

Joseph heller's catch  
22 and joan  
littlewood's oh what a  
lovely war essay



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Both Catch 22 and Oh! What a Lovely War are satirical comedies looking at the absurdity and tragedy of war.

Being satires, they serve to expose the flaws in wartime situations and in doing so often develop criticisms of authoritative figures. Both texts approach the portrayal of authority in slightly different ways; being a play, Oh! What a Lovely War has a lot more scope for portraying its characters visually and aurally, whereas Catch 22 must work within its boundaries as a novel. Both texts employ humour to portray characters of authority; whereas Littlewood's play is more focused on dark humour, Heller uses his own brand of absurd irony throughout the novel - this humour is central to most techniques used in both pieces of literature. Both texts were written in the 1960's, (Catch 22 was published in 1961 whilst Littlewood's play was performed two years later) an era synonymous with the development of youth culture and radical change. Although Catch 22 was initially snubbed by many of its critics, the novel found its readership amongst the emerging generation of men and women who were fiercely opposed to the Vietnam war. Littlewood did not face the same hostility in 1963 when Oh! What a Lovely War was first shown to the public.

Performed by the Theatre Workshop - a company she had co-created - the play was warmly received by the audience and critics alike. Despite their different reactions, both texts were on the cutting edge of anti-war sentiment and continue to be modern classics. Although the texts focus on different wars and different perspectives (Littlewood's play explores World War One from a primarily British perspective and Heller's novel is an American outlook on World War Two) their main themes are similar. Both

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texts are exploring the tragedy of war, the utter absurdity of it, the thirst for power and money war brings, and the ignorance of authoritative organisations. Figures of authority are numerous in both pieces, and do not only include the upper ranks (such as Generals, Field Marshalls and Colonels) but also the representations of business and religious organisations, for they too can be viewed as having 'authoritative' roles in society, especially in wartime.

One technique used by both authors is a demonstration of the lack of communication between commanding powers. Littlewood's portrayal of the allied army leaders is very effective in signalling how inefficient they are at communicating with one another. The French General Lanzerac and British Field Marshall 'French' do not even speak the same language, and French's unwillingness to do so reveals the total futility and worthlessness of their meeting: Aide: Do you think I ought to organise an ... interpreter? French: Don't be ridiculous Wilson; the essential problem at the moment is .

.. the utmost secrecy. p21) In this scene the obsession with secrecy over commonsense negotiations shows us how inefficient the allied army authorities are, and the analogy of the different languages spoken serves to demonstrate the complete lack of communication amongst authoritative powers that hold the fate of thousands in their hands.

In the same way, Catch 22 looks at the problem of communication within the upper ranks. The call General Peckam receives from Ex P. C Wintergreen - the sole words being 'T. S. Elliot'(sic) - has no hidden meaning but is interpreted in an absurd way; " Perhaps it's a new code or something, like

the colors of the day. Why don't you check with Communications and see if it's a new code or something or the colors of the day? " (p45).

This sentence also shows us some insight into General Peckam's intellect, which doesn't seem to be substantial - demonstrated by the repetition and imprecision of speech. Another example of these communicative difficulties is the case of Major Major who receives documents to sign, which have his signature already. The squabbling within the upper ranks is evident in both texts and serves to show us the pettiness and idiocy of figures of authority. There are many instances in Catch 22 where the Generals are engaged in sneaky tricks against one another. General Dreedle's hatred of his son-in-law Colonel Moodus for example, inspires him to keep a beautiful nurse just to torment him with, and the 'Great Loyalty Oath Crusade' is started by Captain Black in an attempt to avenge himself on Major Major (who gained the promotion Captain Black was waiting for). Similarly in Oh! What a Lovely War, the Belgian, British and French army officials are at odds with one another.

The Belgian army are in a sorry state, the French are angry at the British, and the British refuse to believe they have any responsibility in the war; 'We're not here under any obligation' French persists in telling Lanzerac. The heated discussion only ends when Lanzerac is offered a medal on behalf of the King of England. This gesture pleases the General, who 'kisses French on both cheeks' and leaves, suggesting that the upper ranks of the army are only interested in recognition and promotion. This is a very powerful notion in Catch 22, in which key characters such as Colonel Korn and Colonel

Cathcart will do everything in their power to be promoted. Cathcart says of <https://assignbuster.com/joseph-hellers-catch-22-and-joan-littlewoods-oh-what-a-lovely-war-essay/>

his ambition: "What else have we got to do? Everyone teaches us to aspire to higher things.

A general is higher than a colonel and a colonel is higher than a lieutenant colonel. So we're both aspiring" (p450). One of the most important aspects of both texts is how different the experience of war is for the upper ranks and the ordinary men. The inability of authoritative figures to understand the realities of war and their cruel, seemingly deliberate ignorance in many situations is demonstrated in a number of key scenes. An important example of this in *Oh! What a Lovely War* is on pages 50/51 where a commanding officer reveals his detachment from ordinary trench life, and his unawareness of the death that surrounds the men every day; "Ye Gods! What's that?" he asks the Lieutenant upon encountering a German limb that holds up the parapet, immediately telling the men to get rid of it as soon as possible. The Sergeant's response reveals how clueless those in authority are to the brutalities of war: "Heads, trunks, blood all over the place, and all he's worried about is a damned leg".

This warped, uninformed sense of priority and general detachment is evident in *Catch 22*, especially within Colonel Cathcart's storyline. Heller's novel is jumbled chronologically, but one dependable indication of time is the number of missions the men are forced to fly under Cathcart's orders, which steadily increases as the story progresses. What is simply a number for the colonel is a very real death threat to the men of his squadron, many of whom reach the target just as the missions increase. Cathcart raises them for purely selfish reasons - he hopes to gain recognition for his squadron's record and receive a promotion. The Colonel's constant cry of "Doesn't he

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know there's a war going on" when Yossarian refuses to fly further missions is one of Heller's brilliant lines of absurd irony, as it relates directly to the figures of authority in the novel.

They seem to be playing an insane game, unaware of how their actions affect the men - they themselves don't realise they're fighting a war. Other instances of differences between upper and lower rank men can be found in both texts. The final scene of *Oh! What a Lovely War* portrays the men as lambs to the slaughter at the order of their glory-obsessed officer, and we find them shouting " Baaa - baaa - baaa ...

"(p86) as they advance towards the guns. In *Catch 22* the Colonels are amazed that the ordinary men worship the same God as them, and after the revelation from the Chaplain refuse to believe it saying " What nonsense! " Does he expect us to believe that? " and " Chaplain, aren't you stretching things a bit far now? "(p407). A noticeable aspect of both texts is the portrayal of other key figures of authority - primarily those of big business and religion. Where Littlewood is severely critical of both, Heller holds some sympathy for his character the Chaplain (a representation of religion). Common to both writers is a disgust toward capitalists who exploit war for their own commercial gain. The munitions manufacturers in *Oh! What a Lovely War* are introduced on stage as members of a shooting party, an ironic analogy highlighting the part they play in the destruction of so many young men.

They discuss the ' peace scares' that threaten their income, and congratulate one another for their inhuman schemes in money making:

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Britain: German chappies were caught on their own barbed wire?.... Dashed clever.

(p46) In the same way, the character Milo Minderbinder in Catch 22 exposes the lack of morals and boundaries capitalism creates in wartime. His collaboration with the enemy goes unnoticed due to his profit-making, and he even ends up bombing his own men and planes as part of a German contract; ' If I can persuade the Germans to pay me a thousand dollars for every plane I shoot down, why shouldn't I? '(p273) he tells Yossarian. The forces of religious belief in Littlewood's play are greeted with hostility as tools for the war propaganda machine, who support the war effort rather than fighting for the rights of the soldiers; Chaplain: ...

it is no longer a sin to labour for war on the Sabbath... the Chief Rabbi has absolved your Jewish brethren from abstaining from pork in the trenches. (p77) Religion is portrayed in a slightly more sympathetic light in Heller's novel.

The Chaplain is the only character who really connects with Yossarian, and his efforts to help dissuade the Generals from raising the number of missions proves a real commitment and solidarity to the squadron. He is rejected from the Officer's Hall and treated disrespectfully by the Colonels, showing us that even Christianity is powerless in the face of such frighteningly stubborn authority. Another key theme of both texts is the portrayal of war as a game, or as something frivolous and light-hearted by those in authority. The very form of Oh! What a Lovely War is as a musical show, with song and dance. Key song titles include ' I'll make a man out of you' and the grand finale

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track 'Oh it's a lovely war' which paints the text as a Broadway extravaganza rather than a harrowing look at battle.

This technique is very effective in creating a bitter and attacking tone towards authoritative powers - especially considering the nature of the opening scene. In a circus like frenzy the MC brings on the players of the 'war game'; France, Germany, Austria, Ireland, Great Britain and Russia. This structural difference between the play and Catch 22 means that Oh! What a Lovely War parodies authority more consistently. Littlewood constructed the play as a 'show', so the ability of characters in power to undermine the seriousness of war is endless. The War Game' is a classic example of this, as is the 'grouse-shooting party' which consists of munitions manufacturers from the key nations involved in war.

Other techniques were available to Littlewood - lyrically bitter songs and the use of slides as an accompaniment to the speech, which both served as attacking forces against the power of authority in the play. Examples of this can be found in song titles such as 'If the sergeant steals your rum' and ironic lyrics like 'with our old commander, safely in the rear' in the hymn 'Onward Christian Soldiers'.