

# A Comparative Study of Black Humor as Seen in *Catch-22* and *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*

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## Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to find the similarities and differences between *Catch-22* and *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* in the direction of literary genre in black humor. Based on works in both Chinese and English and a lot of literary criticism, the systematical research will be done in aspects of art style, language, the writing technique, major character and theme to obtain a more profound understanding of these two novels. According the research, the thesis gets conclusions as following: *Catch-22* and *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* are both tragedies, but because of the implicit and calm expression of the two authors, both the two works have the effect of comedy. The former subverts the traditional narrative mode by describing absurd plots in a spider web structure, and portrays a alienated major character - Yossarian, who wants to escape from combat, while the latter uses the traditional linear mode to depict a hypocritical character - Grandma. The two characters are both anti-heroes. Nevertheless, *Catch-22* mostly uses repetition and symbolism to reveal the cruelty of reality and wars and show human alienation, while *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* tends to use the metaphor to express the theme of original sin, violence and redemption.

**Keywords**— black humor; *Catch-22*; *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*; comparative study

## I. INTRODUCTION

As an indispensable literary genre, black humor plays a pivotal role in the history of modern American literature. The sound of laughter is mingled with sadness, and absurd stories are told in a cold and implicit tone. Academia generally thinks that black humor emerged in the 1960s, with Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* as his typical work, but in fact, as early as the 50s, the famous writer O'Connor already used the style of black humor in her works, for example, *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, whether the plot or characters are all filled with the evident color of absurdity. In recent years, many scholars have devoted themselves to exploring the characteristics of both the two works in the use of black humor, but they have tended to study them respectively rather than have made a comparative analysis of the two works.

In order to fill the gap of the existing relevant studies, this thesis aims to systematically study the similarities and differences between the two works in the use of black humor, covering artistic style, language, writing technique, character and theme, so as to obtain a more profound

understanding of the literary genre of black humor and the two works. There are five parts in the thesis: Introduction of the main content, importance and structure of the thesis are arranged in the first chapter, the second chapter mainly introduces the origin, definition and characteristics of black humor, as well as the writing background of the two works. The third chapter mainly introduces the similarities between the two works in terms of writing style, language and plot, while the fourth chapter introduces the differences between the two works in terms of writing technique and theme. The fifth chapter is the summary and reflection of this thesis.

## II. ABOUT BLACK HUMOR AND THE TWO NOVELS

This second part of the thesis will review the origin, definition, and features of black humor. At the same time, different writing backgrounds of the two novels will be introduced.

## 2.1 Black Humor

Black humor is also called comedy of despair." "Black" refers to the terrible and dark real world, while "humor" refers to a sense of relaxation, which is made by the use of comic language or a series of writing techniques, such as exaggeration, innuendo, irony, etc. Their aim is to reveal the absurd and cruel objective reality. Moreover, it is a genre of literary creation that depicts the objective reality with sarcasm and helplessness in the contradiction between individual free will and social reality. This literary style has existed since the 1950s, but it wasn't an official genre until 1960s, when the book *Black Humor* was published.

Regarding its origin, the realistic reasons for the emergence of black humor literature genre can be summarized into two points.

At first, the society was in the period of recovery after the war. America spent a lot of manpower and material resources in World War III, and suffered serious injuries and deaths. All kinds of issues, including minority, racial discrimination and the rise of the feminist movement happened. Criminal activities also emerged endlessly. Social turmoil led to people's pessimism. Americans who believed in God and reason began to doubt their beliefs, some sensitive writers in particular were so upset that they began to try to use a cynical language to express their despair of this world.

Secondly, the rapid development of science and technology affected people's material and spiritual life, and also had a certain impact on people's values. The life of people was full of pop music and fashion clothing, material progress ushered in more open mind. However, at the same time, highly developed material progress seemed to fetter the life of people. The loss of individuality and free will was what some authors worried about. Facing the disordered and dark world, writers produced much profound pessimism because they no longer believed in the religion and could not see the dawn of the future.

As for its writing style, just like its name, it expresses the dark and absurd world with humorous and ironic language. Generally speaking, it has three characteristics.

Firstly, the ironic language. Black humor works usually use the calm and reserved language. On the surface, the author is just stating the facts without any subjective attitude, but in fact, the author is mocking everything. Secondly, the anti-heroes. Characters in black humor literature are often unwilling to follow rules and even deny traditional values. In sharp contrast to other characters, they feel everyone is drunk and they are the only ones who are awake. Finally, the haphazard narrative structure. Black humor literature usually disrupts the concept of

time, space and the conventional narrative mode, taking the thought as the guide to form a disorganized plot.

## 2.2 Different Writing Backgrounds of the Two Novels

Although *Catch-22* and *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* belong to the same school of black humor literature, their writing backgrounds are utterly different. *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, written in 1953, was full of strong southern cultural characteristics and religious factors, and based on the original sin of human beings. The collapse of the southern culture and the decline of traditional culture made people's beliefs take a hit. The Catholic Church claimed that human were born with evil, with the "original sin," and people lived in the world in order to atone for their sins. Therefore, when God and religion were doubted, people began to find other ways to make atonement for the original sin. Only if religious beliefs were awakened, people could understand the truth of life. O'Connor wrote for readers who thought God has died to arouse their religious thoughts.

But *Catch-22* was written based on a very different background. It dealt with the most compelling subject of that time: war. The World War II just ended at that time, and the author, who had served as an Air Force bomber pilot in the war and had a deep experience of the conditions of war, thereby used this novel to reveal the cruelty of war.

## III. SIMILARITIES ABOUT BLACK HUMOR IN THE TWO NOVELS

This part will show the detailed information of the similarities in the *Catch-22* and *A Good Men Is Hard to Find*, including 3 aspects.

### 3.1 Comic Description of Tragic Content

Describing absurd stories with a sarcastic attitude is a major feature of black humor literature works. The two works studied in this thesis also extensively use the effect of comedy to describe pessimistic stories.

At first, in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, the work of Flannery O'Connor, comedy effects are very obvious since the opening. In the beginning, the father Bailey decides to lead the families to go on vacation in Florida, but grandma still tries to change his plan. For some time, families bicker and squabble with grandma. The argument finishes with the following dialogue.

"All right, Miss," the grandmother said. "Just remember that the next time you want me to curl your hair."

June Star said her hair was naturally curly. (O'Connor 2014:1)

The dialogue sounds ordinary, full of warmth and humor. Besides, characters are labeled as animals in the novel: the child's mother wears a headscarf like rabbit's ears; the father wears a shirt with a parrot on it; there is a monkey eating lice outside. During the journey, grandma is lively and cheerful, and also specially dresses up and says, "In case of an accident, anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady." (O'Connor 2014:2) She holds her granddaughter in her arms to play and tell stories about her marriage and the life when she was a young lady in order to show her charm. After the accident, grandma pretends injury to avoid grumble of her son, and gabbles on and on instead of being silent when she sees "Misfit". Her old trick seems humorous, whereas sending the whole family into the hell. In short, her works can always highlight the absurdity of words and deeds of the characters. Readers read with a little curiosity in the easy story description and get a reasonable but unexpected ending.

The comedy of tragic content is also a major feature of Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*. Many episodes in the novel are tragedies that make readers feel sad, but the author uses the way of comedy to tell. On the one hand, these episodes deepens the reader's mawkishness, on the other hand, they deepen the tragedy color of the story content. For example, in "the Cellar," the colonel forces the priest to admit guilt.

"Are you guilt or not guilt?"

"Innocent, Sir," the chaplain licked dry lips with a dry tongue, and leaned forward in suspense on the edge of his chair.

"Guilty," said the Colonel.

"Guilty," said the major.

"Guilty it is, then," remarked the officer without insignia, and wrote a word on a page in the folder. "Chaplain," he continued, looking up, "we accuse you also of the commission of crimes and infractions we don't even know about yet. Guilty or not ? "

"I don't know, Sir. How can I say if you don't tell me what they are?"

"How can we tell you if we don't know?"

"Guilty," decided the colonel.

"Sure, he's guilty." agreed the major. "If they're his crimes and his infractions, he must have committed them."

"Guilty it is, then," chanted the officer without insignia. (Heller 2010:443)

The conversation is illogical. The priest is on trial without knowing what is going on, but on the contrary, he is not

imprisoned, the colonel tells him to leave at once. The language of this dialogue is really compact and lengthy, full of comic effect, but it is easy to see priest's despair and fear through the repetitive language.

The writers of black humor novels make the tragic content comedic and make use of the sharp contrast between tragedy and comedy to express more desperate feelings.

### 3.2 Emotionless and Calm Language

The emotionless writing attitude means that the author does not add any subjective color and does not involve any ethical and moral evaluation in the writing process, so that readers will not be restricted by any evaluation criteria or affected by the author's personal will, they will have their own real and profound thinking after reading. In addition, the emotionless language often contains the deep and ironic meaning.

In *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, Flannery O'Connor writes in a very calm attitude. There is no background rendering, without any scene foil, just an outsider who tells the whole story without any subjective color. For example, in the plot of shooting the old lady, the author describes very directly, "The Misfit sprang back as if a snake had bitten him and shot her three times through the chest. Then he put his gun down on the ground and took off his glasses and began to clean them." (O'Connor 2014:14)

There are six verbs in a sentence, but not one adjective, which shows the degree of objectivity. Besides, the author writes in the end, "She would of been a good woman," The Misfit said, "If it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life." (O'Connor 2014:14) Words came to an abrupt end without any moral judgment. The same phenomenon also exists in Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*. For example, in the chapter of Mrs. Daneeka, Dr. Daneeka is mistakenly presumed dead because his name is kept on the list of people in the crashed plane, but in fact, he does not board the plane, he is still alive. There is a dialogue in the novel.

"Just look how cold I am right now. You're sure you're not holding anything back?"

"You're dead, Sir," one of his two enlisted men explained.

Doc. Daneeka jerked his head up quickly with resentful distrust. "What's that?"

"You're dead, sir," repeated the other. "That's probably the reason you always feel so cold."

"That's right, sir. You've probably been dead all this time and we just didn't detect it. (Heller 2010:392)

The language of the characters is plain and calm, which makes people laugh a lot when they read it. However, there is no doubt that after the mockery, they can really feel the strong sense of satire, which causes people to think deeply about the ruthlessness of the war.

### 3.3 Anti-heroes

Black Humor literature genre is good at creating anti-hero. "Anti-hero" refers to the contrastive image of "hero", marking the publicity of individualism, the decline of traditional moral concept and people's doubts about ideal and faith. Furthermore, "anti-hero" negates all traditional views, and obeys social values in the opposite direction. This kind of character image can be seen in *Catch-22* and *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*.

First of all, in the novel *Catch-22*, Yossarian is a typical anti-hero. In the war, people are actively contributing to society, but Yossarian, after seeing the selfish ideas of superiors and finding that they are doing cruel things with lie of patriotism, only wants to survive. He is determined to stay in the hospital, not on the front line to fight. He rejoices in his stable body temperature of one hundred and one degree Fahrenheit, so that he can stay in the hospital. As an officer, he should check all the letters of soldiers, but Yossarian does not check carefully or responsibly.

After the first day no curiosity at all. To break the monotony he invented games. Death to all modifiers, he declared one day, and out of every letter that passes through his hands went every adverb and every adjective. The next day he made war on articles. He reached a much higher plane of creativity the following day when he blacked out everything in the letters but a, an and the. (Heller 2010:8)

On the surface, Yossarian is quite absurd and even a little irresponsible, but in fact, his behavior reflects the darkness and decay of the society and the darkness of the bureaucracy from the side. His weird behavior is like a distorting mirror to reflect the chaotic world and desperate human beings.

Secondly, in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, the old lady is also a typical anti-hero. In order to let Bailey go to the house she wants, she pretends that there are vessels of silver, but they are never found. She arouses the children's curiosity, so Bailey is urged to arrive at that old house. It's the beginning of the tragedy, from here it can be seen that the old lady is a very cunning woman. When the car turns into a roadside ditch, when "Misfit" appears and wants to kill them, the old lady is still persuading "Misfit".

"You wouldn't shoot a lady, would you?" the grandmother said and removed a clean handkerchief from her cuff and began to slap at her eyes with it.

Listen, the grandmother almost screamed, I know you're a good man. You don't look a bit like you have common blood. I know you must from nice people."

"Bailey Boy!" the grandmother called in a tragic voice but she found she was looking at The Misfit squatting on the ground in front of her. "I just know you're a good man," she said desperately. "You're not a bit common!"

"Pray, pray," the grandmother began, pray, pray..." (O'Connor 2014:9-12)

From these descriptions, on the one hand, the old lady is urging "Misfit" not to kill her. She keeps reminding "Misfit" that he is a good boy, even if she knows that he is not, but a man full of sin. She calls out Bailey's name, but at this time she cares more about her own life. On the other hand, the old lady keeps praying. She believes in Christianity, but she is afraid in the face of death, which shows that she is not a true believer in Christianity and is very hypocritical. Her selfish, hypocritical and absurd character image is portrayed incisively and vividly, which violates the image of "hero".

## IV. DIFFERENCES ABOUT BLACK HUMOR IN THE TWO NOVELS

In this part, the differences between *Catch-22* and *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* will be analyzed in the terms of narrative technique and themes.

### 4.1 Narrative Technique

The black humor literature cannot be separated from successful use of writing skills.

First of all, the technique of repetition is used in *Catch-22*. There are not only a lot of repetitive words, but also several repetitive plots. The word "mission" repeats many times in *Catch-22*, 302 times in all. It runs through out the whole novel with shorter and shorter intervals, and more and more flights required. This repetition makes the readers perceive cruelty of superiors, and makes the plots more intense.

Secondly, the repetition of the plot is also obvious. For example, the description of the "soldier in white" in the novel. "The soldier in white was encased from head to toe in plaster and gauze. He had two useless legs and two useless arms. Sewn into the bandage over the insides of both elbows were zippered lips through which he was fed clear fluid from a clean jar, The only thing visible is the worn black hole around the top of the cavity. Nurse Duckett found the soldier dead until a temperature check." (Heller 2010:10) This scene is described three times in all,

respectively in chapter 1, chapter 17 and chapter 34. In short, as Nicholas Bayley says, "The structure of the novel is a recurring plot process. (Bayley 1998:57) And this repetition has its specific narrative effect. As Cheng Yanxi said, "These recurring themes, together with some recurring characters, events and languages make this seemingly scattered work have internal cohesion and unity." (Cheng Xilin 2006:44)

Finally, this novel is also good at using symbolic technique of expression. The most obvious example is the clue throughout the book: Catch-22. The content of the Catch-22 is as follows: on the basis of Catch-22, a madman can stop flying, but he must have evidence which can prove he is a madman, and at the same time, it also stipulates that those who can realize the danger of flight and make an application for flight exemption should continue to perform the flight mission. Moreover, Catch-22 says that pilots can return home after finishing specified times of flying, but the superior gives the pilot more and more flights, and they can not defy him because pilots must obey orders. Seemingly simple Catch-22 is actually a trap that goes round and round, which symbolizes the chaotic and unreasonable bureaucracy of the United States at that time, and reflects the bitter and desperate life of the Americans who can not disobey.

Whether it is repetition or symbolism, the author intends to deepen the absurd color. The sad plots are repeated over and over again to strengthen the readers' memory, thus forming a dark and melancholy picture in the mind. Moreover, they make the readers fall into deep thinking after laughing.

O'Connor is not good at using repetition and symbolism in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, instead she uses metaphor. For example, the important character "Misfit" in the novel is a metaphor for the person who is incompatible with the world and is distorted by the injustice of society. Misfit" once has faith in god and believes in happiness. However, after returning to his hometown after the World War III, he is sentenced to jail, and doctors in the prison say he is in jail because he kills his father. "Misfit" can not believe such a lie, because his father has died of flu in 1919. "Misfit" racks his brain trying to remember exactly what he has done, but he can not. He is still unable to understand why he is punished, not others. From the plot of the story, "Misfit" has experienced various hardships of life, which make him begin to question God. The chaos of reality and the absurdity of existence make him believe that only through madness and violence can modern man find the meaning of himself and his existence.

In addition, this novel also involves many environmental descriptions. The woods where the car turns over, for

example. The author describes the woods just as a dark opening mouth, which can engulf them at any time. In this woods, the families all die. Therefore, the woods, in fact, is the hell, and the families fell into the hell of death.

The dark humor of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* is based on these metaphorical plots. The author does not express the characters and environment in straightforward language but brings out the thought-provoking plots through the relaxed and humorous style. Seemingly, the author is joking, but actually, she is hinting at a terrible ending.

#### 4.2 Different Theme

The theme of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* is mainly divided into two points. The first point is original sin, and the second point is violence and redemption.

At first, *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* already illustrates the theme in its title, which is full of black humor: good people are hard to find or there are no good people. This point comes from the doctrine of original sin of Augustine, meaning "everyone has sin." However, O'Connor does not directly use original sin or suchlike similar title to name her novel, but naming in another way and at the same time, retaining its original meaning. This way of naming is very ironic, just like a humorous exclamation for human, but its rooted meaning is actually connected with the original sin, and aims to satirize people who have lost religious beliefs and ignored original sin in that time. The content of doctrine of original sin is: because of the fall of Adam, all people born in this world have become slaves of sin, and no one can fully choose to follow God, and avoid sin or receive salvation except by the grace of God. Therefore, there is no good man in the world. The people who claim that he is a good man will not obtain the redemption, because he knows less of his guilty conscience. The only way to obtain the redemption is to realize the salvation of his sins.

"On the journey, the old woman smuggled the cat along, intend for the cat to be left alone in the house for three days because she would miss her too much and she was afraid that it might brush against one of her gas burners and accidentally asphyxiate itself." (O'Connor 2014:2) The old lady pretends to be a good person all the time, but she can not help showing her hypocrisy. When the old lady sees the black children without pants, instead of feeling sorry for their poverty, she says, "Oh, look at the cute little pickaninny...Wouldn't that make a picture, now?...If I could paint, I'd paint that picture." (O'Connor 2014:3) Her pride in her artistic sense and pretended elegance make her like a good man." However, the guise or hypocrisy is itself a mistake, the grandma can not realize her sins, but continues to make mistakes pretending to be "a good

man." Her hypocrisy is absurd, her efforts in being perfect and gentle are also absurd. The author does not directly write her sin, even none of a word about it. On the contrary, she still shows how the grandma pretends to be gentle, which creates an image of an old brat and lets the readers find her sins themselves.

The second important theme is violence and redemption. According to O'Connor, the sinner himself will not voluntarily confess his guilt. Only by breaking his fixed ideas and pushing him to the edge of helplessness can he realize the harm of the sin caused by the weakness of human nature and obtain the grace of God. In this novel, the violence saves two main characters. The first is the old lady. She has claimed to be a true believer of God, and her religious beliefs are very strong. She tries to move "Misfit" in her own words, and let the "Misfit" pray for the salvation of God. But when the "Misfit" is going to kill her, she no longer believes in God, because God does not intend to save her from death.

Hiram and Bobby Lee returned from the woods and stood over the ditch, looking down at the grandmother who half sat and half lay in a puddle of blood with her legs crossed under her like a child's and her face smiling up at the cloudless sky.(O'Connor 2014:14)

This part tells that the violence saves the grandma, instead of writing plainly. O'Connor describes it implicitly. If readers have no religious knowledge, they will feel this death position is strange, even ridiculous. And readers may question why focus on the death position of the old grandmother. This is the characteristic of black humor, which hides deep meaning in the depths, allowing readers to find deep meaning behind plain words. What's more, in order to survive, she strokes "Misfit" like a mother, comforts him and encourages him. Although she does not escape from death in the end, she becomes a true believer and is saved by God through her death.

The second is the redemption of "Misfit". The "Misfit" is a miserable man. The indifference of the world and the unfairness of society make him, an honest boy, turn into a murderous thug. He has no faith, his life is no fun, and his heart is empty. Therefore, he kills people to find the fun of living and prove the existence of his own. After killing the old woman, an accomplice says: "Some fun!" Misfit says: "Shut up. It's no real pleasure in life." (O'Connor 2014:14) This shows that "Misfit" has realized that killing can not get the fun he wants, and he has to continue to flee in this boring world. He understands this truth, and his heart has been redeemed, and this redemption is also brought to him by violence. The novel concentrates on the description of morbid or abnormal characters, which also contributes to the formation of the theme, that is to say, the theme of A

*Good Man Is Hard to Find* is presented through the morbid or abnormal characters. With the unembellished language, the novel becomes a successful and representative one of black humor novels.

The main theme of *Catch-22* is alienation. It runs through the whole novel. First of all, the alienation of society and the powerful bureaucracy directly cause the alienation of character. The well-known *Catch-22* is formulated in the army, which asks pilots to absolutely obey orders. It means the officers can increase flight number without constraints, because the pilot must obey. In addition, madman is allowed to stop flying, but the madman will not admit that he is. People who admit would not be madmen, then they must continue to fly. This irrational and insane system deprives pilots of freedom, dignity and life. Besides, the interpersonal relationship is not harmonious.

The most obvious character of alienation is the protagonist - Yossarian. Yossarian originally is a kind and honest person, full of sense of justice. He has made a lot of meritorious military service, which promotes him to be a captain. However, when he witnesses all sorts of absurdity in the army, he starts to be mad and despairing, trying to escape from the mission and return home. As a famous officer in the war, Yossarian's alienation is purely caused by the darkness and injustice of the system. Facing the darkness of society, he does not try to solve it, but flee from it. This manner is contrary to the normal human nature, which is complete alienation.

Alienation, in fact, is the result of chaotic society. The alienated society does not have strict discipline, the alienated *Catch-22* lacks logic, and the alienated characters become abnormal. They all make the novel absurd. What differs from *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* is that *Catch-22* focuses more on the presentation of absurd facts. On the surface, the theme of alienation reflects the abnormality of various things, but actually, it satirizes and mocks the darkness and decay of the society. The absurd plots, preposterous rules, and ridiculous characters are combined with plain language to embody the characteristics of black humor.

Although the themes of these two works are different, they both embody the meaning of black humor novel: to expose the absurd reality. On the basis of reality, the authors turn their feelings into words, telling the story of despair and helplessness.

## V. CONCLUSION

In view of the comparative study of black humor in *Catch-22* and *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, this thesis is based on the Chinese and English versions of the two works and

a large number of literary criticism. The artistic style, language, writing technique, character and theme of the two works are systematically studied, readers will gain a more deep going understanding of the two works.

Through the study, this thesis has analyzed the similarities and differences of black humor in *Catch-22* and *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*. The similarities are: both of the two works use the language of comedy to describe the tragic stories. The language used by the authors is implicit and emotionless. Their main characters are "anti-heroes". Their differences are: the two works use different main writing techniques. *Catch-22* is good at using symbolism and repetition, *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* is good at using metaphor. In addition. The main theme of *Catch-22* is alienation, while *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* focuses on original sin, violence and redemption.

Obviously, the above findings of this study are of remarkable relevance to the comparison between the two works. These findings may have the following theoretical and experimental implications: There is still insufficient research on the similarities and differences between the two works. This thesis only mentions three points of similarities and two points of differences. But in fact, it also has more similarities and differences between them ready to be explored.

At the same time, however, this study also suffers from certain limitations such as the following: (1) Due to the limitation of space and time and the writer's ability, the theoretical exploration of the comparison between *Catch-22* and *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* is still not adequate enough, and needs to be further expanded and improved in content and form in the future. (2) Due to the lack of conditions and resources, the comparative illustration of the structure in terms of black humor between *Catch-22* and *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* cannot be satisfactorily studied, and future studies should explore it.

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