***Catch-22*: Themes, Satire, and Symbolism**

Directions:

1. Catch-22 is a longer read than typical during the school year; therefore, I usually assign it as a summer read. These activities are designed to review the novel and key aspects of the novel upon return from the summer. The students have not only completed the reading of the novel, but they have also been required to blog/respond online to general reading questions. These activities focus more on key stylistic and literary elements of the novel.

2. The attachments are resources for the teacher to use to help students recognize the author’s craft in developing themes, in utilizing satire to ridicule American society and its institutions, and in recognizing and identifying complex symbols in the novel *Catch-22*.

3. The teacher should start with Resource #3 as it is a series of six questions that can be used to begin discussion of “big ideas” in *Catch-22*. This document can be displayed via document camera and students can work in pairs or small groups to answer one or all of the questions. The answers can then be reviewed together as a class. Resource #4 is a PowerPoint that reviews suggested responses to the questions.

* Note to teacher: While students may have worked and shared ideas online over the summer, this may be their first face-to-face discussion. This gives students an opportunity to get to know or reacquaint themselves with their peers they will have class with this year. Most of the questions have been addressed in a superficial manner online through comprehension questions. This gives the students six questions to focus on in-depth. Require students to supply specific citations from the text to support their answers.

4. The teacher should review irony, satire, and black humor. Notes are provided here with examples from the novel for support.

* **Irony, Satire, and Black Humor-** Writers often combine irony, satire, and black humor to express their themes and ideas, because the three techniques work together well. Heller uses all of these techniques liberally in *Catch-22*.
* One definition of irony is the use of words to express something other than their literal meaning—or even the opposite of their meaning. Thus, naming a pilot who is inexperienced at his craft "Kraft" is an ironic choice.
* Satire is the holding up of human vices and follies to ridicule or scorn through wit and sarcasm. *Catch-22* is a social satire, ridiculing targets such as the military (an example would be Scheisskopf’s absurd obsession with military parades) and big business (witness the success of Milo's M & M Enterprises: countries that are actually at war with each other hypocritically do business with each other as well). Satire usually involves extremes, and certainly much of the absurdity in *Catch-22* is due to extreme examples of bureaucracy run amok, or capitalism at its most corrupt.
* The absurdity Heller creates is also funny, although not in a lighthearted way. Heller uses black humor, that is, humor with a dark tone to it, or an edge. Joking about death, for example, is a form of black humor. Thus, when Heller makes the army unable to recognize that Mudd is dead and Doc is alive (because they have more faith in the military's records than in the reality of one dead and one live body), it is black humor.

5. The teacher can now use Resource #5, which is a PowerPoint that walks students through satire in *Catch-22*. Slides provide quotations from the novel and ask what is being satirized and what technique the author used to create the satire. Each quotation slide is followed by a suggested response slide. There are six provided. Students could be asked to find additional examples and provide explanations as a follow-up to this review.

6. The teacher should review theme statements vs. theme topics. Remind students that theme topics are big ideas that are addressed in the novel, but are not complete. Theme topics include ideas like love, personal relationships, war, etc. A theme statement is what the author wants the reader to understand about the theme topic based on the reading of his or her novel. Here is a sample:

* Theme topic: sanity and insanity
* Theme statement: It is impossible to exist as a sane person in an insane environment.
* Evidence of development-
  + Heller portrays life for the men in the squadron as completely crazy. They are at the mercy of ambitious commanders who care more about their own careers than the men's lives.
  + Their sanity is challenged by military rules that make no sense but which they must blindly obey. They see ethics thrown out the window, by Milo in pursuit of profit, for example, or by the old man in Rome, who lives only for pleasure.
  + They are asked to endanger their lives, and begin to question why this is necessary, especially when they are asked to bomb an innocent village just to block a road.
  + The men deal with this insanity in different ways.
    - Yossarian fakes illness to hide out in the hospital.
    - McWatt buzzes people with his plane.
    - Most of the men visit the whorehouse and have meaningless sex-"banging" women, as Yossarian calls it—to distract themselves from their fears and their deep-rooted feeling that they are risking their lives for foolish reasons.
  + Only Orr seems to cope well, to stay sane amid the madness, and the reader later learns it is because he has been focused on a plan to escape, and has even been practicing that escape.
  + When Yossarian realizes what Orr has been doing, he makes the choice to escape as well. Despite the tremendous odds against the success of Yossarian's plan, Heller suggests it is not a crazy but a sane response to an insane situation over which Yossarian has no control.

7. The teacher can now use Resource #6, which provides seven theme statements that apply to the novel Catch-22. The assignment asks students to generate a comprehensive list of examples and situations from the novel to support the themes. Since this is a lengthy piece, the teacher may want to divide the novel and themes out into manageable chunks- one theme for four students to explore over the course of eight chapters. Each theme can be addressed one per day. Teachers can also decide to only review three or four of the themes and use the remainder as essay prompts or assessment questions.