

On the Spatial Structures of the Narrative in *Catch-22*

HE Ya-yi

Sichuan University, Chengdu, China

Joseph Heller (1923-1999)'s celebrated novel *Catch-22* (1961) portrays the predicament of an individual, Captain John Yossarian of the 256th US Army Air Squadron, drifting apart in a helpless prodigious world. The absurdity and ludicrousness of the reconstructed world is strengthened by the elements of space in the narrative text. Drawing on Gabriel Zoran's model of structuring of space within the fictional world, this essay analyzes the three levels of the structuring of space, namely the topographical level, the chronotopic level, and the textual level, and their functions in the novel. Topographical structures magnify the despair and deadly threats prevalent during wartime, whereas chronotopic structures underscore individual's active endeavours and spiritual renewal in the face of institutional coercion. Textual structures, with three aspects of the text, the essential selectivity of language, the linearity of the text, and the point of view, bring forward the picture of the personal agony embedded in the grand establishment.

Keywords: *Catch-22*, topographical structure, chronotopic structure, textual structure

There are so many miseries inflicted upon the characters in the fictional world of *Catch-22* that they are constantly strangled to death at the mercy of the military bureaucracies. The method to highlight the atmosphere of desperation is sometimes through the aid of the structuring of space within the reconstructed world. The self-contradictory law clause known as *Catch-22* is most representative of the absurdity of the world, which pose threats to the lives of men in the squadron. Facing the dilemma, individuals such as Yossarian and Orr, act voluntarily to preserve their existence. From the perspective of Yossarian, a sane man living among maniacs, despair grows with the occurrence of preposterous events. His personal agony is portrayed by Heller under the frame of a larger background to criticize the bureaucracy of the institution.

The spatial elements in *Catch-22* reveal most conspicuously in the varying geographical field in which actions take place, the social landscape of the novel, and the structure of the plot. Gabriel Zoran, in his article "Towards a Theory of Space in Narrative" (1984) divides the structuring of space within the fictional world into three levels: the topographical level, the chronotopic level, and the textual level. This essay, based on Zoran's model, shall identify the aspects of space in the text and explore how they contribute to the depiction of a world of inexorable absurdity and the conscious struggles of individuals trapped inside the living hell.

Topographical Structures and the Threat of Death

Zoran defines topographical structure to be “a kind of map based on elements from the entire text, including all its components” (1984, p. 316), which is founded on certain sets of oppositions, including “relationships such as inside and outside, far and near, center and periphery, city and village” (p. 316). The topographical structure in *Catch-22* bears significance in portraying human fragility when threatened by death with a series of oppositions. As the protagonist, Yossarian’s experience with death is most thoroughly discussed.

Yossarian’s fear of death is firstly displayed in the opposition of inside and outside. He has witnessed the tragic end of many fellow soldiers out on the bombing mission, the inevitable annihilation of the new recruit Snowden and the death of Kraft and his whole crew over the bridge of Ferrara for instance. To be outside on the battlefield is to place himself under the gloom of destruction. What Yossarian can do is to retreat from the outside into the inside out of an existential impulse to ensure his own safety. He takes advantage of a minor liver condition and lingers inside the hospital where “there was a much lower death rate inside the hospital than outside the hospital, and a much healthier death rate” (Heller, 1962, p. 170). The hospital represents a peaceful space for the bombardier where it is justified to stay away from the flight missions. Therefore, Yossarian holds on to every opportunity to be quarantined inside the white walls. He pleads with Doc Daneeka for issuing an order that would ground him, yet in vain. He imitates the soldier who sees everything twice by shouting “I see everything twice!” (Heller, 1962, p. 185), however, the doctor’s diagnosis of him being mentally ill still is unable to protect Yossarian from the sufferings happening outside. He has to be returned to the battlefield and be constantly reminded of the tragic deaths of his comrades.

Another illustration of the opposition of inside and outside is reflected in the space of the squadron and that of the city of Rome. When Yossarian is confined to the squadron on the island of Pianosa, he is coerced into flying missions whose number is perpetually raised by Colonel Cathcart and lives in the tent with the belongings of the disavowed deceased soldier Mudd. Both things are branded on his mind to remind him of the menace of self-destruction, thus the space of the squadron resembles imperiling hell from which he is incessantly hoping to escape. His eagerness to flee from the war is so fervent that he takes emergent rest leave to Rome the instant the bombing mission is over, or even risks court-martial by going AWOL. Rome is not only a shelter from violence and death, but more importantly, “sexual excitement is catered for in the leave-trips to the brothels of Rome” (Way, 1968, p. 261). Yossarian’s romantic encounter with Luciana, together with his active participation in paid sex, becomes the tool for letting out his repressed emotions of “painful recognition of his own mortality and personal involvement, his acceptance of individual guilt and a need for a new set of values” (Mellard, 1968, p. 36). After Luciana scribbles her name and address on a piece of paper when leaving, Yossarian “tore the slip of paper up and walked away in the other direction” (Heller, 1962, p. 167). The refusal to get attached to someone else, along with his general principle of *carpe diem* while in Rome, proves exactly how deep Yossarian is frightened by the cruelty inside the squadron.

Zoran believes that topographical structures within the narrative can signify the space in which man and object are present, and “they may relate to one another in relationships in themselves completely unspatial, such as the relationship between the space of a dream and that of reality” (Heller, 1962, p. 317). The opposing

topographical structure of space in *Catch-22* is indicated by Yossarian's recurring nightmare of Snowden's inevitable death. The picture of Snowden severely wounded, lying on the plane with Yossarian incapable of alleviating his pain traumatizes Yossarian to a large extent that he constantly relives this memory. His conversation between the dying man often reappears during the course of other events happening in real life, and then disrupts "the ordinary memories of adults in a verbal, linear narrative that is assimilated into an ongoing life story" (Herman, 2015, p. 37). The discontinuity in the narrative caused by traumatic experiences with death concretizes the unspoken agony of the character in the novel.

The topographical structures within the fictional world externalize the inner agony of the character by intensifying the prevalence of violence and death, and thereby strengthens the sense of desperation and helplessness of the text.

Chronotopic Structures and the Characters on Action

The second level of the structuring of space in the reconstructed world is the level of chronotopic structure, which is defined as "an integration of spatial and temporal categories as movement and change" (Heller, 1962, p. 318). There are synchronic and diachronic relationships within the chronotopos of the narrative space. Synchronic relations "state that there are certain objects in space which are characterized by their capacity for movement and others which remain at rest" (Zoran, 1984, p. 318), while diachronic relations determine "*axes of movement*" and "state that space, on the chronotopic level, is structured as a network of axes having definite directions and a definite character" (Zoran, 1984, p. 319). The chronotopic structures in *Catch-22* explore how different individuals react in the face of impending doom, and at the same time portray the transformation of the same participant in war in a form of a spiritual journey to maturity.

Synchronic relationships in the novel are implied with the comparison of rest and movement displayed by the protagonist and his roommate Orr. At the beginning of the novel, Yossarian makes some effort to evade the responsibility of flying bombing missions by pleading Doc Daneeka for grounding himself and hiding inside the hospital with his liver condition as an excuse. When these attempts turn out to be either fruitless or temporary, Yossarian ceases the endeavour to alter his current circumstance and retreats to a be merely a spectator for he holds the view that "it was all a sensible young gentleman like himself could do to maintain his perspective amid so much madness" (Heller, 1962, p. 21). It is the day the number of required missions is raised to sixty that pilot Dobbs rushes into Yossarian's tent and reveals to the latter of his plan to assassinate Colonel Cathcart. It seems that Yossarian's refusal of participation in the murder formulation stems from his approval of man's right to live: "he's got a right to live, too, I guess" (Heller, 1962, p. 232). However, this declaration of human right only covers up Yossarian's reluctance to act, to remove himself from the perils in life, for he later develops the idea of killing Colonel Cathcart himself, which would succeed if he had the assistance. Comparing with Yossarian, Orr is always on the move to save himself from the absurdity of war. He is intelligent enough to fake a mask of a moron by constantly mentioning the story of the whore in the apartment of Rome hitting him over the head with shoes, by talking in a discontinuous and fragmented manner, and by performing the role of a mediocre pilot who drops the plane into water. Only in this way can Orr avoid suspicion from others about the possibility of him fleeing from the battlefield and practice the technique to row a raft. His perseverance turns out to be worthwhile when Orr finally captures the opportunity to vanish after the

plane crash and rows to Sweden where he would no longer worry about his safety. The two distinct styles of dealing with the bombing missions reflect the opposition of rest and movement in the characters of Yossarian and Orr. It is only active efforts that will aid oneself in protecting his/her life. Nevertheless, Yossarian does not remain in stillness toward the end of the novel.

Diachronic relations determine the axe of movement in space, which is revealed in the text on Yossarian's journey from desperation to spiritual renewal. Yossarian's initial belief in working within the military bureaucracy is gradually shaken by the decease of comrades as Nately, Clevinger, and Snowden, by the invisible disappearance of Dunbar, and by the preposterous technical death of Doc Daneeka. When he goes without permission to the city of Rome, he reminisces about all the people who have met their tragic end in the war, and his conscience reminds him to rescue Nately's whore and her sister. Yossarian, during that momentous night, participates "in the archetypal pattern of the descent and renewal of the romance hero" (Doskow, 1967, p. 186). After learning that Nately's whore and her sister have been expelled from the apartment with the consent of *Catch-22*, Yossarian is disappointed by the whole institution because an epiphany comes to him: "Catch-22 did not exist, he was positive of that, but it made no difference. What did matter was that everyone thought it existed" (Heller, 1962, p. 418). He makes up his mind to find out the whereabouts of the kid sister of Nately's whore in order to protect her innocence. Walking through the city in the nighttime, Yossarian witnesses all sorts of evil and distortion lurking on earth—children being tortured and animals being beaten makes him wonder "how Christ must have felt as he walked through the world, like a psychiatrist through a ward full of nuts, like a victim through a prison full of thieves" (Heller, 1962, p. 424). Overwhelmed by the absurdities, Yossarian rushes to the officers' apartment only to discover the corpse of Michaela, the only woman in that apartment who does not descend into prostitution. Yossarian sinks into deeper despair than that caused by Aarfy's brutal crime when the policemen arrest himself for going AWOL while ignoring the inhuman rape and murder. Seeing no hope for injustice to be remedied, Yossarian decides to care for his benefit only and accepts the "odious deal" (Heller, 1962, p. 451) with Colonel Cathcart and Colonel Korn. This submissive attitude of his does not remain for long, for the enduring memory of the dying Snowden once again haunts Yossarian after his being wounded by Nately's whore. He now discovers the essence of human life: "The spirit gone, man is garbage. That was Snowden's secret. Ripeness was all" (Heller, 1962, p. 450). With the newly-found understanding of man, Yossarian has the courage to break off the deal with Colonel Cathcart and Colonel Korn as a gesture to rebel against the manipulation of military bureaucracies. His ultimate decision to run away to Sweden symbolizes his power to take the initiative in seizing one's own freedom.

To analyze the state of movement and rest of the characters and the movement of plot serves to better interpret the characteristics of spatial patterns in *Catch-22*. The chronotopic structures help to delineate the individual's active endeavours and spiritual renewal in the face of coercion. Those who are capable of taking measures to resolve difficulties are commended, as well as human's persistent efforts in face of annihilation.

Textual Structures and the Individual in Society

The third level of Zoran's model of narrative space is the level of textual structure, which is "formed within the verbal text" and is "an organization of the reconstructed world" (Zoran, 1984, p. 319). The patterns

of organization are mainly related to three aspects of the verbal text: the essential selectivity of language, the linearity of the text, and the point of view (Zoran, 1984, p. 320). *Catch-22*'s spatial features of narrative accord with these aspects, which assist in delineating personal agony embedded in the grand institutions.

When it comes to the selectivity of language, Zoran holds the view that due to language's inability to express all elements of space, "it may express some things in a concrete way, others in a vague or general way, and may ignore still others altogether" (Zoran, 1984, p. 320). The differentiation between the modes of narrative of different soldiers in *Catch-22* has the effect of exaggerating the absurdities existing in the fictional world. There is the fully-given account of Milo Minderbinder bombing his own squadron in exchange for money from the enemy. The scale of the attack is described with details, including a thorough portrayal of the aftermath of the headquarter: "men bolted from their tents in sheer terror and did not know in which direction to turn. Wounded soon lay screaming everywhere" (Heller, 1962, p. 264). Ironically, Milo is never sent for trial or even punished in any sense for his act of treason due to his vast fortunes. By bribing the government and allying with military bureaucracy like Colonel Cathcart, Milo's commercial empire expands. He succeeds in making profit from the brutality of war and the suffering of other soldiers, for nepotism allows him to coerce someone else into flying his bombing missions. Compared with the selfish profiteer in the war, the victims of the war are sometimes only narrated in a vague or general way, the case in point being the dead man in Yossarian's tent. What Mudd looks like and how he vanishes in air is mentioned little, for "Mudd was the unknown soldier who had never had a chance, for that was the only thing anyone ever did know about all the unknown soldiers-they never had a chance. They had to be dead" (Heller, 1962, p. 111). The disappearance of Dunbar is even described with less concrete information as there is only one clause "who was nowhere to be found" (Heller, 1962, p. 376). The obscurity in narration as to the victimized people during the war strengthens the effect that human lives are so insignificant when placed in gigantic establishments.

As to the linearity of the text, Zoran suggests that the ordering of spatial units in the text may be based on the tracing of movement in space, on the topographical level, or on nonspatial orders such as catalogues of items belonging to a similar category, functional relationships, or scales of various kinds, which will influence the reconstructed space (Zoran, 1984, p. 321). Discontinuity and repetition are distinctive features of the textual structure of *Catch-22*, which is revealed in the way the plot is narrated and the way recurring scenes are delineated. The arrangement of each chapter is loosely connected to the linear time, but rather inserted into interruptions and repetitions, which indicates that "the war is an unchanging condition of absurdity and terror, and it would be a falsification to suggest that there could be any orderly development of this situation, in time, towards a resolution" (Way, 1968, p. 267). The chaplain defines the feeling of experiencing one event for several times as *déjà vu*, which suggests the universality and circulation of human experience during the time of ludicrousness and horror.

When it comes to the point of view, Zoran proposes that the spatial perspective of language is based on "a binary opposition of *here* and *there*" (Zoran, 1984, p. 322). There are two forms of here-there relationship: "between the spatial location of the act of narration and the 'world' as a whole; and, within the 'world,' between things perceived at a certain instant as in the foreground and those perceived as in the background" (Zoran, 1984, p. 322). The spatial location of the narration of certain characters in the novel implies a grandiose sociological purpose underlying the plot. Milo's commercial enterprise serves as one instance of bureaucracy

and power élite, which is established on the toil and agony of other people. His declaration that links the welfare of his syndicate with that of the American country echoes Charles Wilson's stunning quotation as the former president of General Motors announced: "What's good for General Motors is good for the country." The aspects of real life embedded in the world as a whole make room for social criticism. The second way of here-there relationship deals with things perceived in the foreground and those perceived in the background. As in *Catch-22*, pairs of characters construct this form of here-there relationship, most conspicuous of which is indicated by Yossarian and the chaplain. When the chaplain first encounters Yossarian in Snowden's funeral, he mistakenly regards his glimpse of the naked man on the tree as an illusion, yet the picture leaves a deep influence upon him, making him pay attention to Yossarian, which results in his unconscious solicitude for the latter. The chaplain acts in Yossarian's benefit to endeavour to persuade Colonel Cathcart into sending the soldiers home, and covers up his misdemeanour such as forging the chaplain's name when censoring letters. At the end of the novel, the chaplain accompanies Yossarian in the hospital and supports his decision of fleeing from Italy. Meanwhile, Yossarian's rebellious conduct of seeking freedom, in return, contributes to the chaplain's transformation from submissiveness to assertiveness. The interactions between those two characters, one in the background and the other in the foreground, assist in bringing forward spatial aspects to the text as well as in introducing a sense of connectivity to the characters.

Textual structures in *Catch-22*, with the essential selectivity of language, the linearity of the text, and the point of view, provide abundant references to narrative space for the reader, and ultimately bring forward the picture of the personal agony embedded in the grand institutions.

Conclusion

The absurdity of the fictional world in *Catch-22* is delineated with aspects of space in the narrative text. The topographical structures externalize the inner agony of the character by intensifying the prevalence of violence and death, and thereby strengthens the sense of desperation and helplessness of the text. The chronotopic structures help to portray the individual's active endeavours and spiritual renewal in the face of coercion. Those who are capable of taking measures to resolve difficulties are commended, as well as human's persistent efforts to avoid annihilation. Textual structures, with three aspects of the text, the essential selectivity of language, the linearity of the text, and the point of view, bring forward the picture of the personal agony embedded in the grand establishment.

References

- Doskow, M. (1967). The night journey in *Catch-22*. *Twentieth Century Literature*, 12(4), 186-193, <https://doi.org/10.2307/440667>.
- Heller, J. (1962). *Catch-22*. New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc.
- Herman, J. (2015). *Trauma and recovery*. New York: Basic Books.
- Mellard, J. M. (1968). "Catch-22": "Déjà vu" and the Labyrinth of Memory. *The Bucknell Review*, 16(2), 29-44.
- Way, B. (1968). Formal experiment and social discontent: Joseph Heller's "Catch-22". *Journal of American Studies*, 2(2), 253-270, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27552843>.
- Zoran, G. (1984). Towards a theory of space in narrative. *Poetics Today*, 5(2), 309-335, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1771935>.