JOSEPH HELLER'S *CATCH-22*: YOSSARIAN CASE

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Abstract: The circumstances under which Joseph Heller's most important novel appeared were more than dramatic, marking probably the hottest moment of the Cold War. 'Catch-22' was published a few weeks before the Cuban Missile Crisis started, in late October 1962. The world was very close to Apocalypse, which could easily have been brought about by either the American or the Soviet leader pushing the atomic button.
The purpose of the hereby study is to present the fact that 'Catch-22' is only one example of the absurdity and insanity that war brings. The officers' efforts only include putting their men in dangerous situations in which their goal is to get a "tight aerial photograph" or something vain of the like. Success, measured in risk and vanity, is no longer measured by accuracy and getting the job done with no fatalities. People who eventually end up dead in combat surround Yossarian (the main character) and this makes him lose his desire to fly. Yossarian realizes that he can avoid his mission duties by staying in the hospital. But soon he realizes that his responsibilities will eventually catch up to him, and he will be required to fulfill the number of missions required of him.

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Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961), perceived as a peculiar antiwar novel, in a curious twist of fate, managed to attract two otherwise incompatible audiences. Considered as "a Kafkaesque satire on the bureaucratic madness of the military and on the logical inanity of the military mind, to veterans of World War II, it was a hilarious reminder of the chaos and disorder that seemed always to hover just beneath the structured surface of military life. For them it was the way things were, and if it poked fun at the military, it was simply stating the obvious, not grinding an ax."[1]

To others, however, especially as the decade of the sixties progressed and the war in Vietnam escalated, it was the ultimate pacifist tract, the best reason yet presented for turning one's back on war of any kind and lighting out for neutral ground. The very catch in military logic that it ridiculed – the infamous "Catch-22" – was also their way out. "Be crazy, it's all crazy anyway." As disenchantment with American foreign policy abroad and domestic "oppression" at home mounted, "Catch-22" became the rationale for opposition, desertion, draft-dodging, dropping out, whatever it took to lodge a passive protest against what many considered an unjust war.[2]

Catch-22 is set on the imaginary island of Pianosa during World War II and focuses on Captain Yossarian and his attempts to survive the fanatical lunacy of his bomber squadron's commanders long enough to get home. As the death toll rises, the quota of bombing missions

[1] Thomas Reed Whissen, *Classic Cult Fiction: A Companion to Popular Cult Literature*, New York: Greenwood Press, 1992, p. 55.
[2] Ibid.

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required for home-leave is repeatedly increased. By pleading insanity, Yossarian hopes to find a way out until the doctor quotes the infamous *Catch-22*, which goes something like this: "Flying missions is crazy. To get out of flying them, you must plead insanity. However, since wanting to get out of flying them is proof of sanity, the minute you say you don't want to fly, you have to."[3]

Although Yossarian does not want to fight, he is not a coward, and this was an important part of his appeal to cult readers. He is often called an antihero because he was on the wrong side in a popular war, but in reality he has all the attributes that make up the idealized mono-mythical hero. He loves life, culture, travel, and adventure, and he is cursed (blessed?) with such a sensitivity to injustice, irrationality, and inhumanity that he ultimately finds himself in opposition to all the powers that be. He is slow to realize the full implications of his predicament, but when he does, he has the courage to take the only definitive action still open to him.

Yossarian has been called one of the great "drop-outs" in American literature, and those who responded to Timothy Leary's exhortation to "tune in, turn on, and drop out" were drawn to him. In his opposition to forces he distrusted, he comes up against the two chief enemies of the counterculture: the Establishment and the System. Yossarian, like his admirers, finds it impossible to live within the Establishment, even to reform it, because he feels, as his admirers did, that it tends to treat human beings as mechanisms, to value conformity above creativity, to regard people's files as more important than the people themselves, and to indulge in official lying as a matter of policy.[4]

The way he sees it (and his admirers shared his vision), the System tends to use war not so much to fight a national enemy as to regulate its own people. It fosters power struggles that victimize the fighting man in wartime and the creative person in peacetime. On every level, the System needs scapegoats and always finds them. The Establishment formulates humanitarian policies not for its own practice but for use in measuring the enemy, for propaganda purposes. Corruption runs rampant in all professions and institutions because private greed is sanctified.[5]

Yossarian's principles accurately reflect the principles of the counterculture. To begin with, Yossarian values individuality and freedom more than status or official recognition. And he thinks of money and machinery as means, not ends. He is also more interested in humanity than in organizations, and when The Organization turns against human values, Yossarian has the courage to remember that there is a higher law than the state and that there are times in history when the state is the villain, when what is needed is a new kind of hero.

Yossarian is this new kind of hero, and the notorious Catch-22 is his dragon. In every written law it is the unwritten loophole that empowers the authorities to revoke one's rights whenever it suits their cruel whims. Because of *Catch-22*, justice is mocked, the innocent are victimized, and Yossarian's squadron is forced to fly more than double the number of missions prescribed by air force code.

Cult readers had no trouble finding parallels to *Catch 22* in civilian life. A policeman might make an illegal arrest in order to break up a demonstration, but the demonstrators must

[3] Joseph Heller, *Catch-22*, London: Vintage, 1994.
[4] Thomas Reed Whissen, *Classic Cult Fiction: A Companion to Popular Cult Literature*, New York: Greenwood Press, 1992, p. 56.
[5] Ibid.

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submit to arrest or else they would be guilty of disobeying the police. By the time the courts assert the law and free the demonstrators, the police have accomplished their purpose.[6]

Orr, the combat pilot and Yossarian's tent-mate and alter-ego, is also the "alter-hero" of the book. In Orr there is something of the real "prophet," for it is he who prepares the way for Yossarian. From the beginning, he has been Yossarian's double, acting in many ways like the ego to Yossarian's id. Orr operates objectively and rationally to their common predicament while Yossarian behaves subjectively, whining and protesting and acting moody. Orr is resourceful and cunning, having lived among his enemies in the guise of a shallow-minded joker while plotting his revenge, while Yossarian has trouble getting beyond his own moods and emotions.

Of course, hovering always in the background and overriding all other symbols is the haunting, mysterious, anonymous Soldier in White, bandaged from head to foot and kept alive by an endless rotation of body fluids. What begins as a grotesque joke – what is excreted at one end is what is injected at the other – becomes a grim symbol of the mechanical regulation of human life: facelessness, self-containment, the withdrawal and isolation of the patient who is thoroughly dehumanized, yet kept alive because it has become possible to do so. With the Soldier in White there is even doubt about whether someone actually exists beneath those bandages. And if he does exist, does he hear what is going on around him? Does he think? Can he feel? These are horrible questions that carry the madness of war beyond the battlefield.[7]

Thus the appeal of *Catch-22* as merely another antiwar novel would not account for its cult status. It needed this extra dimension to attract readers to its premise that military methods make a mockery of political goals. Because of the very nature of war, even a "good war" will become an evil, extremist enterprise. It seems safe to conclude that for Heller and his hero, World War II began as an idealistic war, with justifiable, humanitarian aims, and degenerated into just another self-negating, militaristic crusade. No matter how noble the ends, the means become identical with the enemy's. This was the message the counterculturists wanted to hear and the argument still used to oppose any military action, no matter how seemingly justifiable.[8]

This tragic but inevitable corruption of purpose is demonstrated in the scene in which Dobbs proposes to Yossarian that they assassinate Cathcart because of his illegal treatment of his men. Dobbs is carried away by the idea and soon envisions a blood-bath. Although his desire to punish a guilty commander is understandable, it is clear that Dobbs would soon out-Cathcart Cathcart in his thirst for revenge.

Dobbs's misguided fanaticism is symptomatic of the larger fanaticism that informs the entire narrative of *Catch-22*. A democracy has declared war on the fascist powers because they are aggressively antidemocratic, inhumane, and uncivilized. But the U.S. military establishment is repeatedly revealed as being antidemocratic and quasi-fascist. Clevinger, for example, believes that Scheisskopf is sincere in asking for suggestions, and he responds accordingly with several sensible proposals. As a result, he is punished for his presumption, even framed and humiliated in a travesty of justice worthy of the most heinous of Nazi court trials. Cathcart's contempt for enlisted men, Dreedle's flaunting of his privileges, the way Korn insists that disagreement with him is tantamount to disloyalty to the flag, and the sadistic Star Chamber tactics of the men from the C.I.D. all demonstrate that the military is not defending democracy but undermining it.

[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid. p. 57.

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Added to this are other crimes dear to the hearts of counterculturists eager to tarnish the image of America. How can the army Yossarian is serving be called antifascist when Captain Black considers a certain corporal to be un-American because he disapproves of Hitler? Furthermore, the Texan and Cathcart both feel free to express racist attitudes, while the tribal history of the native-American White Halfoat makes it clear that the American people are themselves guilty of genocide.[9]

If these examples of latent American fascism are reminiscent of the attitudes expressed in Kurt Vonnegut's cult classic *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the suggestion that perhaps there is a dark side in all of us that war releases is reminiscent of the premise of William Golding cult classic *Lord of the Flies*. Scene after scene in *Catch-22* postulates the likelihood that war so brings out the worst in men that it can turn humanitarians into butchers. War triggers the release of the sadistic impulses of men like Havermeyer, Aardvark, and Black and creates a climate favorable only to cynical people like Korn and Peckem, exploitative people like Minderbinder, and manipulative people like Wintergreen. War allows military policemen to commit arbitrary, illegal acts simply because there is no way to stop them. In the name of efficiency, armies convert people into mechanisms, as typified by the activities of Scheisskopf and the fate of the Soldier in White. The ultimate antihumanitarian aspect of even a "good war" is shown in the decision to bomb an unwarned civilian population in an undefended village purely for military purposes. An act of this sort makes it impossible for the uncorrupted to see any difference between the enemy and themselves.

An especially curious thing – among a multitude of curious things – about *Catch-22* is that as the action unfolds, we see or hear almost nothing about an actual enemy. Peckem's "enemy" is Dreedle, the military court's enemy is Clevinger, the C.I.D.'s is the Chaplain, Minderbinder's is his own squadron. One effect of *Catch-22* not lost upon the cult reader is the suspicion that governments on either side use war less as a defense against an enemy than as a means of controlling the lives of their own people.[10]

Although a synopsis of *Catch-22* makes it sound like a routine World War II novel, it is really much more. This is why veterans of that war could appreciate it so much. They understood its target to be the military mind regardless of nation or cause. For them, World War II was a necessary evil, but they did not kid themselves when it came to assessing the virtues of armies on either side. Thus, the wisest of them found much to admire in a desert fox like Rommel and much to deplore in the petty malice of some of their compatriots. They knew evil to be the most egalitarian propensity.

However, younger readers who took it to heart as an antiwar novel saw the scale of evil tilted toward their fathers who, they felt, had whitewashed their wartime misdeeds in the blood of Auschwitz, pretending to have waged a holy war when in reality they found out about the holocaust only after they got back home. Heller wrote the novel during the Korean War, but it appeared at the dawn of the Vietnam War and found its greatest popularity during the time that that war was heating up. The time was right, then, for an assault against the rationalization of what Dwight Eisenhower had called the "Crusade in Europe" and for a blanket denunciation of war for any reason and against any enemy. In this respect, it became the definitive statement of the modern antiwar position, much as Erich Maria Remarque *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929) had expressed the pacifism of the post-WWI generation.[11]

[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid., p. 58.

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Nevertheless, cult readers are sophisticated enough to demand more than the elements of a tract in the literature they take to heart, and in this respect *Catch-22* contains its share of the conventional components of cult fiction. Throughout this book there are numerous references to mythological and literary parallels. Yossarian is Everyman, Aeneas, Christ, Ulysses embarked on an odyssey, a quest, a descent into hell in order to bring back a message, a plan for our salvation. He is the antihero who becomes the hero of this reinvented myth that offers a blueprint for resistance and survival and sanity in a world that insists on repeating its mistakes. Yossarian is a modest man with a wholesome attitude toward life, but because he is sensitive to injustice, irrationality, and inhumanity, he finds himself in opposition to the established authority.

Yossarian describes himself variously as Tarzan, Mandrake, Flash Gordon, Shakespeare, Cain, Ulysses, the Flying Dutchman, Lot in Sodom, Deirdre of the Sorrows, Sweeney among the Nightingales, and *Supra*man. Except for the last, these are all heroes who are also outsiders. By calling himself *Supra*-man, Yossarian is saying that he hopes to surpass man. In this respect he resembles Frank Bowman of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, Valentine Michael Smith of *Stranger in a Strange Land*, the title character in *Demian*, Howard Roark in *The Fountainhead*, and even Jay Gatsby in *The Great Gatsby*.

All of these are characters who are (or seem to be) larger than life. Yossarian possesses many of the traits that set these people apart and above, one of them being his ability to question clichés and shibboleths, to think for himself, to know what and what not to value from the past. Like his counterparts in other cult novels, Yossarian prides himself on his individuality and is jealous of his freedom, which he values more than mere status or official recognition. He would agree with the famous abolitionist who argued that that which is not just is not legal. "I'm not running *away* from my responsibilities," says Yossarian as he takes off for Sweden at the end of the novel, an ending that upset some critics. "I'm running to them."[12] To war protestors, of course, Yossarian's decision pointed the way for their own escape from an immoral obligation. Running away they found to be much braver than going off to fight a war they did not believe in. As far as they were concerned, personal refusal was the only heroism left, and Yossarian was the hero who would lead them to "a new morality."

While it is true, as some insist, that Yossarian resembles Dr. Strangelove more than King Arthur, it is equally true that simply recycling the same old antiwar message would have failed as surely as those messages themselves had so obviously failed. What good has *The Good Soldier Schweik or All Quiet on the Western Front* done? What readers needed to encounter was a Colonel Cathcart, that model of robot-like conformity, a person who measures his happiness according to the "quotation of the day," always trying to adjust to the dictates of the bureaucracy and to avoid confrontations with officialdom. What readers also needed was to encounter a Soldier in White, possibly Heller's most inspired creation, for in this anonymous victim we have the perfect symbol of the rational absurdity of war.

Although the term 'Catch-22' has become a permanent part of the language, and the novel continues to attract new readers, by and large its day has passed and its message has no more impact than that of the antiwar novels it tried to surpass. Perhaps the ultimate "Catch-22" is to be found in the fact that war's very absurdity is at bottom its most irresistible attraction and that antiwar novels, like all warning labels, only with an appetite for the thing they warn against.

[12] Joseph Heller, *Catch-22*, London: Vintage, 1994.

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