Closing Time Short Guide

Closing Time by Joseph Heller

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Characters

Closing Time, Heller focuses upon Inthree major characters: Sammy Singer, Lew Rabinowitz, and John Yossarian, all of whom are alter egos of the author. In fact, in this highly autobiographical novel, Heller has Sammy Singer reminisce about Joey Heller, who lived in the apartment house across the street and shared his aspiration to be a writer.

Sammy represents Heller's gentle and nostalgic self. A Jew short of stature and fearful of getting beaten up, Sammy was raised in Coney Island. He then fought in World War II as a tail gunner; indeed, he was in Yossarian's bomber when Snowden died. After receiving a college education on the GI Bill, Sammy taught in Pennsylvania for two years before becoming an advertising copywriter in the promotion department of Time magazine. Heller depicts Sammy as a man who finds satisfaction in life through his friendship with Lew and his commitment to his family, although that family includes marriage to a divorced Protestant from the Midwest and adoption of her three children, one of whom is a suicidal schizophrenic and the other two of whom are at risk for neoplastic disorders. Deeply in love with his wife Glenda, Sammy finds his life dramatically altered when Glenda dies within a month of being diagnosed with ovarian cancer. Afterwards, life holds only simple pleasures of playing bridge, attending concerts, doing volunteer work for cancer relief, visiting friends, and finally taking a trip around the world.

In many respects Lew Rabinowitz is the opposite of his friend Sammy. A big man with a broad chest and a strong voice, Lew, the Jewish son of a junk shop owner, is fearless, even when he becomes a POW in Germany.

Not college-educated, Lew is streetsmart, earning a fortune in lumber, plumbing, and spec housing; winning the hand of the highly attractive Claire; and even gaining membership in an elitist WASP golf club. However, Lew is not indestructible. Hodgkin's disease eventually conquers him, but only after a twenty-eight-year battle with the illness and the nausea resulting from chemotherapy. Drawing upon his own struggle with Guillain Barre Syndrome, Heller portrays in Lew a man facing his own mortality with dignity and humor.

John Yossarian represents Heller the iconoclast, who rails against toxic wastes, genetic engineering, garbage, political boobs, and illogic and is tormented by paranoia. In the three decades between this novel and Catch-22, Yossarian has become enmeshed in capitalistic enterprises. He lives in a luxury apartment in New York City, is a member of the select ACACAMMA (Adjunct Committee for the Advancement of Cultural Activities at the Metropolitan Museum of Art) society, rides in limousines, and has a cushy job as a "semi-retired, semi-consultant" for M & M Enterprises & Associates. Yet Yossarian has not escaped the travails of upper-middle-class life. His first marriage ended in divorce; his second wife is in the process of divorcing him; two of his four children have experienced their own marital difficulties, while his youngest son cannot seem to find his goal in life. Yossarian at age sixty-eight is plagued by morbid visions of strokes or

seizures and assaulted by a battery of worries: "Men earned millions producing nothing more substantial than changes in ownership. The cold war was over and there was still no peace on earth. Nothing made sense and neither did everything else." Yet even in old age, John Yossarian is ever the survivor, the antiheroic hero. Heller writes, "Given a choice, Yossarian still preferred to live." It is that irrepressible will to live that motivates Yossarian to leave the mad world of the subterranean bunker during the threat of nuclear destruction with "the innate — and inane — conviction that nothing harmful could happen to him, that nothing bad could happen to a just man" in a quest to join his lover Melissa Macintosh and their unborn child with the belief that the three of them "would survive, flourish, and live happily — forever after."

Social Concerns

It's closing time for American civilization, according to Joseph Heller in Closing Time. America is plagued by moral squalor, best exemplified by the New York Port Authority Bus Terminal with its assortment of pickpockets, prostitutes, transvestites, and the homeless. There, the air reeks with "smoke and unwashed bodies and their waste . . ." There, rapes, stabbings, and drug overdoses are the norm. Indeed, the rape of a one-legged woman is just part of a daily routine.

All the while wealthy dilettantes, blind to the human misery surrounding them, attend their elitist ACACAMMA meetings and try to outdo each other in their planning of monstrously exorbitant social events. Heller's "assault on nouvelle society," as Thomas Edwards terms it in his review, culminates in the Minderbender/Maxon wedding, the "Wedding of the Close of the Century," held in the New York bus terminal, but with actors substituting for the homeless. Heller's social satire is at its sharpest in portraying the extravaganza with its thirty-five hundred guests, eight clerics, sixty bridesmaids, one hundred and twenty flower girls and ring bearers, forty-four-foot wedding cake, four thousand pounds of caviar, and the sites of the Temple of Dendur, the Blumenthal Patio, the Engelhard Court, and the Great Hall transported from the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

As in Something Happened (1974), the American family in Closing Time is not faring very well. Divorce is rampant, selfish consumerism has reached new heights of excess, children are quarrelsome and spoiled. Yossarian captures this condition in assessing his own offspring: "All in all ... it was a typically modern, poorly adjusted, new-age family in which no one but the mother truly liked all the others or saw good reason to; and each, he suspected, was, like himself, at least secretly and intermittently sad and regretful."

In this sequel to Catch-22, a major source of attack for Heller's vitriolic wit is, as in his first novel, the morally vacuous military/industrial/political complex that has hastened the nation's doom. America is led by a Dan Quayleinspired President, nicknamed Little Prick, who spends most of his time playing video games. His lackey, G. Noodles Cook, manipulates the public, proudly declaring, "If I'm going to be trivial, inconsequential, and deceitful, . . . then I might as well be in government." Milo Minderbinder and ex-PFC Wintergreen, greedy capitalists supreme, scheme to get a government contract for the Sub-Supersonic Invisible and Noiseless Defensive SecondStrike Offensive Attack Bomber, code name Shhhhh!, which is merely a design, and seek a patent on the heavy water Chaplain Tappmann produces in his urine, since it contains deuterium oxide, used in nuclear weaponry. Ultimately Heller acknowledges that our nation has the capacity to destroy itself, if not the entire universe, as he portrays Little Prick pushing the wrong button, resulting in a nuclear holocaust.

Techniques

At the close of the MinderbenderMaxon wedding ceremony as the couple kiss, the "soulful, soaring strains of the "Redemption Through Love" theme of Wagner's Gotterdammerung float through the air, followed by the ethereal, painfully sweet voices of a children's chorus from Adrian Leverkuhn's Apocalypse, which is then interrupted by the "barbaric cacophonous ensemble of rollicking jubilation" of a male chorus. This odd musical combination essentially describes the technique of Closing Time. The novel is in part a paean to long-term, committed love — that ever-changing mixture of passion, tenderness, friendship, nurturing, and occasionally apathy. It is also a beautiful yet disturbing reminder of the fragility of life. And it is, in its cardboard government and military officials, Catch-22-style dialogue and illogical regulations, such as the Freedom of Information Act, which requires government agencies to release information to anyone who applies for it, except for information that the agencies do not want to release, an hilarious catharsis from anxiety over the horrors of life in the 1990s.

The point of view, tone, and structure reflect this combination. The narrative shifts between the evocative, somber, dignified internal monologues of Sammy Singer and Lew Rabinowitz and third person omniscient narration presenting social satire that focuses primarily upon Yossarian, Chaplain Tappman, and Milo Minderbender.

Themes

Through the carefully chosen title of his sixth novel, the punning references to the bus terminal, the allusions to such works as Wagner's Gotterdammerung (1874), the last drama of The Ring of the Nibelung (1852-1897), Mann's Death in Venice (1912), and Leverkuhn's oratorio Apocalypse, Heller underscores his principal thematic concerns. Closing Time is about the aging process and death of individuals, the passing away of the World War II generation, and, ultimately, the demise of the world.

In Closing Time, Heller bravely confronts through the monologues of Sammy Singer and Lew Rabinowitz what it is to grow old: the fears and realities of cancer and strokes; the losses of sexual vitality, memory, bladder control, hearing; the death of one's spouse; loneliness. He also confronts the inescapability of death. Although John Yossarian is still the affirmer of life, in this novel he completes his recognition of human mortality initiated by the Snowden incident in Catch22 (1961). Through philosophical discussions with Dr. Dennis Teemer about the naturalness of death, through speculation "That's the only way to live, by preparing to die," and through a nightmarish epiphany in which he sees "the Angel of Death double and the gunner Snowden too" sixty-eight-year-old John Yossarian finally knows without a doubt that his life span is limited.

Not only does Heller open his readers' eyes to the deterioration of the body, but he also provides an elegy to the World War II generation. In fact, the novel opens with Sammy Singer's lament that soon there will be no World War II veterans — only mementos and perhaps memories passed on from parents to their children. The world of buildings without elevators; of George C. Tilyou's Coney Island amusement park rides; of corporate dominance by RCA, Time, and Western Union; of Marilyn Monroe, William Saroyan, and FDR is gone. Even Kilroy has died of cancer of the lungs, bone, prostate, and brain.

The most horrific insight that Heller gives his readers is that with one slip of the finger America's supposedly security-preserving technology might destroy civilization. Can underground bunkers save lives? Can those above ground survive in the event of a nuclear holocaust? Heller does not answer these questions in Closing Time.

He only leaves us with an ambivalent message: the dim hope of salvation through affirming love as Yossarian chooses to go above ground to be with his pregnant lover Melissa and the Chaplain escapes from imprisonment to return to his wife in Kenosha, Wisconsin; yet, in opposition, the haunting evocation of the Apocalypse in Revelation through a blood-red moon.

Adaptations

Closing Time has been recorded by Simon and Schuster Audio (1994). The reader is Elliott Gould.

Key Questions

Discussion of Closing Time almost inevitably begins, as is revealed in most of the reviews of the novel, by comparing it to its famed predecessor.

Groups might enjoy noting which preoccupations sixty-eight-year-old Yossarian retains from the time when he was thirty-five. Conversely, they can note the ways Yossarian's character has changed. Discussion of which novel readers prefer and why can also be quite illuminating.

Heller's social satire presents many topics for discussion: Among them are the problems of the decay of inner cities, of homelessness, of increased materialism in American society, and of the threat of a nuclear holocaust.

Heller's portrayals of secret agents, government weapons contractors, and even the President should evoke strong responses.

More personal issues to consider are Heller's attitudes towards marriage, parent-child relationships, and responses to retirement, aging, and medical care in the 1990s.

1. Is Closing Time truly a sequel to Catch-22, or is it, despite its use of some of the characters in Heller's first novel and references to key events, a book very different from its predecessor in its themes and effect upon the reader?

2. How has Yossarian changed in the thirty-three years since his escapades in Catch-22? Were you surprised at his being a consultant for M & M Enterprises & Associates?

3. How does Heller characterize the American family in the novel? Do his depictions of divorce and complexities in the father/son relationship seem realistic?

4. Do you like the political satire in the novel, or do you think it is too heavy-handed? Do you think Heller is vicious in having the President of the United States seem so similar in background to Dan Quayle? Do you find G. Noodles Cook's statement "If I'm going to be trivial, inconsequential and deceitful, . . . then I might as well be in government" offensive or insightful?

5. Is Heller's surrealistic portrayal of a Dantesque underworld managed by George C. Tilyou, clever or too disconcertingly fantastical?

6. How is Chaplain Tappman used to satirize the U.S. government? What does his persistent victimization suggest about the power of the clergy within American society?

7. How is the military characterized in this novel? Is the portrayal similar to that in Catch-22?

8. How effective are Heller's characterizations of Lew Rabinowitz and Sammy Singer? Do you think their reminiscences about Coney Island and the references to Joey Heller are selfindulgent on the part of the author or an essential element in the narrative?

9. What insights about marriage does Heller express through the relationships between Glenda and Sammy Singer and between Claire and Lew Rabinowitz?

10. Do you find Heller's combination of realistic and absurdist elements in the novel successful or bothersome?

11. How effective is Heller's use of the New York PABT as a setting? Does he accurately diagnose the problems of the socially and economically disadvantaged?

12. How would you evaluate Heller's portrayal of the Minderbender/Maxon wedding? Does he have a keen grasp of the excesses of the socially privileged?

13. In what ways does Heller remind readers of their mortality?

14. How do you react to the end of the novel? Does Yossarian's decision to return to Melissa seem in character?

Does Heller project any hope?

Literary Precedents

In Chapter 27 of Closing Time, Yossarian goes with former detective sergeant Larry McBride down a staircase in the New York Port Authority Bus Terminal, to a metal closet with a false back and hidden door, through which they then journey to a subterranean realm influenced both by accounts of the classical Greek underworld and Dante's Inferno (1321). There they view a number of writers, including William Saroyan, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, James Joyce, Henry James, Joseph Conrad, Charles Dickens, Franz Kafka, Marcel Proust, Virginia Woolf, and Sylvia Plath — an assortment of figures that reflect Heller's recommended reading list. Not only does Yossarian meet authors but also some of their characters, such as Thomas Mann's Gustav Aschenbach, from Mann's Death in Venice (1912; translated into English 1924), a book that influenced the elegiac tone of Heller's novel, and Schweik from Jaroslav Hasek's The Good Soldier Schweik (1920), a major source for Heller in Closing Time, as well as Catch-22, for exposing absurdities in the military. Heller refers several times in this novel to Kurt Vonnegut, who, like him, depicts recurring images of the horror of war.

This novel is notable for having not only literary precedents but also musical ones. The most significant are Wagner's Gotterdammerung as Heller compares the Yossarian/Melissa relationship to that between Siegfried and Brunnhilde and Leverkuhn's Apocalypse for inspiring the response of laughter in the face of apocalyptic decadence and destruction.

Related Titles

Closing Time shares characteristics with each of Heller's previous five novels. Of course, its closest similarity is with Catch-22, with which it shares characters, such as Yossarian, Milo Minderbender, and Chaplain Tappmann; evokes episodes, such as Yossarian's hospitalization, Snowden's death, and Yossarian's sitting naked in a tree refusing to accept Milo's offer of chocolate-covered cotton; and recalls the circular, non-sequitur, absurdist dialogue of its predecessor and the surrealistic vision of "The Eternal City" chapter in its portrayal of the PABT and its sub-basements.

The monologues of Sammy Singer and Lew Rabinowitz are reminiscent of Heller's first major experiment with internal monologue in Something Happened; the cast of bumbling politicians, secret agents, and public relations officers reflects the antigovernment satire of Good as Gold (1979); the emphasis upon aging reminds readers of Heller's portrait of King David in God Knows (1984); and the depiction of capitalism as the major force in Western civilization relates to Picture This (1988).

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