

**A Sister to All:
Nately's Whore's Kid Sister in *Catch-22***

Many characters in Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* do not have proper names. Like the Texan, the soldier in white, and the soldier who saw everything twice, Nately's whore's kid sister does not have a specific birth name. This namelessness forces the reader to question her identity, her characteristics, and her role in the work in relation to other characters. As Nately's whore's kid sister, she is at least two degrees of separation away from a real name, a true identity. The reader is forced to consider this character first in relation to Nately and then as the kid sister of a whore who also lacks a proper name. Every formulation of the kid sister's identity must be filtered through these other characters. This distance from authentic identity makes her more of an abstraction than a recognizable character. She is described as innocent, dependent, and pre-sexual. These qualities put her in direct contrast with the corrupt, immoral, and hedonistic characters that populate the pages of this novel. An examination of her name (or lack thereof), her behavior, and her interactions with and influence upon other characters in this novel show Nately's whore's kid sister to be an embodiment of human innocence and hopeful longing for a brighter future.

Insight may be gained most easily by breaking her name down into its component parts—kid and sister. “Kid” is a colloquialism for child. Her behavior is repeatedly described in terms that one would associate with a child. She is easily appeased with a hug and some chocolate ice cream. Her dependency and need for attention can be seen in the way she tags along wherever Nately and his whore go and in her efforts to imitate her elders. Repeating what her sister says, like a child learning to speak, she parrots her sister's condemnation of Nately as a crazy idiot: “*Tu sei un pazzo imbecille*” (368). While trying to help her sister

kill Yossarian, the kid sister is said to brandish a bread knife as if playing with a toy. Her innocence makes her incapable of violence. She is not yet able to control such womanly, domestic weapons.

As a “kid” she is not an adult, not a woman, not a man. She is a twelve-year-old virgin who cannot be identified by her sexuality. Her “sapling body” (259) is twig-like in comparison to the voluptuous women in the bordello. She is outgrowing her childhood but has not yet reached adulthood. She is caught between the world of innocence and the world of guilt. As a virgin she is pure and unadulterated in the most basic sense of the word. She is not contaminated by the sordid ways of the world and maintains an innate innocence. Yossarian wants to rescue her before she falls into the trappings of adulthood, into the footsteps of her older sister. The purgatorial state in which Heller presents the kid sister can be viewed as similar to the moral limbo in which Yossarian finds himself. Diagnosed with “a morbid aversion to dying” and having “deep-seated survival anxieties” (313), Yossarian’s main objective throughout the book is to avoid being killed. However, his instinct for self-preservation is moderated, in the end, by loyalty to his friends and a sense of optimism and hopefulness that he associates with Nately’s whore’s kid sister.

The second part of this character’s cognomen brings attention to her position in relation to family structure. She is the sister of Nately’s whore, but that is the only traditional family bond in evidence. These sisters do not have a family name. Belonging to a family with no name can be viewed as belonging to a larger family—humanity. By extension, this kid sister is a kid sister to all. Every man and every woman owe her protection and support. Just such an unconventional, broad definition of family is manifest in the bordello. Nately’s whore and her kid sister “live in an apartment with an old man and woman and a bunch of other girls” (71). There are representatives for the role of father, mother, and siblings. These people have been thrown together by circumstance but protect and provide for each other in many of the ways a traditional family would. They often try to protect the kid sister by sending her out to play or distracting her when business takes place in the bordello. They see her as an innocent child whose purity must be protected.

The apostrophes in Nately’s whore’s kid sister’s name imply possession. She is, first of all, the younger sister of Nately’s whore who, as the older sister, is in charge of her kid sister’s well-being. The little sister relies upon her older sibling to care for her and to show her the way to adulthood. As a dependent family

member, she is the responsibility of Nately's whore. She is also, by extension, a possession of Nately. He attempts to possess and control the whore with whom he has fallen in love. To possess the whore is also to possess the persistent kid sister.

The kid sister reminds Nately of the good things in life—family, happiness, being able to provide for and protect loved ones. Interrupted once again by the kid sister jumping into bed with him and his whore, “Nately settled back smugly with an arm about each, feeling strong and protective. They made a wonderful family group, he decided” (367). He dreams of the whore being his wife and of sending the kid sister off to a prestigious college. With such a fine pedigree the kid sister would be an outward sign of his good fortune, prosperity, and achievement. This would help to secure his position as a Nately, as a member of a family that has “never done *anything* for their money” (259). In his delusion, Nately fails to see that the “incorrigible kid sister” (259) is unlikely to play willingly the role of demure, society debutante that he envisions for her. Nately unselfishly wishes that all his buddies could share in his misogynistic vision of happiness. “He wanted them all to fall in love right away and get married. [...] Love had transmogrified him into a romantic idiot” (369). Nonetheless, it is through the kid sister that Nately dreams of future happiness.

When Yossarian is fleeing Nately's whore's attempts to kill him, the kid sister is described as “pagan, irrepressible” (407). By describing her as pagan Heller implies that she is not a Christian, not a Jew, and not a Muslim. She is unencumbered by the religion-based morality that has been so easily distorted by characters throughout the novel. She is free to explore whatever pleasures seem natural to her. Because she is an innocent child this behavior is innocuous rather than hedonistic. If she is irrepressible, she cannot be restrained or repressed. She is beyond control. Nately and his whore cannot stop her from jumping in between them whenever they are in bed together. Yossarian cannot prevent her from joining in her sister's efforts to kill him. It is also highly unlikely that she will be accepted at “Smith or Radcliffe or Bryn Mawr” (367), which were at the time this novel was written strict, conservative institutions. The kid sister embodies an innocence, freedom, and hope that cannot be squashed even on this “lousy earth!” (422).

When Captain Black, enjoying the opportunity to bear bad news, tells Yossarian that the bordello has been emptied and its inhabitants tossed out into the street, another chink in Yossarian's self-serving armor is revealed:

“What about the kid sister?”

“Flushed away,” laughed Captain Black. “Flushed away with the rest of the broads. Right out into the street.”

“But she's only a kid!” Yossarian objected passionately. “She doesn't know anybody else in the whole city. What's going to happen to her?” (414)

After receiving this news, Yossarian springs into action. He consciously decides to go AWOL in order to find the kid sister. He is motivated by guilt, by the memories of his dead friends, and by all the evil and stupidity in the world.

Snowden and Nately's whore's kid sister were on his conscience, too. Yossarian thought he knew why Nately's whore held him responsible for Nately's death and wanted to kill him. Why the hell shouldn't she? It was a man's world, and she and everyone younger had every right to blame him and everyone older for every unnatural tragedy that befell them; just as she, even in her grief, was to blame for every man-made misery that landed on her kid sister and on all other children behind her. (415)

This passage suggests a responsibility of each and every human to all others. To exist is to be culpable. A human being inherits the world with all its evils. It is the responsibility of each person to make the world better for all those born after him. Yossarian is acknowledging his complicity in these crimes against humanity, against the kid sister. By admitting his involvement he is also accepting responsibility to do something to counteract it. He sees children as the future, as hope, as the opportunity to make this world a better place. Yossarian cannot comprehend and will not tolerate a “craving for wealth or immortality [that] could be so great [...] as to subsist on the sorrow of children” (416).

When Yossarian asks Milo to help him find Nately's whore's kid sister, his motives are immediately misinterpreted. ““She's just a twelve-year-old virgin, Milo,” he explained anxiously, ‘and I want to find her

before it's too late” (419). Milo assumes that Yossarian wants to find her while she is still a virgin so that he can be the one to deflower her. However, Yossarian's intentions are to find her before she comes to harm, to save her from becoming a whore both literally and figuratively. “Don't you understand? I don't want to sleep with her. I want to help her” (419–20). He wants to protect her from all the evil in the world, from becoming a victim of despair, a whore to war, injustice, and immorality. If he can save her, there is a chance he can save himself.

For a moment, Milo does understand Yossarian's motivation to save the child. He commends Yossarian on his principles and agrees to assist in the search. However, Milo is quickly distracted by an opportunity to make a profit in the tobacco black market and abandons Yossarian in his search for the girl. Milo sees promise (future, salvation) in making money, not in saving children. Left to fend for himself in the corrupt “Eternal City,” Yossarian is lost. When he cannot find Nately's whore's kid sister, he falls into deep despair. That night he wanders through the streets bearing witness to the atrocities of the world. It is as if he has lost hope. “His spirit was sick” (427).

Yossarian's optimism is awakened once again when he hears of Orr's escape to Sweden. “There is hope, after all. Can't you see?” (459). He is encouraged enough to renounce the odious deal he has made to be sent home. “If Orr could row to Sweden, then I can triumph over Colonel Cathcart and Colonel Korn, if I only persevere” (461). Yossarian embraces life, not only his own but that of the kid sister. Despite the hardship and dangers that face him when he runs away from the army, he can see a promising future. He sees in Nately's whore's kid sister the human potential to do good. Yossarian abandons his mission of self-preservation for a chance to live and share life. “There's a young kid in Rome whose life I'd like to save if I can find her. I'll take her to Sweden with me if I can find her, so it isn't all selfish, is it?” (462). He is astonished at his new outlook on life, his clear conscience, and the sense of joy he now feels for living. These feelings are inspired by the kid sister and the innocence and hopefulness that she represents.

In *Catch-22*, Heller presents the human spirit in conflict with a contradictory world. The institutions that form the basis of society—government, commerce, religion—fail to provide the support needed for the mental, physical, and spiritual health of the species. Nately's whore's kid sister can be seen as a

personification of the will to survive. In the kid sister, Heller presents an irrepressible, eternal hope for the future of humankind. Despite the ravages of war, abuse, neglect, depravity, and unrestrained capitalism the human soul continues to search for inspiration, for the innocent kid sister, for a way to the impossible shores of Sweden.

WORK CITED

Heller, Joseph. *Catch-22*. 1955. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996.