Acquiescence in the Presence of Absurdity
—On the Zero Degree Writing in *Catch-22*

**Jingwen XU**
Sichuan University,
Shandong Polytechnic University

Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22* is one of the most representative works of the Black Humor in the 1960s, which helps the author to establish his status among the authors of experimental works. The title “Catch-22” even makes its way into the language and becomes a phrase in English. In this work, Heller delineates the life of soldiers in the WW II to reflect a series of political riots and the development of capitalism in the US after the WW II with great irony. At present, the studies on this work in China mainly focus on the style of black humor, the theme of absurdity, the power of discourse, the narrative structure and the time sequence. However, it is also important to notice the profound themes and the ironical tone is elaborately completed in the author’s calm and even cold language style, which helps to increase the effect of irony. When he describes the absurd world in the novel, he usually makes declarative statement with few comments or rarely showing his critical attitudes through the figures apparently. Heller’s silence as an author accords with the concept of “zero degree writing” come up with by Roland Barthes in *Writing Zero Degree*, which embraces literary works with neutral or unemotional
descriptions from the author. But the author’s silence over the ridiculous scenes and happenings in this novel is not quite studied. Such silence is not only a strategy to increase the effect of black humor, but also expresses the defiance against the absurdity in terms of the text. Besides, this didn’t violate the intellectual rules within the social context when the work was composed, making *Catch-22* a work reflecting the temperament of 1950s and early 1960s. This essay will analyze the zero degree writing in the text to find out how this style becomes Heller’s strategy to defy the absurdity, and interpret Heller’s seemingly acquiescence under the social context so as to study how zero degree writing deepens the themes and reflect the characteristics of the ages.

I.

It is of no controversy that in *Catch-22* Heller expresses profound deliberation on the themes of “absurdity, abuse of power, and the destructive force of capitalism or big business”.[1] However, it is hardly the case that Heller or the narrator comments directly in the descriptions of the war, the military power and the business operation of the capitalism. The author and the narrator usually keeps declarative writing style and refrain from the direct comments when confronted with the absurd rules of *Catch-22*, the abuse of military power, the greedy Milo and the greatly suffering Snowden. Searles points out, “as well as confusing the reader about the time or exact nature of the events in the novel, Heller also frequently shocks him by adopting attitudes to objects or situations opposite to the expected ones. By introducing these unexpected attitudes in a very casual way, he not only avoids to challenge the traditional value system but suggests through his tone that nothing unusual is being said, thus doubling the shock effect”[2]. In the novel, Heller describes in a seemingly casual way and avoids apparent personal values’ permeating into the text. He provides the presentation of the scenes and happenings in calm tone and from the third person point of view. The figures in the work are frequently given the opportunities to guide the development of the plot through their direct speeches and their dialogues. In this way, Heller’s participation in the development of the work is minimized. Therefore, he decreases the emotional presentation to the lowest through avoiding his personal attitudes in the text in order to show the fictional figures and the world in an objective way.

Such effort to minimize personal emotion conforms to the “zero degree writing” hailed by Roland Barthes. Bathes defines the zero degree writing as the indicative
mood writing between subjunctive mood and the imperative, and terms it as journalistic writing which is made up of objective narration and presentation of the object, with no taint of the authors' personal impulses or commands, or the sensational words. Here, this author will analyze how Heller writes at zero degree in the delineation of the war, the power, the capitalism and the absurdity through third person narration, direct speeches of a single figure and dialogues between figures so as to reduce his presence in the development of the work.

Heller usually narrates from the third person point of view in *Catch-22* to present the actions and describe the figures in an objective way. In the third person narration, he usually keeps the indicative mood to deprive the narration of personal values and authorial emotions in the work as if the scenes and the figures were presented objectively by a spectator. In the delineation of a soldier in white in the first chapter, he narrates from the third person point of view to show the physical suffering of the soldier in the war in a language devoid of any pain and does not display a hint of the accusation of the war and the fear of death.

This soldier in white, with his body in plaster and gauze, useless legs and arms, and failed circulatory systems, should have been presented as the victim of the war and as an evidence of the cruelty of the war. However, Heller does not make him the object of sympathy in the delineation of his appearance but names him "a soldier in white" and describes his physical existence in an unemotional manner. In his calm narration from the third person point of view, the readers could tell the soldier's disabled legs and arms, his body covered from head to toe, and the only hole on his body as his mouth, and learn that his body could not continue the circulatory function without artificial manners. In common sense, such physical existence as this soldier can not be named as a human being but an object without humane elements. In such neutral descriptions, the author shows no sympathetic feelings. Neither does he comment on the ruthless reactions to the soldier by Yossarian and the other roommates. What Heller does is to present the soldier from the most objective view. In such description devoid of humane comments, this soldier is a sign with symbolic significance in a sharp contrast with the author's silence, only to make an intense irony of the war.

Heller said that, he can not write about Yossarian from the first point of view because he had to present Yossarian's ideas, psychological activities and personal histories to a fuller extent if he narrates from the first person point of view. When Heller takes the third person point of view to narrate the story and organize the
narration of different plots, he does not only spare himself the efforts to elaborate on Yossarian’s thinking but also avoid to make comments on the happenings from a personal perspective. In this way, he avoids showing his personal attitudes by keeping a silent manner and keeps the distance between him and the work as if he were an outsider of the fictional world, in which his personal emotions and judgment of the scenes do not permeate into the text through the figures. This manner provides Heller a way to set himself apart from the opinions and the descriptions in the work no matter how ridiculous or sympathetic the confronted figures and the actions are, so as to enhance the objectivity of the description. Heller’s objective third person narration conforms to the standard of “zero degree writing” to a great extent by avoiding personal comments and judgment in a declarative mood.

Besides the objective third person narration, Heller in many cases also hands over the opportunities of presenting opinions and giving description of certain actions to the figures. In direct speech, the characters narrate a certain occurrence and present their opinions on the actions, in which they could express their opinions freely while the author does not have to intrude into the work and give personal comments on the figures, opinions and the actions. In Chapter Two, Yossarian complains that he feels unhappy in the hospital because nothing interesting is happening outside the hospital except the war. The uninteresting war for Yossarin, however, does help Doctor Daneeka solve an urgent problem that it is hard for him to operate his clinic with few patients coming to his office.

Fortunately, just when things were blackest, the war broke out. “It was a godsend,” Doc. Daneeka confessed solemnly. “Most of the other doctors were soon in the service, and things picked up overnight. The corner location really started paying off, and I soon found myself handling more patients than I could handle competently [...] Things couldn’t have been better [...]”[^5]

In Doc. Daneeka’s remark quoted above, Heller presents Danneka’s personal point about the war, through direct speech, as an objective viewpoint in the text without interfering into such statement by judging it ideologically, leaving it as a statement whose ideology Heller is indifferent to and has no need to comment on. The first sentence in the quotation is of course narrated from Doc. Daneeka’s point of view. In such perspective, the war which deprives the soldier in white who can only exist with the medical instruments of a human life, and should have been considered as cruel, becomes something shockingly fortunate. This cruel war takes
away the other physicians as his competitors and solves the economic embarrassment in the operation of his clinic despite the disadvantageous location. His clinic’s business thrives since then and maintains successful. That Doc. Daneeka judges the war by taking the business in his clinic and his economic gains or loss into consideration violates the common sense shared by sane minds. But Heller does not bother to refute or approve such ideas. He only accompanies such ridiculous attitude to war with a seemingly serious and elaborate justification. Doc. Daneeka’s solemn attitude works to remove the absurdity in the viewpoint and put it under the coverage of reason. It seems apparent to him that his viewpoint on the war is irrefutable and is based on his sensible understanding of life. He makes such a shocking remark not as a joke but a seriously deliberated affirmation. The suffering caused by the war is beyond his consideration. Nor is it within the author’s. Heller hardly gives any clue about his point on such statement, but presents the idea objectively through direct quotation of the figure. By direct speech, Heller does not have to convey the figure’s opinion in his words so that he can not permeate his attitude directly into it, and the figure’s viewpoint won’t be taken as his. Even when he has to transmit the perspective from third person into direct speech, he appears in the text as a witness who takes the neutral ground. Therefore, when the third person narration and the direct speech by the figure are taken together, the ridiculous opinions and the serious facial expressions are juxtaposed, and the original shocking effect of such statement can be minimized to the lowest so that the ridiculous statement is presented objectively in the text. As for the attitude of the figure, Heller keeps a neutral stance and stands distanced from any obligation to provide a comment.

Heller sometimes hands over the power of control to the figures in the text, through which the characters could carry out some crucial actions by their dialogues and the story is carried out by the figure while Heller takes a seemingly small part in the composition. Another aim under great attack in Catch-22 is the army and the powerful authority symbolized by the army. Colonel Cathcart is a symbol of the power in the work and his dialogue with Milo in Chapter Thirty-five displays the abuse of power and the absurdity of such institution to a great extent.

When Milo tries to earn the wartime credit by taking more flights, he tells Colonel Cathcart that he has taken five missions during eleven months. This number of flights makes a great irony when compared with the enforced fifty missions of flights by the other soldiers. However, Colonel Cathcart appraises that it is much
enough when thinking about Milo’s operating the mess hall in the army and says that “that’s very good... That averages out to almost one combat mission every two months”. He even mentions Milo’s bombing of their own in a casual manner: “And I’ll bet your total doesn’t even include the time you bombed us... You didn’t actually fly along on that mission, did you?” Instead of being embarrassed by the fact, Milo argues, “It does... But it was my mission... I organized it, and we used my planes and supplies. I planned and supervised the whole thing.”[6] When Milo argues that he must complete the combat missions as the other soldiers to get the credit, he proposes that someone should complete the mission for him. “Maybe we can get someone else to fly my missions for me... After all, you’re doing all this for them. They ought to be willing to do something for you in return... What’s fair is fair.”[7]

In such a funny but annoying dialogue between Milo and Colonel Cathcart, the corrupt military institution and the abuse of power is exposed to a full extent. However, Heller still does not intrude into such a shocking dialogue by attacking the military power represented by them directly. The figures carry out their conversation freely and develop the story as they wish. In their conversation, the other soldiers will be sacrificed for Milo and Milo’s business will be expanded continually. Heller hardly has the chance to stop their making use of their power to save the other soldiers or to handle the direction of the deterioration of the situation. In their conversation, the figures make the decision by themselves that someone will fly the combat mission for Milo and will probably die for him while Milo will get the credit granted to the soldier. This becomes a pivotal point in the work and from then on Milo’s business will get any possible profits on behalf of the big business machine while the soldiers will not only suffer for the food provided by Milo’s mess hall but also die for him so that Milo could get the military credit. In such a turning point, Heller keeps on being a surrogate for the two figures by being silent over their attitudes, no matter how ridiculous Colonel Cathcart’s flying only two missions is or how selfish Milo is. Heller takes part in the composition of the work only as a transmitter by keeping the figures’ opinions original and even steps outside and lets the story goes on by itself.

It is quite apparent that Heller in the passages and dialogues quoted above keeps a neutral attitude toward the war, the absurdity, the power and the destructive capitalism. The figures are free to carry out the dialogues and the author’s third person point of view narration is objective descriptions of the figure and the situation. Heller rarely interferes the dialogues or comments on the absurd logic of
the figures. Just as Barthes recommends the zero degree writing as the best form of writing style, Heller’s writing in *Catch-22*, devoid of authorial interference, does make sure the world and the figure be presented objectively. Even when he is confronted with the absurd and even misery world, Heller scarcely shows his sympathy but presents the figures’ pains and suffering in a calm or even indifferent manner, such as the soldier in white and Snowden, as if he were narrating something quite ordinary.

II.

Just as Barthes himself realizes, the effect of zero writing can not be fully achieved for the author’s attitudes are hardly unrecognizable. Although Heller does not make public his attitude towards the ironical and misery situation of the figures in *Catch-22*, he does not intent to hide his opinions from the readers but to double the shock effect. “His narrative techniques and his use of tone, depend upon a frustration of the reader’s expectations”[^8] and in the absurd or paradoxical logic raised by the figures, the effect of black humor comes to a full extent. In Heller’s seemingly casual tone, the frustrating and absurd world is displayed as a place full of helplessness. The author’s silence over the absurd world not only helps to realize the effect of black humor, but also provides the clues to interpret Heller’s understanding of the absurdity of the world, in which absurdity is an inevitable state and language is manipulated by the authority to reinforce the feeling of meaninglessness. When the world functions on absurdity and the language itself is manipulated to be running on illogical rules, it will become absurd to contend with the world by means of language and the author’s silence in the face of absurdity can be recommended as a wise choice.

Heller’s description of the shocking absurdity experienced by the soldiers in service during the Second World War in *Catch-22* is usually explained in a wider situation, showing that such absurdity is a reflection of the general existential situation of human beings. “*Catch-22* reflects a view of the world which is basically that of Jean-Paul Sartre and the early Albert Camus.” According to the philosophy of existentialism, “the world has no meaning but is simply there; man is a creature who seeks meaning. The relationship between man and his world is therefore absurd; human action having no intrinsic value is ultimately futile [...] When a man discovers these facts about his condition he has an experience of the absurd”. This is the same world experienced by the figures in *Catch-22*. No matter how hard they try,
they can not figure out the meaning of their life or find a way out of the absurd existence. And the contrast between the shocking scenes and dialogues and the indifferent and casual manner in which they are displayed belongs to the experimental techniques as "an attempt to 'dramatize' his view of the human condition rather than merely describe it"[9]. Heller does not merely describe the absurdity but also reinforce the effect received by the readers through sharp contrast between the readers' expectation and his refusal to provide a value-permeated comment.

In *Catch-22*, Heller does not show his attitude to the cruel world, but he doubles the effect of his lashing of such a world by pretending to be silence. Such silence not only shows his profound understanding of the absurdity of the world of the philosophy of existentialism, but also signifies that he tries to find out a way of defiance against the absurdity of the world. In the absurd world of existentialism, "reason and language, man's tool for discovering the meaning of his existence and describing his world, are useless"[10]. Therefore, when the language and the reason, which should sit human beings on the throne of domination in the world, is exposed to be useless, trying to establish a meaningful life or to attack the absurdity with words is destined to be futile. In *Catch-22*, language even becomes a source of absurdity, producing absurdity and frustrating the effort to understand it. So long as the world runs on absurd rules, human beings can not set up an expected order with language, nor can they seek the truth of such a world. To contend with such a world with language will also turn out to be an absurd action.

When Colonel Cargil is assigned to generate among the soldiers enough enthusiasm to attend performance by the U.S.O. troops in Yossarian's squadron, he excitedly commands that everyone must attend it while claiming that he does not mean to force them to do so.

"Now, men, it's no skin off my behind. But that girl that wants to play the accordion for you today is old enough to be a mother. How would you feel if your own mother traveled over three thousand miles to play the accordion for some troops that didn't want to watch her? [...] We all know the answer to that one. Now, men, don't misunderstand me. This is all voluntary, of course. I'd be the last colonel in the world to order you to go to that U.S.O. show and have a good time, but I want every one of you who isn't sick enough to be in a hospital to go to that U.S. O. show right now and have a good time, and that's an order!"[11]

In the passage above, Colonel Cargil emphasizes that he does not intend to force
anyone to attend the show, and works to invoke the sympathy among the soldiers to attend it voluntarily, but on the other hand he gives direct order that it is imperative that they should do it without exception. This statement is self-contradictory with no doubt, but Colonel Cargil does not cover the contradiction within. His contradictory remark exposes that the military institution itself exists as a self-contradictory body so that its authority could set up rules that conflict with each other, which contributes to the absurdity in it. Language becomes an instrument with which the army officials aggravate the absurdity. Colonel Cargil relies on his power in the army and sets up a voluntary task that the soldiers must finish. In order to fulfill his responsibility assigned by his leader, he has to abuse his power and misuses the languages by overriding the common linguistic rules and reason so that he can play his domineering role over the soldiers. The absurdity of the language will surprisingly guarantee and reinforce his power within this hierarchical system. He can maintain his democratic image and overthrow it at the same time. When the soldiers are confronted with the absurd language under the control of power, they can not even contend with it by argument. Under the overwhelming role of power, language could not be used by them to reason and argue with the absurdity, because even the rules of language are set up by authority. Language is from then on far from being neutral but is beyond the sphere of reason and sanity. The common linguistic rules shared by soldiers lose the power to contend with the absurd rules set up by authority. The reason lies in that the authority has the only power to tell the so-called right and wrong. As for this statement by Colonel Cargil, Heller does not expose its illogical composition. As an outsider of this absurd world with self-contradictory rules, Heller understands the language as his only instrument has already been tainted by the corrupt power. When the authority sets up rules and inspects the implementation of them, it becomes the ruler not only of those who has to obey the rule but also the ruler of the usage of language. It will be useless and absurd to argue against the institution with what it produces absurdity. In face of this corrupt use of language, Heller can not argue with the world by means of language any more, but can only record the absurdity objectively and leave it to be judged.

Colonel Cargil is only one of the representatives of the self-contradictory power system, and self-contradiction seems to be one of the principles many army officers abide by when giving orders. Major Major Major orders that his office hours are the time when he is not in the office, making it impossible for the visitors to meet him; "under Colonel Korn's rule, the only people permitted to ask questions were those
who never did”,[12] only the pilots who do not want to be grounded will be permitted to apply for landing. As the best example of the absurdity of the language and the rules in this fictional world, “Catch-22” becomes the trap nobody could escape. When describing this military regulation that can not be found in any written text but can be found anywhere to regulate the army, Heller makes use of the dialogue between Yossarian who has to obey it and Doc. Daneeka who turns a blind eye to the illogical composition of the regulation. In this way, Heller does not have to contend with the rule by himself to attack the ironical absurdity.

Yossarian looked at him soberly and tried another approach. “Is Orr crazy?”
“He sure is,” Doc. Daneeka said.
“Can you ground him?”
“I sure can. But first he has to ask me to. That’s part of the rule.”
[...]
“That’s all he has to do to be grounded?”
“That’s all. Let him ask me.”
“And then you can ground him?” Yossarian asked.
“No, then I can’t ground him.”
“You mean there’s a catch?”
“Sure, there’s a catch,” Doc. Daneeka replied. “Catch-22. anyone who wants to get out of combat duty isn’t really crazy...It’s the best there is.”[13]

In the world of Catch-22, the traps set up by the authority with language for their benefits are countless. The authority abuses the power to set up rules not to be violated by anyone. Catch-22 is a typical example of the invisible but ubiquitous rule operated by the illogical language of power. With no sphere transcending the regulation by it, Catch-22 becomes a symbol of the military power and regulates or even risks the soldiers’ life with self-contradictory logic at any time. It runs on the basis of mutually conflicting rules. No matter mad or not, the soldiers can not finish their combat missions but have to finish more and more missions endlessly when this catch forms a maze in which the participants have no hope of locating the exit. Yossarian is one who tries to protect himself from this catch and seek for a meaningful existence in spite of the absurdity by the means of language. He argues with Doc. Daneeka about Catch-22 and strives to solve the illogical catch to safeguard himself and the others. But finally he can only appraise the catch’s deliberate design when “he realizes that to use reason in the face of the irrational is futile”,[14] When Yossarian realizes the futility of his effort with language and reason, he chooses to say no to the catch by refusing to fly more missions, and Heller also
gives up arguing with the world and chooses to refrain from making his attitudes public in the text. When faced with a world in which all efforts are meaningless, language has also been occupied by the authority to reinforce the absurdity, it is wise to be silent about the absurdity.

Therefore, when Heller is deliberating upon Catch-22 and the absurd world, he understands the powerlessness of language. Yossarian and other figures, even when they realize the self-contradictory nature of the rules, can not defeat a world in which it is impossible to tell the right from wrong with an objective standard. Heller, an outsider of the fictional world, and “the straight man on this lunatic stage”, [15] knows clearly where the problem locates. So long as the absurdity originates from the language game manipulated by the authority, it is also absurd to fight against the game with the corrupt language. Here lies the reason why Heller does not interfere with Colonel Cargil’s public speech, not doubt Major Major’s office hours, or show his contempt for the Catch-22. “Catch-22 is, of course, Heller’s illustration of the irrational nature of the world. Any attempt to argue logically and reasonably reaches its confines.”[16] Heller’s choice to express his neutral ground by writing at zero degree is an intelligent one and such style is a sharp contrast with the figures’ absurd experience and viewpoints ironically.

III.

It can not be denied that Heller’s objective description with no direct personal comments is not only needed to enhance the themes but is also called for by the age’s ideological atmosphere. The composition of the novel started in the year of 1955 and ended in 1961. Although this work is considered by many to be a protest of the 1960s, it needs to be noticed that the novel was mainly composed in the 1950s and finished in the early 1960s. Therefore, the author’s writing style is tainted by the intellectual atmosphere both of the 1950s and the 1960s.

When Heller talks about the war in Catch-22, he mentions that most of the arguments and the humor about the current affairs are related to the happenings after the WW II and during the term of the Senator McCarthy.[17] Therefore, Catch-22 takes McCarthyism and the Cold War as its social background. “After the WW II, the unity within the American society during the war collapses swiftly, the problem of conflicting interests between different social strata emerges again, [...]. With the prevailing of McCarthyism during 1950s, many American suffer blatant doubt and injuries to such an extent that everyone feels himself imperiled. The scientists Mr.
and Mrs. Rosenberg are even executed for fabricated political crimes.”[18] The American Senator McCarthy aggravates such a politically intensified atmosphere after the WWII in the name of Cold War, manipulating and confining the civil society ideologically. The America in the 1950s fell into “an age of acquiescence”, during which the fundamentally critical ideas of the American society, especially the radical critical views dissolved without trace.[19] Conceived and mainly composed during this conservative age, the novel of Catch-22 did not and should not express radical ideas in an apparent manner. In this age of conformism, Heller took away authorial presence in the novel and avoided personal judgments about the fictional world, as a metaphor for the current affairs during his time, to be expressed directly or through the figures. No matter how absurd the world appears, Heller maintains his neutral manner and refrains from attacking it by describing whatever he sees in a relatively neutral way, so as to conform to the tendency to avoid active protest. Josh Greenfeld in 1968 also thought this novel belonged to the 1950s by being not extreme. “For if the fifties can be characterized as the age of acquiescence, when whispered demurral amounted to near heroic protest in the face of Senator McCarthy’s assault on the left, then Catch-22 belongs more to that decade than to the present one, when active protest has re-emerged in such relatively extreme forms as draft resistance and military desertion.”[20] According to Greenfeld, Yossarian in Catch-22 does not take extreme forms of protest against the political situation, and he also states that he expresses his protest of the war by desertion. Although it is controversial whether Yossarian deserts the absurd world by escape, it is undeniable that Joseph Heller appears to accept the absurd world by presenting it without radical comments.

This may be one of the reason why Catch-22 was not banned anywhere after publication.[21] Heller also mentions that “it is fortunate this novel doesn’t seem to attack anyone in terms of morality or ideology”[22]. Of course, this results partially from Heller’s efforts to be neutral and avoid attacking on any situation. Heller is profoundly aware that, the literary work must abide by certain rules as the other social products. “There is a tradition of taboo against submitting to examination many of our ideological beliefs, religious beliefs; many things that become a matter of traditional behavior, or habit, acquire status where they seem to be exempt from examination. Or even to suggest that they do be examined becomes a form of heresy.”[23]

Catch-22 was conceived and composed mainly in the 1950s. Heller knew exactly
what he should keep away from, especially in a conservative age. In an age when the
left was repressed and assaulted, and when the American culture “still cherished nice
notions about WWII”, it would be heresy to attack the war and what it represented.
Eliot Fremont-Smith recalled in the Village Voice, “demolishing these, it released an
irreverence that had, until then, dared not to speak its name”\[24\]. Therefore, in this
politically conservative context, Heller could not even raise radical ideas about the
war. It was politically safe to present a fictional world with minimized authorial
comments as if Heller did not attack it but displayed it from an objective perspective.
The zero degree writing appraised by Barthes as an autonomous body provides
Heller a chance to shelter himself from political assault while also attacks the
absurdity of the current affairs in an implicit manner. The readers who harbor the
same feelings against the situation should echo Heller’s deliberation upon the age in
such a low profile and understand the absurd experiences of the figures and the
implicit assault against the current situation.

Situated in the quiet 1950s, Heller accurately located the problems of the age,
attacked them in a low-profile manner and, to some extent, foretold the breakout of
the protest in 1960s in the novel of Catch-22. After a time of acquiescence in 1950s,
active social protests, for example, civil rights movement, feminism movement,
anti-war protest and some counterculture movement in the end of the 1960s, broke
out in a wide range. Thomas L. Hartshorne compares Yossarian’s actions with those
of the protestors in the early 1960s and states that both of them spot a limited and
realizable goal of protest to make sure they can accomplish the goal. He says that
protestors in the early 1960s “employed new styles of protest: the sit-in, freedom
rides, direct action, nonviolent resistance, nonviolent resistance, the community
organizing of the early years of the SDS, the idea of participatory democracy. At the
same time, there was a tendency to avoid explicit ideological commitments and the
discussion of long-term blueprints for the wholesale reconstruction of society”\[25\].
As the protestors in the early 1960s, Heller also employs new styles of protest.
Instead of exposing the problems of the society during the cold war in a harsh way,
he chooses a seemingly lukewarm tone. But by the contrast between the shocking
scenes and the lukewarm tone, Heller makes the effect of such zero degree writing a
success in presenting the destruction McCarthyism and the Cold War brings to the
American society in an ironical way. The irony and the implicit attacking ideas mark
the novel of Catch-22 with the characteristics of the 1960s.

Conditioned in the 1950s and 1960s, Catch-22 bore the characteristics of both
decades, the acquiescence of the former one and the protest of the latter. Conceiving in the 1950s when the intellectual sphere is under control politically, Heller took zero degree writing to be acquiescent while he could not refrain from attacking it and does so in an implicit way, which conformed to the protest in the early 1960s and further led to the extreme ways in the late 1960s. By following zero degree writing style, he could defy the social affairs while conforming to the social need of being submissive. His attitude in the novel represented how the spirit changes from submissiveness in the 1950s to protect in the 1960s. He rarely makes appeals apparently, and composes the work by dialogues and monologues of the figures and objective description. On the unreasonable rules and shocking scenes which epitomize the real condition in his decades under control of power and capitalism, he does not make comments to correct the corrupt and absurd values, frustrating the readers’ expectation. At the same time, it is recognizable that Heller exposes the hidden problems of the institutions in a deliberate manner, no matter how lukewarm his narrative tone is. The tone in Catch-22 is marked by the spirits of the decades of 1950s and 1960s, and records the transition from a submissive decade to an active one.

Notes:
[1] Kathi A. Vosevich, “An Analysis of Catch-22”, in Janet Witalec, ed., Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism, Vol.131, Farmington Hills Mich.: The Gale Group, 2003, p. 28.
[2] George J. Searles, “‘Something Happened’: A New Direction for Joseph Heller”, in Dedria Bryfonski, Phyllis Carmel Mendelson eds., Twentieth Century Contemporary Literary Criticism, Vol.8, Farmington Hills Mich.: The Gale Group, 1978, p. 277.
[3] 详见罗兰・巴尔特：《符号学原理——结构主义文学理论选》，李幼蒸译，三联书店，1988年，第102页。
[4] 详见查尔斯・鲁亚斯：《美国作家访谈录》，粟旺、李文俊等译，中国对外翻译出版公司，1995年，第146页。
[5] Joseph Heller, Catch-22, in Robert M. Scotto, ed., Joseph Heller’s Catch-22 (A Critical Edition). New York: Dell Publishing Co. Inc, 1973, p. 40.
[6] Ibid., p. 363.
[7] Ibid., p. 367.
[8] George J. Searles, “‘Something Happened’: A New Direction for Joseph Heller”, in Dedria Bryfonski, Phyllis Carmel Mendelson eds., Twentieth Century Contemporary Literary Criticism, Vol.8, Farmington Hills Mich.: The Gale Group, 1978, p. 277.
[9] Ibid., p. 275.
[10] Ibid., p. 275.
[11] Joseph Heller, Catch-22, in Robert M. Scotto, ed., Joseph Heller’s Catch-22 (A Critical Edition), New York: Dell Publishing Co. Inc, 1973, 28.
[12] Ibid., p. 35.
[13] Ibid., pp. 45-46.
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Jingwen XU, Ph. D. student at Program in English Literature and Literary Theory, College of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Sichuan University. She serves as a lecturer at School of Foreign Languages of Shandong Polytechnic University. Her academic interest covers American literature and cultural studies. Her publications include essays “On Fear of Death in White Noise” in Anhui Literature (Nov. 2009) and “The Stream of Consciousness and Reality in Mrs. Dalloway” in Youth Literature (Oct. 2009). She also does research on culture of consumption and ecology for the academic research project “The Study on the Ecological Predicament in the Context of the Culture of Consumption” authorized by Ministry of Education in Shandong.