

# Using Literature to Teach the "Process": Some Practical Applications of Heller's *Catch-22*

By  
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When I taught my first classes as a teaching assistant at the University of Massachusetts in 1971, I recall feeling guilty about dragging a piece of good literature into the classroom kicking and screaming in the service of freshman writing. Since most T.A.'s I worked with were not writing teachers, but literature enthusiasts, we were delighted to have something to talk about that would shift the emphasis away from our ignorance of the writing process.

Actually commentators like Hairston, Flower, Garrison, and D'Angelo have shown that teaching the writing process can be compatible with a fine poem, song lyric, or complex novel. The process approach presumes a problem-solving orientation: writing always begins with a question-mark and proceeds through several stages, each of which engages heuristics—successive stages of generating questions. The questions multiply in the course of each step, from the discovery and exploration of it through revision.

Good literature, the writing process, and life share one important trait—they don't render easy answers, certainly not simply right or wrong ones. They require our direct participation in order to arrive at even the most tentative solutions. And understanding literature, like life, demands that we *re-make* it, take it apart and put it together again within an ordered frame that reflects that understanding.

Over the past several years, I have had occasion (no, actually I have invented one) to use *Catch-22* in my composition classes. I first began to teach it because I simply love the book. But *Catch-22* also afforded me a chance to tie reading to writing, critical thinking to the composing process. *Catch-22*, as everyone knows, is a hallucinatory patchwork quilt of a book, apparently formless, portraying a world overrun by paranoiacs and overseen by an apparently lunatic-creator. But the confusion of Heller's novel provides a constructive learning environment to test and change writing and thinking habits. No magical lightning bolts of perception strike here—readers must earn their way to order and meaning and sanity. As in any realistic problem-solving activity, one wrings meaning from this novel by *doing*, participating in it, making it one's own.

Through the *Catch-22* experience, students learn (1) to equate the experience of reading the novel with the thinking process; (2) to use pre-writing heuristics to collect lists of data from the novel that support a focus; (3) to engage pre-organizational heuristics to collate the collected data; (4) to move from potential ordering principle to a way of thinking and writing about the focus—a purpose statement; (5) to practice “summary” skills that will help to re-order and re-see the experiences of the novel; (6) to teach inductively how to prepare for an essay exam. My paper will generally chart the methods I employ to subordinate *Catch-22* to the composing process.

## I

When I assign *Catch-22* to my Composition II students on the first day of the quarter, I must establish groundrules. First, the *Catch-22* reading/writing “problem” will be the last one that we shall tackle. Because of its length, students need time to read it carefully. And, before I broach discussion on the book’s characters and situations and issues, everyone concerned must have completed the entire text. Widespread “reading-with-training wheels” would seriously compromise the collaborative approach that I have developed. Instead, the group activities that assume a read-through should generate some focused re-reading and re-assessment. Also, since I intend our reading and writing about *Catch-22* to mirror the writing process, I will need ample time to walk students through several tasks that rehearse stages of composing.

Finally, all of us must accept the premise that opening the cover of this (or perhaps any) book resembles the process of blithely turning a corner and suddenly confronting an accident. It’s an awfully large and messy accident, and nobody’s saying who caused it or, in fact, whether it will or can be cleaned up. It disturbs us, maybe to the point of wanting to walk around and beyond it. However, it is not necessary for us to like what we see; rather, we must cognitively sort and file what is in front of us and reconcile it with the rest of our experience before going on. In other words, we shall approach the book as a model of reality.

Before I set up the sequence of activities for *Catch-22*, permit me to mention briefly a large assignment that directly precedes and facilitates the *Catch-22* process—the Interview Analysis. Whether the interview task has focused upon the world of work, differences between two generations, or a current issue, questions (and clear, open-ended, un-prejudiced ones) will have represented the core of this assignment. Before anything beyond topic selection could happen, students had to generate lists of questions, evaluate them, and sequence them according to purpose and focus. These same question-generating and ordering activities inform our very earliest efforts to discuss and discover *Catch-22*. Locating questions to ask the book and an effective sequence for asking them eclipses a reader’s obsession for “right answers.”

Besides providing practice in heuristics, the interview analysis offers one other indirect benefit. The interview serves as both research tool and source, but, unlike library sources, it possesses a radical instability. Depending upon the clarity and sensitivity of the questions, an interviewee will either respond or withdraw. While *Catch-22* is no less inert than other published materials, it does “react” to an open-minded, respectful reader who has temporarily suspended judgements about the book’s materials and seeks an active dialogue with the text. Taking notes mindlessly from the book won’t work here; however, carefully framed questions will “open up” the book to subsequent re-shaping.

## II

I introduce students to my heuristic emphasis very early by means of a Reaction-Research journal. As with other recording devices, this journal chronicles individual responses to the the *Catch-22* reading/writing/thinking experience. It contains summary material, a string of accumulating questions, observations, and lists and locations of quotes, paraphrases and situations.

However, the journal also serves two other vital functions. It documents the proceedings of group activities—the questions that direct collaborative “research” of the book or that result from evaluation of such research, and each group’s conclusions. Also, it offers a medium for pursuing some essential “personal research.” While the questions that direct this self-analysis are simply worded, they are not simple. Each week as students progress through the reading, I assign some of the following to energize the cognitive process:

- (1) What do you believe in?
- (2) What are you willing to fight over or for?
- (3) Does *Catch-22* have any meaning in your life?
- (4) Can you document a “*Catch-22*” experience?
- (5) What is your idea of success or failure?
- (6) To what degree are you or your teachers responsible for your education?
- (7) Have you ever had to communicate with anyone without language? Explain.
- (8) What constitutes cowardly behavior to you?
- (9) What makes a good relationship?

These questions may expose prejudicial attitudes, as well as some unexamined assumptions that underlie them;. Students’ responses provide an initial yardstick for assessing Milo Minderbinder’s free enterprise, Appleby’s patriotism, Captain Black’s obsession with loyalty, Major Major Major’s father’s devotion to the work ethic, Nately’s passion for democracy, Clevinger’s dedication to education, and Scheisskopf’s competitive drive to win marching medals.



Although I prepare background information for the first day of discussion to place *Catch-22* historically, politically, and culturally, except for orchestrating the written and group exercises that evolve from discussion and assigning the critical analysis paper, I scrupulously avoid talking *about* the book or telling students what I think it means. Because we intend to treat the novel as a problem-solving activity, I define myself as primary guide and resource person, I have read the book once a year since 1972 as an affirmation of life, sanity, and the criminally bizarre. Along the way, I have indexed virtually every character and situation, and I know their locations intuitively. In short, I can creatively mediate in the "re-creating" process. And, on the way to discovery, I clarify and urge re-formulation of students' questions, as tour guide and interpreter between their comfortable environment and the nightmarishly absurd world of the book.

With my role clearly defined, we spend the first day indiscriminately generating questions about the novel. Group activities and answers must wait upon a "damage estimate," an examination of the extent of the problem before us. In a discussion-oriented version of pre-writing, I attempt to record their questions on the board as they ask them, and I request that the class enter them in their Reaction-Research journals. Students' questions flow steadily because questions are endemic to the *Catch-22* environment. A partial listing of these questions reads as follows:

What war is being fought?  
 Who's in charge of the war?  
 What's the approximate time frame of the book?  
 What were people's attitudes about the war being fought?  
 What's an Anabaptist?  
 What the devil is a Snowden?  
 Could you define *deja vu*?  
 Why does that character Orr stuff chesnuts in his cheeks and pay the prostitute to beat him senseless with her spiked heel?  
 How can Milo buy his eggs for seven cents, sell them for five cents, and still make a profit?  
 Who or what is the Soldier in White?  
 Who are John Milton, Milton John, Washington Irving, and Irving Washington, and why are characters like Yossarian signing letters with these names?  
 Is there anyone who isn't insane in this book?  
 Why does Nately's whore expend so much energy trying to kill Yossarian?  
 What is a protective rationalization?  
 Who was the President of the United States at the time the book was written, and what significant political and social events occur during its creation?

Is Yossarian a coward for refusing to fly any more missions and running away to Sweden?

Why Sweden?

Who is the dead man in Yossarian's tent?

Does anyone believe in anything larger than self in this book, or is God the irresponsible, incompetent, deranged hayseed Yossarian claims he is?

Is Heller at all in control of what he has written?

Although our list is not exhaustive, this initial encounter parallels the normal routine of preparation and evaluation for every writing problem pursued during the term and can be extended to any writing-thinking problem. Despite the free-form aimlessness of the exercise, it accomplishes what successive rounds of pre-writing usually produce: a relatively clear view of the dimensions of the problem and some choices available for solving it.

From practice on previous assignments, students can anticipate the inevitable next step: consolidating our questions into categories that we can rank by degree of complexity. Although many groupings are possible, students have repeatedly identified six: (1) what elements define individual characters; (2) how characters relate (*are* these individuals simply random ping-pong balls ricocheting off one another?); (3) what beliefs, if any, various characters subscribe to; (4) how effectively characters communicate; (5) how words are defined, contextually and stipulatively; (6) and what ordering principles operate in the book.

On this first day, neither the specific questions nor categories for grouping them determine the success of the venture. We agree only that we must ask and then address them on the principle of the simplest questions first. Since the characters offer the easiest entry into the book, they will dominate the second day's in-class group activities.

But before I dismiss this first class, I want to claim the radical heuristic orientation of *Catch-22*. Yossarian is obsessed by questions from the first to last page. His conviction that all agencies in the war are plotting to kill him motivates him to make someone accountable for his embattled situation, and Yossarian's name, appearance, and behavior become nagging cyphers for all who encounter him (*i.e.*, the Chaplain's marvelous *deja vu* incident on page 210). In fact, the book becomes a seminar on what happens when educational institutions discourage and students stop asking questions. As an example of how we all must seize responsibility for the learning process, a truly educational environment materializes on page 35—a briefing session. As always, the "instructor" Clevinger and his aide deliver intentionally obscure statements and no information, but this time Yossarian and others persist to dissipate the verbal smokescreen:

'Who is Spain?'

'Why is Hitler?'



'When is right?'

'Where was that stooped and mealy-colored old man I used to call Poppa when the merry-go-round broke down?'

'How was trump at Munich?'

'Ho-ho beriberi.'

and

'Balls!'

all rang out in rapid succession, and then there was Yossarian with the question that had no answer:

'Where are the Snowdens of yesteryear?'

Significantly, these questions are incoherent. Most questions form and evolve in dialogue, but, without feedback from asking and responding, they become skewed and idiosyncratic. Like Yossarian's question in the briefing, ours constitute a first step—they can be re-framed, but we must first identify questions suitable for framing. If we do not, the book will remain as silent as Clevenger's future briefing sessions.

The process of group work and writing exercises that ensues from day two to the end of the experience imitates the shape of the composing process, from deconstruction through purposive re-construction. Discussion of the second day centers upon the examination of five characters (again, it matters not which ones), with particular emphasis on their physical attributes, family background, education, values, beliefs, and behavioral quirks. Yossarian can, but need not, be included as a candidate for individual discussion. Evaluation of Major Major, Aarfy, Doc Daneeka, Milo, Chaplain Tapman, Colonel Cathcart, Orr, and others cannot proceed without considering Yossarian's effect on them: Yossarian loves the Chaplain at first sight (7); Milo treats him as confessor and consultant (64-69); Aarfy cannot or will not hear his fearful screams when he is wounded during a mission (151-54, 297-98); Danneeka walks him through the intricate immoral logic of "*Catch-22*." Yossarian represents one of the few constants in the cognitive bombardment of disappearances, shifts in scene and temporal sequence and sensory detail. But, whatever the characters, each group will produce a series of specific textual references, most of which they will identify by page number.

This active collaboration fulfills three objectives: (1) a sharing of each group's findings with the rest of the class; (2) a short (ten-minute) summary by each group member that draws conclusions about his/her character and connects the character with the concept "*Catch-22*;" (3) a homework assignment that asks each group member to formulate a question linking his/her character to a larger issue in the book. For example, Milo's behavior in his contractual agreements with the Germans (238, 261-62), his bombing of the squadron (265-66), and his nutritional nightmare of the chocolate-covered cotton (269) seem to put our attitudes concerning capitalism, success, the American dream, patriotism, and the competitive work ethic to the test. Are all of these principles worthless, or does the book vindicate some of them?

This question-forging activity forms the basis for the next three days of group research. At the start of the next class, each group chooses one question from among the five to six generated by its members and begins compiling a list of textual situations relevant to the question. Again, the answers to these questions matter less than participation in the process of recreating the book around them. As I have indicated, students often compose questions relating to the following areas: problems of communication, the relation of *Catch-22*'s reality to ours, the issue of belief, and comparative definitions. Whatever the questions, the widening of focus from mere observations about characters that these more general questions effect helps each student carve out a more substantial island of meaning and to envision possibilities for writing the critical analysis paper.

As I discovered during this past winter quarter, this group experience can lead to more than just the summary-analysis statements that members write after sharing the results of their research. A group collecting textual examples of communication found three separate references to the Soldier in White (10, 173-75, 373). They noted the obvious elements of the soldier's body cast, his silent, motionless state, and the black space where the mouth should be that suggest no one may be inside. Indeed, the nurses' method of draining fluids into and out of the soldier with two reversible jars continues with no attempt to measure its effect. But when the group determined that the Soldier in White on page 373 might well be different from the earlier one and that no staff person had tried to confirm "its" identity, they had discovered a useful insight on the communication problem.

Beyond a simple researched response to their question, three members of this group isolated focuses for their critical analysis: the death-resurrection theme, as seen through Yossarian's "playing dead" for a family of Italian-American mourners (189-91) and his personal awareness of the sanctity of life through mourning Snowden's death (447-50); "the quality of care" issue, a distinction between mechanical, unconscious treatment of faceless "numbers" and self-sacrifice; and a comparison between traditional and often empty verbal communication and instinctual physical gesture, sign, and symbol that, like Orr's repetitive plane crashes and valve repair, may convey a simpler truth. Discovering the text in this way re-creates a pre-writing approach to narrowing and exploring a writing topic.

The final and fifth day for group activities extends the exploration of islands of meaning. On this occasion, the groups agree to synthesize independently and then share textual evidence of larger ordering principles that make this novel about anti-form cohere. This discussion of forms and patterns matters for two reasons: first, because it forces students to think about lines of connection between the individual islands of meaning they have been researching, and, second, because this search for an organizing principle within the book parallels the same sequential process of development that they are currently pursuing in their own papers. Form follows



content; pre-writing generates the material from which patterns emerge, and questions and statements that one can articulate about those lists of materials provide alternatives for selecting from, sequencing, and shaping those lists. Most importantly, this investigation of form demonstrates the identity and reciprocity of the thinking, reading, and composing processes.

During this activity, the groups often render tentative answers to questions posed on the very first "brain-storming" encounter with *Catch-22*. Our earliest queries concerning the operation of time, place, and situational sequences reveal that most of the book consists of interrupted fragments. These fragments are dream-like and surreal, obeying no logical chronology and occurring in such a wild and blurred variety of places as to suspend them above solid ground.

In addition to Heller's dislocation of temporal and situational sequence, most of the chapters in the book are insular units. Although they deal with similar subject matter, these chapters are as isolated as the characters are alienated. Furthermore, there is no underlying plot. In its place are excruciatingly vivid, occasionally sickening descriptions (*i.e.*, the graphic excursion into Snowden's internal geography and mutilation of Kid Sampson by McWatt's airplane propeller {348}), self-contained sequences that manifest a crazy dialectic (*i.e.*, the scatological trial of Clevinger for insubordination {77-81}, Natelly's discussion of ethics and survival with the old whoremaster {249-53}, Yossarian's passive observation of the menagerie of violence in the darkened streets of Rome {421-28}, and, of course, the dissociative dialogue between Snowden and Yossarian), and a number of scenes that repeat and accrete (*i.e.*, the Soldier in White, the *deja vu* experiences of the Chaplain involving a naked Yossarian sitting in a "tree of life," and the eight scattered but successively more detailed Snowden references).

By this point in the process, the groups know their way reasonably well through the text, have established some key page references as sign-posts, and can identify some of these ordering principles. In their research journals, they write about how these repeated scenes, just like Orr's mimetic performances involving the valve and the whore's high heel, force Yossarian and *us* to re-perceive our experience of the book. And, as Webster's reminds us (along with Young, Becker, and Pike), perception means to understand by re-ordering what we see.

Regarding the formal writing assignments that evolve from such a use of *Catch-22*, I can comment only briefly. The actual form and assignment options for the critical analysis spring directly from the in-class discussion mode, short writing responses to the group activities, and two fifteen-minute individual conferences outside of class. The only point to make *in class* is that each student must settle upon, explicate, and evaluate the significance of a small part of the text and, by the end of the paper, relate that specific *part* to the whole. The paper invokes the steps of the writing process just as the thinking, reading, writing activities in-class have sought to rehearse by re-creating them.

As for the essay exam that punctuates the two and one-half week experience, the students are ready for it. Perhaps without being fully aware of it, they have contributed to the design and practice of a method of studying and re-seeing. Consistent with every other aspect of the *Catch-22* experience, questions represent the core of the essay exam—if one knows in advance by pre-writing what they will be, one can prepare responses to fit them. And not just any questions will do; they must be general yet significant enough to enable a synthesis of substantial portions of textual material.

Reproducing this process has justified using such a large text (a very short one unnaturally truncates the re-ordering experience). We discovered increasingly larger controlling questions to plumb the text, and built increasingly wider circles of meaning. Use of this heuristic device can transform anyone's preparation from an inefficiently linear to an organic one. And, unless the instructor creating the exam is an illegitimate offspring of Rasputin or some devious trickster, this device equips each student to anticipate several possible questions and to practice assembling concrete support and organizational options. Preparation for a practical task has occurred by activating the composing process, and this method should work equally well with any content-oriented course.

One final note: I am not proselytizing for *Catch-22*, nor am I implying that my method of presenting and using the book is the only one. One could well begin the course with reading and writing activities on the book, with other larger tasks like an historical analysis and an interview paper evolving from it. But, in recreating an overloaded individual thinking process that reflects confusion from sensory bombardment and only occasional ability to focus, filter, and shape that sensory data into a purposive choice, *Catch-22* provides an ideal environment to link the active focusing, filtering, and ordering processes of reading, writing, and thinking. I heartily recommend it.

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