325), one of whom causes the plane to fly directly into flak, causing the injury to Snowden. In another incident, a soldier named Kid Sampson, while standing on a raft
in the ocean, is sliced in half by a friend flying low in an airplane as a joke.

... and then there were just Kid Sampson's two pale, skinny legs, still joined by strings somehow at the bloody truncated hips, standing stock-still on the raft for what seemed a full minute or two before they toppled over backward into the water finally with a faint, echoing splash and turned completely upside down so that only the grotesque toes and the plaster-white soles of Kid Sampson's feet remained in view (8, p. 331).

While those watching on the shore:

... scampered for their things in panic, ... looking askance at each gentle, knee-high wave bubbling in as though some ugly, red grisly organ like a liver or a lung might come washing right up against them ... Kid Sampson had rained all over (8, p. 332).

The pointlessness of the non-war-related event and the self-concerned reaction of those viewing the incident highlight the absurdity of the necessity for the violence and others' reaction to it. The reaction of the onlookers in escaping parts of the body as if touch by them meant instant death is both absurd and pointless.

In The Beetle Leg, Hawkes unhesitatingly describes such things as the cutting and draining of a snake-bite wound, the violent, forceful pulling of teeth by a sadistic doctor, and the discovery of a dead infant:

He lifted the huckleberry pole and there, biting the hook, swung the heavy body of a baby that had been dropped, searched for, and lost in the flood. The eyes slept on either side of the fish line and a point of the barb protruded near the nose stopped with silt. It turned slowly around and around on the end of the wet string that cut in half its forehead ... . . . The white stomach hung full with all it had swallowed (6, p. 132).

The same event could have been described by Hawkes as a dead baby washed up on shore in a much more preserved state, but instead the event was
described in terms of the realistic gruesome and cruel side of life. The needlessness of the scene is further amplified by the discoverer of the dead infant placing the body again in the stream, analogous to returning a fish smaller than the legal limit, and complacently sitting back again under the trees as if nothing had occurred.

These violent and gruesome descriptive episodes serve the writer of Black Humor in his attempt to present all sides of life as absurd. He does not avoid these topics in fear of reader rejection of the horror presented.

**Emotionless Characterizations**

Black Humor characters are generally apathetic, emotionless creatures. The Black Humor writer sees love, hate, compassion, and other human emotions as a meaningless waste of effort. They are viewed as false escapes on which people become dependent in an effort to impart some meaning to a meaningless world. There is no point in caring for others in a pointless world in which nothing matters, not even interaction between people.

Both George Smith, *A Singular Man*, and Underland, *Orpheus On Top*, impregnate a woman with whom they have been involved. Both are oblivious to the feelings of the woman and seem above any attachment to the child they helped create. Smith's secretary becomes pregnant after a romantic episode in Smith's cabin in the woods. Although she works for him every day, he takes no notice of her pregnancy until one day she holds a gun on him, screaming, "I'm going to have a baby." Smith's reaction is typically emotionless Black Humor. "Miss Martin if only you could have
looked upon it as a present" (5, p. 295). Underland's reaction to the idea is more emotional, but only because he realizes that he would have been responsible for bringing a child into an absurd world. He insists the girl obtain an abortion "Because . . . a rabbit is happier than a tree, because there's more happiness in a vacuum than in all the stones in--" (18, p. 148). Underland physically forces the woman to get rid of the child through an unprofessional abortion from which she later dies. Underland's view of procreation could be said to be the epitome of the Black Humor philosophy: life is so absurd that it should not be allowed to start.

All the characters in The Beetle Leg are apathetic and emotionless. In one incident, the son of a rather wealthy couple traveling through the desert is bitten by a rattlesnake. Another character attempts to draw the poison out of the boy's wound while he and the father discuss the terrain and a nearby dam. The mother stays in the car playing with the radio and the electric windows and calling "Hurry up" to the men (6, p. 28). In another incident, the local sheriff kicks some Indians whom he is holding prisoner to prove to another man that the prisoners are harmless (6, p. 35). A doctor pulls teeth without anesthetic and, in general, has a sadistic time spreading pain among his patients.

In an episode in Malcolm, the main character starts to cry with confusion in the presence of a couple much older than he. The response of the woman of the couple is quite natural for Black Humor. She demands he stop crying, as she "cannot stand emotional crises in others" (14, p. 77). In I Am Elijah Thrush, Peggs screams so violently that a mouthful of blood is sprayed on his listener. The reaction of the
listener, "Albert, my dear, you have stained me" (13, p. 102), highlights the insensitivity of the one character toward the other. In How Much? (3), the characters are oblivious to the suffering and needs of their grandmother, whom they see as an inconvenience. Snow White (2) only thinks of herself and, as she sees it, her suffering. To her, others' problems are non-existent.

Emotionless characters demonstrate a total lack of concern for fellow beings. They regard caring for others as a waste of time, as they believe no one else should care for them. If there were such a thing as love, compassion, or even hate in these novels, there would be some hope for the world, as these reactions could be considered an answer to the question of the meaning of life.

Religion as a Meaningless Social Convention

Religion, for the writer of Black Humor, is only another meaningless social convention. The question of the existence or nonexistence of a god is irrelevant, and the emphasis others place on this irrelevant convention is absurd. If Black Humor philosophy allowed for the existence of a god, it would provide a being on which to blame the ills of the world and through which to look for meaning to life. According to Black Humor, the belief in a god and practice of religion are only absurd escape routes in which people indulge in order to avoid admitting the purposelessness of the world.

Southern (and Hoffenberg in Candy) constantly uses Heavenly exclamations in both The Magic Christian (17) and Candy (16). With the exception of the main character in both novels, almost every character
is given to shock and surprise that brings a cry for God, Christ, or Heaven. "In the name of God," "Good Lord," "Christ," "Good Christ Almighty," "Good Heavens," "Good God," are just a few of the expressions used after Guy Grand has worked his will on the public or Candy is seen in a sexual entanglement. These characters surrounding the main character raise the name of God in cries for assistance against the absurdities with which they are presented, but, following the Black Humor view, no such help is forthcoming, and Grand continues with his pranks, and Candy with her sexual encounters.

_Sec_ond _Skin_ also contributes a note on religion. One of the characters becomes physically ill and vomits and notes the comparison between this action and the act of praying:

_Anyone who has gotten down on his knees to vomit has discovered, if only by accident, the position of prayer. So that terrible noise I was making must have been the noise of prayer, and the effect, as the spasms faded and the stomach went dry, was no doubt similar to the peace that follows prayer_ (7, pp. 127-128).

This passage implies that vomiting and praying have about the same purpose and achieve the same results. Both actions offer relief, one from a sickness of the stomach and the other from a sickness of the head. In vomiting, the physical act has the effect of cleansing the system and making the party feel relief by ridding his body of that which caused it to feel ill. In praying, the effect is that of cleansing the mind by unburdening it to another party and so lifting the weight of troubles from the prayer's shoulders to those of another. Therefore, the prayerful person feels better because he has rid his mind
of that which was making him ill. Black Humor philosophy finds both acts of equal value.

Religion is parodied throughout Giles Goat-Boy (1). The "Founder" of the "University" (universe) represents God. The main character becomes a symbolic Christ, and his followers seem to be splitting the teachings of "Gilesian[ism]" (Christianity) into two separate camps with separate beliefs. Stoker (the Devil) is in charge of Main Detention (Hell), where punishments are doled out through different levels which resemble those described in Dante's Inferno. At the end of the novel, the main character sees the error of his ways--his belief that there is some hope in the world--and realizes that the world is absurd, and the best he and everyone else can do is accept it. Another character, the Living Sakhayan, is deemed godlike while all he does is sit silently while being carried from place to place by his admirers. To any question asked him, his answer is always silence, and Giles finally comes to learn, in his quest for solutions to the ills of the world, that this is the only answer to life's absurdities.

The Black Humor philosophy sees religion and a belief in God as escape mechanisms and believes those who utilize these escape mechanisms place trust in an irrelevant idea. The great religious wars of the past can be viewed as tremendous jokes, since so many people were involved so fanatically in an absurd cause. In the Black Humor viewpoint, all beliefs in God are as worthless as Underland finds them in Orpheus On Top: "Nobody's God, you idiot, God is all the ignorance in your head" (18, p. 148).
The Humor and Irrelevancy of Death

The treatment of death, burial, and death's consequences are handled in a very humorous and completely unemotional way in Black Humor novels. Characters die while others view their deaths unemotionally, as a relief, or as an inconvenience. Funeral arrangements may be lavish and complex, but only because of concern for the living.

The Loved One concerns two funeral homes, one for animals, another for humans. Both are similar and are described in the novel as utilizing a very professional and businesslike approach. The principle behind both is to create a feeling of emotion at the loss of the loved one while the funeral home staff maintains an indifferent air. "The Happier Hunting Grounds," the animal mortuary, offers the bereaved the choice of burial or cremation with the assistance of a pastor in either case. If the bereaved chooses, the service includes the release of a white dove over the crematorium. Also, the bereaved receives an anniversary card every year marking the demise: "Your little Arthur [name of the deceased animal] is thinking of you in heaven today and wagging his tail" (30, p. 21). These ceremonies and those for humans conducted at "Whispering Glades," the human mortuary, are quite similar. The only real difference is the zoning of Whispering Glades mortuary park, which separates remains of white individuals from the remains of black individuals. As a final absurd touch, the human park also includes "two non-sectarian churches . . . and a number of non-sectarian pastors" for services over agnostics (20, p. 44).

In A Singular Man, Smith simplifies the involved process of burial by building himself a tomb which he considers a home for his body after
he dies. Upon the building's completion, Smith distributes engraved invitations to its opening as one would send housewarming invitations or wedding invitations:

George Smith
requests the pleasure of
your company at the opening
of his memorial
At Thistle Plot, Buttercup Drive
The Reknown Cemetery
on Thursday, 17th November
at 3:30 P.M.

Flat 14, R.S.V.P.
Merry Mansions
2 Eagle Street
Decorations will not be worn (5, p. 327).

In *How Much?* death and burial are seen in terms of financial cost and the search for a bargain. Mrs. Halpern shops for the best funeral arrangements for her mother but finds herself having to tell a clerk ready for a sale, "I'm only window shopping. I'm so sorry, but you see, Mama's not dead yet" (3, p. 122). Following the logic implied, she hopes her mother will die soon and enable her to take advantage of the funeral bargain she discovered.

*Catch-22*, the setting of which is wartime, naturally involves death. The deaths it describes, however, are met with total indifference by those who remain alive. In one episode, Yossarian sits naked in a tree watching the funeral of a comrade who died in his arms. Yossarian does not show any grief over the loss of his companion, but rather fear at having been so close to death himself. Also sitting with him in the tree is Minderbinder, concerned with the fact that he has grossly overbought cotton for his syndicate. Minderbinder's conversation indicates his level of interest in the funeral taking place below him:
"That's terrible," Milo grieved, and his large brown eyes filled with tears. "That poor kid. It really is terrible." He bit his trembling lip hard, and his voice rose with emotion when he continued. "And it will get even worse if the mess halls don't agree to buy my cotton...."

"I can't watch it," he cried, turning away in anguish. "I just can't sit here and watch while those mess halls let my syndicate die" (8, pp. 258-259).

Minderbinder implies that worse than the death of a person would be the death of his syndicate. His feeling over the death and funeral of a fellow soldier and his feeling over what could be the death of his syndicate are hopelessly mixed in a meaninglessly absurd way.

Death, according to the Black Humor philosophy, is as meaningless as life. When a character dies, no emotion is showed by other characters at his loss. Concern for the dead by the living consists of arranging funerals, which in themselves are absurd.

The Illogical "Logic" of Black Humor

The "logic" involved in Black Humor works is of necessity illogical. Black Humor philosophy views the world as basically illogical and sees any type of logical explanation for the way things are as meaningless. Characters in Black Humor novels test their logical abilities against the world in episode after episode in a desperate attempt to make some sense out of what they see, but the world beats them back time and time again as the absurdities of which the world is composed have no logical basis.

For example, Cabot Wright Begins is filled with twisted logic and twisted facts. During his life as a rapist, Wright attempts to rape an older woman only to be given as a reason why he should not assault her,
"I have a young daughter upstairs." However, Wright, not to be daunted, replies, "You'll do, old pal" (12, P. 164). Wright rapes them both and after the incident the daughter, in perfectly "logical" fashion, tearfully assumes her career as a sixteen-year-old model (she is eighteen) is at an end and plans to sue her mother, since the rape occurred in her mother's house (12, p. 165). But all charges are dropped, when Wright's employer, upon hearing of the incident, changes his will to make Wright sole heir (12, p. 167).

In Malcolm, a character learns that her husband is leaving her for another woman. The fact that she is losing a husband is of no consequence, but the idea of losing her last name and salutation of "Madame" is most important to her. "You could so much easier change your names than I mine" she insists, claiming the whole world knows her only by her married name (14, p. 149). In another incident, Malcolm is called a pederast. In response Malcolm replies, "Why, I don't believe I'm old enough. . . . You have to study the stars a good deal to be one, you know" (14, p. 194). During a mock emotional crisis, the main character in Giles Goat-Boy comments, "I could have wept for anger at myself. Indeed, tears came to my eyes. . . . I rubbed them away, not to blur the image of my downfall" (1, p. 119). Another character who runs the local electrical plant for two opposing powers comments that both sides hate him but tolerate him because, "they've got to have power if they're going to be enemies" (1, p. 176). In still another incident, Giles attempts to locate another character whom he has lost somewhere in a large city. "My first impulse was to look up and down the mall for Peter Greene. Had I appreciated the size and populousness of New
Tammany I'd never have bothered--but I did not, and espied him at once" (1, p. 411). The characters uttering these illogical statements see no wrong in their unreasonable conclusions, and it is from such "truths" they build their lives.

Catch-22, in the novel of the same name, is the "logical" answer to all that is illogical in the novel. The following conversation between the central figure in the novel and a military chaplain shows an example of the use of the rule:

"Is Orr crazy?"
"He sure is."
"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. . . . He has to be crazy to keep flying combat missions after all the close calls he's had. But first he has to ask me."
"And then you can ground him?"
"No then I can't ground him."
"You mean there's a catch?"
"Sure there's a catch. Catch-22. Anybody who wants to get out of combat duty isn't really crazy" (8, p. 45).

This Catch-22 not only provides all the answers there are for all the problems in the novel, but also suggests the only answer Black Humor philosophy finds for the absurdities in the world: there are no answers.
CHAPTER BIBLIOGRAPHY


CHAPTER V

CAT'S CRADLE AS BLACK HUMOR

Notwithstanding the fact that the fourth page of Kurt Vonnegut Jr.'s Cat's Cradle tells the reader, "All of the true things I am about to tell you are shameless lies" (4, p. 16), an examination of the novel may further serve to clarify the definitions and limits of Black Humor novels as described and analyzed in this thesis. First, the work's relationship to pure Black Humor must be clarified. According to many critics of Vonnegut's works, his writing is Black Humor: "One of the labels that get pasted on [Vonnegut's] work a lot is this term black humor" (2, p. 96), "'black' humor . . . the tradition in which both Vonnegut and Southern write" (3, p. 26), "black humor, sick humor, absurd laughter . . . these are terms applied . . . to a group of contemporary novelists including . . . Kurt Vonnegut" (1, p. 57), "Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. through six novels and more than forty stories . . . holds his own with the black humorists" (2, p. 158).

But according to the conditions set forth here for a work of pure Black Humor, Cat's Cradle is not Black Humor. It falls instead into the category of near-Black Humor with one essential ingredient missing. That ingredient is the all-prevailing view of a totally hopeless world completely void of any saving light. To better understand the overall Black Humor view, a separate analysis of the novel in terms of its Black Humor-like qualities and in terms of its missing ingredient is in order.
On first glance, *Cat's Cradle* seems enmeshed in a meaningless and absurd world. The novel matches many of the representative points of a Black Humor novel discussed earlier in its theme, structure, some characterization, and use of forbidden topics.

Vonnegut has written his novel from a subjective viewpoint much like *Second Skin* or *Lolita*. The subjectivity is that of "John," the narrator, about whom the reader is told only that he is a free-lance writer and a "Hoosier." According to John, he originally planned to write a novel concerning events on the day the atom bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, titled *The Day the World Ended*, but instead he has detailed, in six month's time, events leading up to the novel's description of the actual end of the world. As such, John the narrator's role may be comparable to that of John the Revelator in the Bible. Both characters provide a vision of the future. In *Cat's Cradle*, John is very opinionated, referring to other characters with epithets such as "nice old lady" (4, p. 43), "Horse-faced platinum blonde" (4, p. 96), and "Son of a bitch" (4, p. 75).

The book consists of 127 sections ranging in length from half a paragraph to three pages, with the average length about a page. But the novel is not written in episodic form, since one section is highly dependent on another for continuity. The division of sections is haphazard and may occur in the middle of a conversation as readily as at the completion of an event. In addition, a new language has been constructed for use in the novel. This vocabulary, consisting of eighteen new words, is carefully defined by the narrator as the terms arise, and, for the most part, these define interpersonal relationships.
The chronology of the novel usually is well ordered. Flashbacks into a character's background are used, but they are inserted in chronological sequence, unlike the flashback techniques used in other novels, e.g., Catch-22 and Cabot Wright Begins. The only break from this ordered pattern occurs when in the midst of one event the beginnings of another are interjected. For instance, in one scene a character is relating to John an anecdote concerning that character's father. This anecdote gives the reader some idea of the personality of the person being discussed, while also bolstering the idea of an absurd world, and, therefore, is of some importance to the philosophy behind the novel.

In the middle of the telling of the anecdote, a phone call interrupts the conversation. This phone call marks the beginning of the next scene. After the call is completed, the telling of the tale is taken up and completed (4, p. 134). In another scene, an important conversation between John and another character is interrupted by the entrance of office typing pool girls singing Christmas carols (4, p. 40).

Vonnegut uses letters, poems, and songs to build action and reemphasize philosophical points. Asides are also used, although some of them seem to have been placed in the narrative for no purpose whatever. For instance, during the description of an automobile ride, the narrator stops to discuss the "stop-and-go signs." "Green meant go. Red meant stop. Orange meant change and caution" (4, p. 35). In another incident, the playing of a clarinet by a major character is preceded by a description of the life of the pianist whose recording is being accompanied. This description of the pianist is taken from a record album cover (4, p. 149). This insertion of insignificant detail is
similar to the technique used by Barthelme in *Snow White* of presenting facts to the reader in the manner of a history book, and serves to heighten the overall absurdity.

*Cat's Cradle* is dependent on plot for narrative movement and, therefore, resembles many traditional novels. The novel's setting is relevant to the plot but not to the philosophy presented or the overall outlook of the novel. Basically, the plot involves the events leading up to the discovery and world-destroying use of a substance called Ice Nine. Ice Nine freezes all water at a point of 114.4 degrees Fahrenheit. It proves fatal when imbibed by humans or animals as, one assumes, it freezes all liquid portions of the body. The philosophy presented is based on a "religion" named Bokononism which is based on lies. The setting is the small island of San Lorenzo in the Caribbean, and elements of the society of that island bring the characters together.

The theme of the novel is that life is meaningless and absurd. This theme is the theme of all Black Humor novels. In *Cat's Cradle* this view of the world is not only implied in the presentation of absurd events, but is given by characters as their view of life.

The absurd events are interspersed throughout the narration and usually concern some aside or anecdote rather than forming a direct part of the plot. One of the inventors of the atom bomb is described as having shown more interest in turtles than in the bomb. However, he regained interest in the bomb project when his turtles were taken away, and he came to work looking "for things to play with and think about and everything there was to play with and think about had something to do with the bomb" (4, p. 24). A convict who had slain twenty-six people is
referred to as having sung a song he had written for the occasion on the scaffold at the time of his execution (4, p. 34). A character describes some gorges: "Aren't the gorges beautiful? This year, two girls jumped into one holding hands. They didn't get into the sorority they wanted. They wanted Tri-Delt" (4, p. 22). A local bar called the Navajo Tepee is decorated to appear to be an authentic Indian home with blankets, cow skulls, and tom-toms. One day a real Navajo Indian comes into the bar and tells the proprietor that Navajos didn't live in tepees. "That's a fugging shame" he is told in response (4, p. 32).

In declarations by characters and the revelations of the philosophy of Bokononism, direct references are made continually to the meaningless, purposeless world. One theory is that it is man's nature to seek life's purpose, but all that man learns is that life is purposeless. As a demonstration, the novel presents a parable illustrating man's futile search for meaning. In the parable God created living creatures out of mud so they could see what God had created. Man was the only creature to speak.

God leaned close as mud as man sat up; looked around, and spoke. Man blinked. "What is the purpose of all this?" he asked politely.
"Everything must have a purpose?" asked God.
"Certainly," said man.
"Then I leave it to you to think of one for all this," said God.
And He Went away (4, pp. 214-215).

God's only purpose in creating life, according to the parable, was to alleviate his "cosmic loneliness" and show someone what he had created, but the first question man asked upon rising was "what is the purpose?" God had not thought of a purpose for his creation, as he did not think
a purpose important. Therefore, man searches for the answer to the meaning to life, while God knows that the answer is unimportant. In another passage, the title to the Fourteenth Book of Bokonon is presented as "What Can a Thoughtful Man Hope for Mankind on Earth, Given the Experience of the Past Million Years?" The contents of the chapter answer the title question in one word, "Nothing" (4, p. 199). The personal philosophies of the characters point up the futility of various particular aspects of life. People talk about anything "so they'll have good voice boxes in case there's ever anything really meaningful to say" (4, p. 140). "Maturity . . . is a bitter disappointment for which no remedy exists, unless laughter can be said to remedy anything" (4, p. 162). Written records of history are futile (4, p. 193). In general, humans' search for life's meaning is described as being like the search for a cat and a cradle in the design made of string called a "cat's cradle."

"No wonder kids grow up crazy. A cat's cradle is nothing but a bunch of X's between somebody's hands, and little kids look and look and look at all those X's . . . ."

"And?"

"No damn cat, and no damn cradle" (4, p. 137).

The maker of the design asks its viewer to project into the shape of the strings a form of a cradle which is not really there. This is analogous to "The Emperor's New Clothes," in which a nude Emperor imagines himself to be splendidly dressed, and his subjects, to please him, pretend they also see his splendid clothing. The novel compares this belief in an imaginary object with the belief in a purpose for life. Neither exists in reality.
To support this theme, the novel presents many varied views of a purpose in life or a solution to the ills of the world as seen through the eyes of different characters. These views are logically absurd, fitting the Black Humor view of a solutionless world. Newton Hoenikker, the son of one of the inventors of the atom bomb, says, "There is love enough in this world for everybody if people will just look" (4, p. 26). John sees "peace and plenty forever" (4, p. 118) in the person of Mona Aamons Monzano, a beautiful girl who is "very young and very grave . . .--luminously compassionate and wise" (4, p. 72). A female character in an anecdote described by one of the major characters "claim[s] to understand God and His Ways of Working perfectly" (4, p. 75). Two characters casually and unconcernedly discuss a newspaper article in which the "basic secret of life" has been discovered to be "protein" (4, p. 31). A bicycle manufacturer believes that "what people were really supposed to do with their time on Earth" was "build bicycles for him" (4, p. 82). Another character feels people "think too much" (4, p. 37). All these views serve to amplify the absurdities presented in the novel. Newton's view is contributed a week before his own love affair ends, and, as it turns out, his "lover" was only interested in obtaining Newton's Ice Nine. John's view of Mona was not reciprocated, proving Bokonon's stated view of love as false hope. God is a lie, so the desire to understand God's will is absurd. The statement that protein is the basic secret of life seems as uninspired and irrelevant as insisting that the Fountain of Youth, "Monkey Gland Juice," or bicycles are the answer to the secret of life, or a vitamin deficiency, the nation's youth, or thinking too much life's only problem.
Of all the diverse views of the world presented, the one the novel seems to support is the view put forth in a story told by one of the characters. The story describes a ship loaded with wicker furniture and disease-ridden rats. The ship wrecked on rocks near San Lorenzo, and all were lost except the furniture and the rats, which both came ashore. The result of the episode defines the philosophy: "So some people got free furniture and some people got bubonic plague" (4, p. 134). In other words, events happen without divine or human supervision. Life has no purpose or master design and to impute such is absurd. Life is only pure chance, nothing more.

The most prevalent Black Humor character type is the complacent character. This type is seen in Bokonon, the "kind" (4, p. 112) "old Negro man" (4, p. 230) who founded and fostered the religion Bokononism. Other characters, such as Newton Hoenikker and Mona Aamons Monzano, appear to be complacent characters, with the exception of a few incidents in which they show unexpected emotion.

Bokonon himself is only seen in the penultimate page of the novel, although his early history is narrated and his presence through his religion is one of the key features in the novel. Bokonon wrote a set of books, The Books of Bokonon, which are treasured like Bibles by most of the other characters. These books contain Bokonon's philosophical bits of wisdom, and through them Bokonon can be recognized as a complacent character—-one who has given up the search for life's meaning in favor of the realization that life has no meaning.

Newton Hoenikker, a four-foot midget, complacently tolerates mothering from his older sister and continued references to his small
size, making him appear to be an unemotional character. However, other scenes in which he vomits at the sight of the first Ice Nine victim (4, p. 195) and becomes agitated while presenting the analysis of the cat's cradle quoted above (4, p. 137) give him an emotional quality which makes him less than complacent. Mona Aamons Monzano, San Lorenzo's national erotic symbol, stands by complacently while her adopted father collapses in pain (4, p. 123) and is unconcerned when directed to marry a man other than the one to whom she has been engaged (4, p. 169). Even at the view of thousands of dead Ice Nine victims, she laughs and later complacently takes her own life with the substance (4, p. 221). However, concerning one subject, love, Mona becomes adamant and emotional. When told by her husband-to-be that she must not show favor to any other man, she insists she loves everyone equally and will not marry anyone "who wants all of somebody's love" (4, p. 171).

With regard to forbidden topics, Cat's Cradle, like a Black Humor novel, does present most of those elements normally prohibited to the writer of traditional novels. But these elements are not mentioned in great detail. Vonnegut's novel contains references to sex, like most Black Humor novels. The narrator is involved with a whore in the opening scenes of the book (4, p. 29) and assures the reader he has been to bed with fifty-three women (4, p. 167). Newton, the midget, has an affair with a midget Russian ballet dancer. Newton's brother reveals that as a high school student he had been "screwing" his employer's wife (4, p. 109). At the end of the novel, the characters discuss their dying sex urge (4, p. 164). Another forbidden subject, defecation, is
represented by a poem left on a kitchen floor written in excrement (4, p. 71).

The novel contains the usual Black Humor reference to the absurdity of wealth in the view of the importance of money expressed by two characters. The daughter of one of the inventors of the atom bomb laments that her father "gave so much" and only got forty-five-dollars as a bonus in return. Another character has moved his manufacturing plant to San Lorenzo, where the people are "poor enough and scared enough and ignorant enough" not to organize for more pay or better working conditions—or as the character ironically puts it, where the people have "common sense" (4, pp. 146, 80).

One Black Humor-like gruesome event is described in detail:

"They put up a gallows, see? Two posts and a cross beam. And then they take a great big kind of iron fishhook and they hand it down from the cross beam. Then they take somebody who's dumb enough to break the law, and they put the point of the hook in through one side of his belly and out the other and they let him go—and there he hangs, by God, one damn sorry law-breaker" (4, p. 83).

Although there is violence in the novel, such as the crash of an airplane into a mountain and death by Ice Nine of thousands, the narrator does not choose to dwell on gory detail when presenting these events.

In regard to a belief in God, the novel states that God is an escape mechanism for humans who need something to depend on. God is mentioned many times in the novel in terms of both an exclamation: "Good God," "For the love of God," "God Almighty," "Great God"; and a sort of companion on which characters depend when in need of reassurance, guidance, and assistance. At the end of the novel, Bokonon is able to convince thousands of people to kill themselves by telling them
it is God's will that they do so. These people have sought a "purpose" for the ravages of Ice Nine and readily accept the explanation that "God was surely trying to kill them . . . and that they should have the good manners to die" (4, p. 220).

This belief in God is a lie, the narrator tells the reader, but it is a convenient and comforting lie. It gives some meaning to a meaningless world. One character's reaction during a situation is a succinct statement of this view:

I found it impossible not to lean on God. I had never needed such support before, and so had never believed that such support was available. Now, I found that I had to believe in it--and I did (4, p. 184).

This character found strength and comfort in sharing his problem with another being, although he was aware that the being was of his own fabrication.

Formal religion is viewed in much the same way. The "civilized" people are comforted by a belief in Christianity while the poor of San Lorenzo are strengthened through a belief in Bokononism. The basis for both is lies. According to the novel, the basis for all religion is lies, as truth, the truth that life has no meaning, is too sad for people to accept. As the founder of Bokononism says:

I wanted all things
To seem to make some sense
So we all could be happy, yes
Instead of tense
And I made up lies
So that they all fit nice,
And I made this sad world
A par-a-dise (4, p. 109).
Although many elements in *Cat's Cradle* seem to parallel Black Humor, the novel is not a Black Humor work because it contains hope, a characteristic not consistent with Black Humor. The novel's basic theme is the absurdity, purposelessness, and meaninglessness of life, but it does not deny hope for a brighter future. This hope is founded in two elements: man and death, as both are seen to contain some solution to the ills of the world.

Man is respected in *Cat's Cradle*. This fact is emphasized through a conversation between two characters discussing Bokononism:

"What is sacred to Bokononists?" I asked after a while. "Not even God, as near as I can tell."
"Nothing?"
"Just one thing."
I made some guesses. "The ocean? The sun?"

It is through a respect for man that there is hope. It is through the interaction of men that hope and a brighter future might be gained. Men may live with lies, but if the lies better them in their interpersonal relationships, then there is hope.

For example, the theory of love advanced by Bokonon in the novel is:

A lover's a liar,
To himself he lies.
The truthful are loveless.
Like oysters their eyes (4, p. 190).

Yet, if two people happen to believe in the same lie, believing they "love" each other, the result can be very pleasing and is described in the novel as a "dupress," two "lovebirds" (4, p. 80) who are formed into one "karass," one "team" (4, p. 13) in life, which cannot be interrupted by anything. Therefore, "love," although based on a lie, according to Bokonon, is idealistic, comforting, and, as described, something to be
sought after in order that happiness might be gained. Following the same logic, although a belief in God is a lie, as is a belief in Christianity and Bokononism, if such belief brings happiness and causes one human to act favorably or kindly toward another, then such belief is good.

As further proof, the novel presents samples of noble people or actions to serve as examples of man's potential for good. Julian Castle, although represented as a hard man steeped in the view that the world is meaningless and "Man is vile, and man makes nothing worth making, knows nothing worth knowing" (4, p. 140), is described as "a saint" (4, p. 138), "an American sugar millionaire who had, at the age of forty, . . . [choosen a life similar to that of] Dr. Albert Schweitzer by founding a free hospital in a jungle, by devoting his life to miserable folk of another race" (4, p. 76). "Boko-maru," the mingling of awareness between two people who lie touching feet, is said to "work," meaning "people who do that really do feel better about each other and the world" (4, p. 142). The "father of the atom bomb" worked on the bomb because he was guided in that direction. His only criterion for his attention in inventing was that his project be something to play with and think about. It can be assumed, then, that if his attention had been directed toward a humanitarian invention, such as discovering a cure for cancer, he would have met his two criteria and would also have been making a truly humanitarian contribution to mankind. Although several love affairs are presented which do not make the participants happy, or "false duprasses," an example of a true duprass is given. These two people, acting as one unit, are entirely oblivious to
the rest of the world. They are seen sitting in a plane "enter-
tain[ing] each other endlessly with little gifts; sights worth seeing
out the plane window, amusing or instructive bits from things they
read, random recollections of times gone by" (4, p. 78). They seem to
speak only after consultation with each other and although rather dis-
tant to others, they appear to be very contented because of their private
interchange. Bokonon believes "that good societies could be built only
by pitting good against evil, and by keeping the tension between the two
high at all times" (4, p. 90). This philosophy allows for the possi-
bility of "good societies" even though they are only achievable in
conjunction with evil. However, any belief in a good society is not
Black Humor. All of these people, beliefs, and events are worthwhile,
hopeful aspects of life.

Thus, Cat's Cradle presents the idea that the seeking of the truth
--the so-called purpose of life--is irrelevant. "I just have trouble
understanding how truth, all by itself, could be enough for a person"
(4, p. 52). As there is no ultimate "truth" or meaning to life, the
seeking of truth is absurd. On the other hand, it is through respect
for man and human interaction that hope lies. All the ills in the
novel were created by man, and all events, although cruel and self-
destructive, could have been avoided if there had been positive rather
than negative human interaction. Social action could be reversed by
social action if man was "working consciously and tirelessly to reduce
the stupidity and viciousness of ourselves and all mankind" (4, p. 207).

Death, although not necessarily hopeful of a pleasant afterlife,
provides an answer in Cat's Cradle. Death is not glorified as a
release to a better world, but as a solution, perhaps an escape, from the ills of the world. People who die in the novel are described as looking asleep (4, p. 202). The duprass couple died holding hands, facing the sea (4, p. 210). A person in great pain would "be grateful" if he was killed (4, p. 176). John, at the conclusion of the novel, sees some glory in the way others died and looks for some noteworthy way to end his life as well (4, p. 230). It is not that he looks forward to a better life after death; rather he seems to acknowledge the fact that all things die. Mona laughingly summarized this view of death upon discovering thousands of dead San Lorenzo inhabitants. "It's all so simple, that's all. It solves so much for so many, so simply" (4, p. 221).

If death can be seen as some solution to the hopelessness of the world, then the novel can be said to end in contentedness. At the conclusion most of the characters have contentedly died: Julian Castle while tending people in his jungle hospital, Newton's sister while playing the clarinet which was her companion in loneliness, and others as described above. John searches for "some neat way to die, too" (4, p. 230), to follow Newton's cynical description. Bokonon seeks the "final sentence" for The Books of Bokonon. Other living characters are content with their meager existences, and they have unlimited food and shelter sources. If they die, as they eventually will, the narrator has not led the reader to believe death would be bad. Although this particular set of survivors cannot reproduce, since, as they note, they have no female of childbearing age among them, nothing has led the reader to believe that groups of survivors in other countries around
the world might not possibly be able to reproduce and in so doing continue the human race. Also, with the expressed belief in respect for man, nothing has led the reader not to believe that this new race of humans might be better than the previous generations and, therefore, things on earth might be greatly improved. Following this line of thought, then, *Cat's Cradle* ends very hopefully by providing the human race with a clean slate with which to start again and hope for the reader that things might be better the second time around.
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