FROM HEMINGWAY TO HELLER: THE WAR NOVEL

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Abstract:Considered a particular type of narrative literary texts, Joseph Heller's Catch-22 and Ernest Hemingway's A Farewell to Arms are both remarkable war novels, thus being perceived as important cultural products. Both novels are linked to two distinct cultural and literary paradigms, modernism and postmodernism and both of them are special kinds of war fiction. Being written by authors who had experienced war at a young age, their interpretation as war texts and their characters' attitude is challenging.
Although in Hemingway's book war turns out to be the complete opposite of the traditional view of armed conflict as a test for manly virtues, both novels have a number of common characteristics, highlighting them being the purpose of the hereby paper.

Keywords: war novel, war fiction, autobiographical novel, attitude towards war, war reality, heroism.

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. It was believed that the world was very close to Apocalypse.

The case of journalist Bernard Fall is emblematic for the way the Americans initially saw the conflict in Indochina and then how public opinion changed. This can also be compared with Hemingway's change from the initial enthusiasm for the cause of the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War to the horrors he experienced after a while, when he realized that the war is not good at promoting heroes, but at disenchanting, if not breaking, them. Bernard Fall, one of the first journalists to voice critical opinions of America's military involvement in Vietnam, and who was eventually killed in Vietnam in 1967, described the scenes he witnessed in shocking detail:

> The impact of the war right now is not literally the killing of individuals by individuals – you do not often see heaps of the dead lying around. But what you do see is the impact on the countryside. In Asia vegetation is always lush, but now when you fly over parts of Vietnam you can see the dead, brown surface of the areas which have been sprayed with weed killers. You see the areas that were sprayed on purpose, and the places defoliated by accident. Ben Cat, a huge plantation near Saigon, was almost completely destroyed by accident; 3000 acres were transformed into the tropical equivalent of a winter forest… (Bloom & Breines 1995: 207)

Fall sees that some of the most catastrophic consequences of the war, and of wars in general, are sometimes due to accidents and mistakes, rather than deliberate plans, which reminds people about the unfortunate combination of circumstances that led to the bombing of the Florence of the Elbe, Dresden at St. Valentine's day time in 1945, the focus of Hemingway's *Slaughterhouse-Five.* Fall notes the mixture of mistake and irony in the effects of war:

> A Catholic refugee village, Honai, along Highway 1 in South Vietnam…was sprayed by mistake. All its fruit trees died. United States Air Forces planes were defoliating the jungle along Highway1, but the wind shifted and blew the killer spray towards the villages instead. In a supreme irony the jungle now stands in the background, lush and thick, while the villagers are barren. (Bloom & Breines 1995: 207)

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A few years after its publication, the status and image of Heller's *Catch-22* received another type of attention, the different kind of reception, much more enthusiastic than the initial one, obviously determined by new generations of Americans responding differently to war. If, in 1962, very many Americans saw the world divided in two very different sides, with their country on the right side, the champion of freedom against Soviet totalitarianism, developments in Vietnam over the long decade of the 1960s changed everything, which tends to support a claim made in various places in this dissertation: most times it is not the intrinsic quality of a literary text that provides its defining characteristics, but the interpretive communities and the accompanying cultural context in which the text is received. *Catch-22* becomes increasingly subversive at the end of the decade in which it was published, much in the same way in which the message of Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* in 1969 is much stronger than that of the author's 1961 *Mother Night*.

Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* had been equally subversive. Italy's fascist government undertook to ban the novel out of fear that its representation of the country's disastrous defeat in the World War I campaigns would affect the morale of those who would soon have to say 'welcome to arms' in the next global military confrontation. The book's commercial success and cultural impact made its anti-war potential considerable. Published in September 1929, the novel sold more than 80,000 copies by February. The novel was adapted to the stage in 1930, and it was also made into two movies, in 1932 starring Gary Cooper and Helen Hayes, and in 1957 starring Rock Hudson and Jennifer Jones. (Tyler 59)

The links between Heller's and Hemingway's above-mentioned novels (both of which have become important cultural products) are remarkable: written by authors who had experienced war at a young age, set in war-torn Italy (cynical Italians who prefer defeat to victory included), with charismatic main characters who prefer drinking and womanizing to the actual business of war, and who ultimately escape by boat to traditionally neutral countries: Switzerland and Sweden, respectively. In both cases, Frederic Henry's and Yossarian's desertions are not acts of cowardice, but of integrity and, paradoxically, heroism. Both characters make their "separate peace" as a statement of defiance; they escape the dehumanizing mechanisms of war and their heroic status is given not by a fight against "enemy" countries, but against what they see as "the real enemy," the oppressive forces of their own Establishment. (A. Vlad 21)

Although war is the central theme in both novels, the description of the books simply as straight-forward war novels may not be entirely accurate, in addition to them being linked to two distinct cultural and literary paradigms, modernism and postmodernism. Both are special kinds of war fiction. In Hemingway's book war turns out to be the complete opposite of the traditional view of armed conflict as a test for manly virtues; true bravery is achieved by confronting the human condition, not an enemy on the battlefield, and Catherine, as already said, may be seen as the central code hero. In *Catch-22*, war is a metaphor of bureaucratic society in general, which, Yossarian realizes, can only be resisted by getting out of the vicious circles it creates. His position within the fictional framework of the novel as a war text or as a more comprehensive satire against more than war remains to be examined, while his status as a hero or anti-hero may depend both on that framework and on the cultural context in which the book is received, at the time of its initial publication or at significant moments afterwards.

Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* is seen as an autobiographical novel. As already mentioned, the young man had been an ambulance driver for the Red Cross in Italy during World War I, had been wounded, and had fallen in love with Agnes von Kurowsky, the real Catherine. Michael Reynolds, one of Hemingway's biographers, rather humorously draws attention to the ways in which the author dealt with the real elements of his personal war experience:

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> He gives his war wound and his nurse to Frederic Henry; to his fictional nurse, he gives his second wife's pregnancy. From his first marriage with Hadley Richardson, he takes their good times at Chamby when the roads were iron-hard and they deeply in love. From maps, books, and close listening, he has made up a war he never saw, described terrain he never walked, and re-created the retreat from Caporetto so accurately that his Italian readers will later say he was present at that national embarrassment. (Reynolds 1997: 60)

Millicent Bell goes in the same direction by pointing out that the novel should be read for what it actually is, a book for which thorough documentation came from various sources rather than from the author's first-hand experience:

> Ernest Hemingway's novel is not the autobiography some readers have thought it. It was not memory, but printed source material that supplied the precise details of its descriptions of historic battle scenes on the Italian front in World War I. The novel's love story is no closer to Hemingway's personal reality. He did go to Italy and see action, but not the action he describes; he did fall in love with a nurse, but she was no Catherine Barkley. (Bell in Hemingway 1987: 113)

Personal self-justification plays a significant part in the novel, and one should take into account that both Hemingway and his initial readers were supposed to make a more direct link between what the author directly experienced and what the novel shows, by what the title seems to suggest, as well as by the expectations one had about a war novel at the time of the book's initial publication. Whether or not one reads the novel now as a book condemning war and encouraging pacifist attitudes, the fact is that young Hemingway had to go by certain prevailing stereotypes linking manhood and war action. Alex Vernon sums up the young man's case, who, out of a certain self-respect, had to go ahead with a certain more or less imagined persona of a war veteran telling war stories:

> The nature of both his Red Cross service and his wounding - while delivering cigarettes, postcards, and chocolates to the entrenched Italian infantry - gave him cause to later mislead others about his service, all toward preserving a more manly and heroic image of himself. (Vernon 37)

In the context of the patriotic war rhetoric, the tough, hard-drinking, assertive hero of *A Farewell to Arms* appears to be the embodiment of the masculine ideal young Hemingway aspired to and a projection of an idealised image of himself: macho, self-possessed and knowledgeable, rather than young, inexperienced and only fit for the Red Cross, unfit for proper military service. Harold Bloom, ironically comparing him to his follower, Norman Mailer, notes Hemingway's special 'agonistic' attitudes, a tough figure he wants to proudly display, if not in actual battle, at least as an aggressive expression of his, to use Bloom's famous phrase, "anxiety of influence":

> Hemingway notoriously and splendidly was given to overtly agonistic images whenever he described his relationship to canonical writers, including Melville, a habit of description in which he has been followed by his true ephebe, Norman Mailer. (Bloom 1987: 3)

Bloom goes on to describe the 'boxing' terms in which 50-year-old Hemingway compares himself with the canonical writers he feels he can compete against, invoking one of his letters addressed to no other than the man behind him in the 'literary ring':

> In a grand letter (September 6-7, 1949) to his publisher, Charles Scribner, he charmingly confessed, "Am a man without any ambition, except to be champion of the world, I wouldn't fight Dr. Tolstoi in a 20 round bout because I know he would knock my ears off." This modesty passed quickly, to be followed by, "If I can live to 60 I can beat him. (MAYBE)." Since the rest of the letter counts Turgenev, de Maupassant, Henry James, even Cervantes, as well as Melville and Dostoyevsky, among the

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> defeated, we can join Hemingway, himself, in admiring his extraordinary self-confidence. (Bloom 1987: 3)

By way of contrast, coming back to actual war experience, one can see Vernon reinforcing the idea of Hemingway's initial insecurity with his own performance (before he turned professional as a pugnacious, boxing war writer, so to speak) with an excerpt from a letter written by his mother on his nineteenth birthday, while he was wounded in the Milan hospital. In it, she declares herself happy that, "in the eyes of humanity my boy is every inch a man....God bless you, my darling...It's great to be the mother of a hero." (A. Vlad 25)

Maybe it is not fair for critics to read an affectionate mother's correspondence to her beloved, wounded son, but Vernon seems to be unaware of it. He concludes that Hemingway must have felt at least some resentment towards his mother's "characterizing her son as a man and a hero because it was at odds with his own experience of the event as decidedly unmanly and unheroic – blown up delivering candy and tea to 'real' soldiers." (Bloom 1987: 37) But maybe Vernon is wrong, and young Hemingway felt that his mother's words were telling the truth, and that he should see himself as a hero, who had to live up to society's expectations. And who, later on, would be able to create similar heroes in his war novels.

Frederic Henry, despite his assumed machismo, is often perceived as immature by those who are close to him. Rinaldi repeatedly calls him "baby" (*FA* 32) and "little puppy," (*FA* 27) while Catherine calls him a "silly boy." (*FA* 102) So Frederic's development as a hero should be seen in a context in which other factors will give him opportunities to develop as a Hemingway hero. Rinaldi and Catherine seem to have escaped Frederic's and Hemingway's heroic posturing in the same way in which Vonnegut's war buddy's wife discusses representations of heroism in war narratives, and their negative effects in the autobiographical, first chapter of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Images of soldiers as children or "babies" are particularly powerful in Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, a novel advertised by the author himself, in a countercultural age which needs another type of heroes, as depicting a 'children's crusade.'

Joseph Heller also had first-hand experience of the "raw material" used in *Catch-22* at a very young age. Born in 1923, one year after graduating from high school and one year after Pearl Harbor, Heller enlisted and went to cadet school in the Army Air Force. He became a combat bombardier, was based in Corsica and North Africa (Pianosa, the setting of the novel, is somewhere between Italy and Corsica), and flew in sixty missions before being discharged as an Air Force lieutenant.

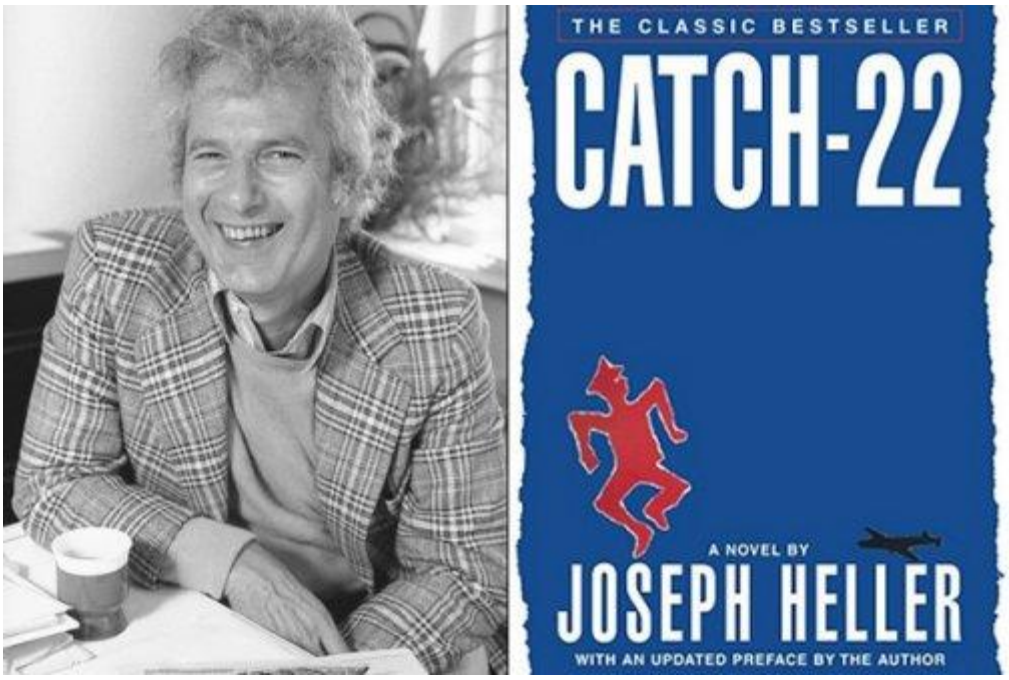
Although at first he claims to have had no objections to flying combat missions (which makes sense, when one is a qualified bombardier in the air force at times of war), after forty missions he had thought he had had his share, just like Yossarian, the protagonist of *Catch-22*. His changed attitude was largely caused by his thirty-seventh mission (his second to Avignon) when the co-pilot panicked and grabbed the controls away from the pilot. Located in the nose of the aircraft, unaware of what had happened, Heller believed that the plane had lost a wing and was catastrophically going down. He had just seen the plane just in front of him blow an engine and watched as it fell, with no parachutes coming out, as he graphically describes the incident in an interview quoted by Barbara Lupack:

> Then suddenly after we dropped our bombs, our plane started to go straight down and I was pinned to the top of the cabin. The co-pilot has thought we were climbing too steeply and would stall. He grabbed the controls to shove us back down. We went down and I thought I was dying. Then the plane straightened out and flew through flak and my earphones were pulled out. I didn't know my headset was out. You know, when you press the button to talk, you hear a click, but I pressed it and heard nothing, so I thought I was already dead. For a while the rest of the crew couldn't hear me, and when I did plug in I heard this guy – the co-pilot – hysterical on the intercom yelling,

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> 'The bombardier doesn't answer. Help him! Help him! Go help the bombardier.' And I said, 'I'm the bombardier; I'm ok,' and he said, 'Go help the gunner.' (Lupack 20-21)

In a comic film, the scene may appear humorous, but not in a real life situation, or in a realist description of war. What if the gunner had really needed help, and there was nobody around to take care of his horrible, profusely bleeding wound? This will turn into the fictional grim reality of Snowden's agony in the Avignon story which haunts most of the narrative in *Catch-22*.



[1]

Unlike his character Snowden, Heller stayed alive to tell the bombardier's story; unlike his Yossarian, he did not rebel against the system, and did not run away to Sweden or anywhere else, following Frederic Henry's example in Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*. Some readers, depending on their cultural position and values, will view Yossarian as a more heroic version of Joseph Heller. The peace movement activists of the late 1960s, the anti-Vietnam war demonstrators of that time were bound to see the situation as such. More traditional readers were tempted to view things in a different manner, with Heller the bombardier as the hero and Heller the novelist as the villain dealing devastating blows to patriotism and warism. (A. Vlad 28)

A Farewell to Arms is thought to share the disillusionment of Hemingway's generation with the war that was, in Wooden Wilson's famous words, supposed to "make the world safe for democracy," but not in a political sense. Frederic Henry dismisses the empty rhetoric that supplied the justification for the war and rejects "abstract words such as glory, honour, courage, or hallow [which] were obscene beside the concrete names of villages, the numbers of roads, the names of rivers, the numbers of regiments and the dates." (*FA* 191)

[1] http://www.google.ro/search?q=joseph+heller+-+catch+22&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ei=GvTDUfL7DpKzhAfnqYCoAw&ved=0CAcQ_AUoAQ&biw=1280&bih=929#facrc=_&imgdii=_&imgrc=EaAWXxLluZGtiM%3A%3Bfoi3Wpuw8SWiRM%3Bhttp%253A%252F%252Fcdn.thedailybeast.com%252Fcontent%252Fdailybeast%252Farticles%252F2011%252F09%252F04%252Fjoseph-heller-catch-22-50th-anniversary-how-the-novel-changed-america%252F_jcr_content%252Fbody%252Finlineimage.img.503.jpg%252F1337256000000.cached.jpg%3Bhttp%253A%252F%252Fwww.thedailybeast.com%252Farticles%252F2011%252F09%252F04%252Fjoseph-heller-catch-22-50th-anniversary-how-the-novel-changed-america.html%3B503%3B335

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Like his protagonist in *A Farewell to Arms*, Hemingway gradually, shows, in his war narratives, a growing suspicion of big words and romanticized depictions of war. He preferred literary responses to war that were gritty, authentic and direct. In the introduction to *Men at War*, he claimed that Henri Barbusse's *Le feu* ("Under Fire") was "the only good war book to come out during the last war." Appreciating Barbusse's direct, naturalistic style, he praised the French author's ability to "tell the truth without screaming:"

> He was the first to show us, the boys who went from school or college to the last war, that you could protest in anything besides poetry, the gigantic useless slaughter and lack of even elemental intelligence in generalship that characterized the Allied conduct of that war from 1915 to 1917...But when you came to read it over to try to take something permanent and representative from it the book did not stand up. Its greatest quality was his courage in writing it when he did...[Barbusse] had learned to tell the truth without screaming. (*MW* 9)

Although tempted initially, Hemingway does not succumb to the glamour of war rhetoric, attempting to artistically achieve the tragic dimension of a Romeo and Juliet war story, as Robert Merrill notes, while quoting Hemingway himself on the issue:

> There is little question that Hemingway conceived of *A Farewell to Arms* as a tragedy. He once referred to the novel as his *Romeo and Juliet* and later wrote: "The fact that the book was a tragic one did not make me unhappy since I believed that life was a tragedy and knew it could only have one end." (Merrill 25)

Starting from the position imposed on him by the rhetoric of the age (which, as already seen, his mother had accepted) Hemingway keeps hesitating whether to equate war with manliness and bravery. In a context where deadly technological innovations had made the personal courage and fighting skills of the combatants irrelevant to the final outcome, and where both sides were for much of the time trapped in a deadlock with no apparent possibility for a foreseeable ending, war was more of a crippling experience (see the dubious position of Jake Barnes as a Hemingway code hero) than a testing-ground for young men's macho abilities.

Alex Vernon points out that the fact that 'male sufferers from shell-shock during the Great War were routinely characterized as exhibiting symptoms of hysteria, a purported mental affliction traditionally afflicting only women, reiterates, paradoxically, the emasculating (and feminizing) effects of the war.' (Vernon 39) Significantly, in the opening pages of the book, there are those lines describing soldiers not as warring Homeric characters, but as bearing a resemblance to peaceful, pregnant women, marching 'as though they were six months gone with child.' (*FA* 4)

Frederic only gradually comes to fully understand the brutality and futility of war. When the Italians talk about ending the war by refusing to attack, Frederic insists that the war must end with a victory. He rejects their idea that nothing is worse than war. Later in the novel, however, he admits to the priest that he no longer hopes for victory and concedes that perhaps defeat might be better. By then Frederic has watched Passini die an excruciating death when his legs were destroyed by the trench mortar shell that also wounded Frederic.

Afterwards, as Frederic was transported by ambulance, the man in the stretcher above his head was severely wounded, his blood dripping down on Frederic. Frederic is even more traumatized later, when his friend Aymo is killed by friendly fire. After Frederic deserts rather than be killed by overzealous carabinieri, the change in his attitude is evident when he is indifferent to the contempt shown to him by the aviators who share his train compartment on the way to Stresa. He no longer feels the urge to get into a fight with them to defend his masculinity. He has put war behind him. As Frederic puts it, "I had made a separate peace." (*FA* 243)

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In the case of *Catch-22*, even though the novel is set towards the end of World War II, it has more meaning in regard to the postwar period: the reaction to McCarthyism, the military engagements in Korea and Vietnam, the students' revolution of 1968 and the accompanying anti-war movement. Whissen considers *Catch-22* one of the cult novels of the postwar decades, describing the book as conveying a special message to a large mass of readers, "...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." (Whissen 55)

Arne Axelsson does not see war fiction in terms of a modernist – postmodernist divide, but in terms of a military tradition that affected both the reality of war and its fictional representations. He argues that the war novel after World War II was as cut off from its tradition and its past as the military itself and highlights the importance of the Cold War context when reading *Catch-22*:

> The political development and the new kind of limited war that was to follow would not diminish the gap; it would take decades – and a *Catch-22* to even partially bridge past and present. (Axelsson vxiii)

While the nature of *Catch-22*'s relationship with the tradition of war fiction remains a matter of debate and can best be described as ambivalent, it is an undisputed fact that the novel makes connections between World War II and the Cold War context in which Heller was writing, Robert Merril notes:

In his book on Heller, Robert Merrill quotes the author as stressing the contemporary connections he would like to suggest by means of the anachronisms that critics had reproached him for:

> I deliberately seeded the book with anachronisms like loyalty oaths, helicopters, IBM machines and agricultural subsidies to create the feeling of American society from the McCarthy period on. (Merrill 12)

Rather than being a war novel (which Heller denies by claiming: "I wasn't interested in the war in *Catch-22*. I was interested in the personal relationships in bureaucratic authority"), (Merrill 10) in *Catch-22* the military system is a microcosm for the larger American society and a symbol of the subordination of human impulses to a pattern of mechanical efficiency and profit. (A. Vlad 33)

Barbara Lupack remarks: "Technically [...] the novel is no more about war than Animal Farm is about agriculture." (Lupack 23) What comes under attack is not war itself, but what Heller calls "the contemporary regimented business society," (Merrill 10) which is driven by repressive and dehumanizing forces. The novel is set towards the end of the war, when the defeat of Nazi Germany is foreseeable and the danger against democracy (and against the individual) does not come from the 3rd Reich, but from the American establishment itself. Yossarian feels that it is not his country which is threatened, but himself. He realizes that the enemy is "anybody who's going to get you killed, no matter which side he's on." (Heller 127)

Yossarian's justification is strikingly reminiscent of Frederic Henry's views. Leslie Fielder argues that, in both *Catch-22* and *A Farewell to Arms*, "the true enemy of all men of goodwill is not the ostensible foe but armed conflict itself, no matter for what cause it is ostensibly fought," (Fielder 390) but things could be put in even more general terms: the enemy is represented by the forces and mechanisms in society that endanger the individual in one way or another. In *A Farewell to Arms*, the enemy is generally described as "them":

> That was what you did. You died. You did not know what it was about. You never had time to learn. They threw you in and told you the rules and the first time they caught you off base they killed you. Or they killed you gratuitously like Aymo. Or gave you syphilis like Rinaldi. But they killed you in the end. You could count on that. Stay around and they would kill you. (*FA* 338)

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In *Catch-22*, Yossarian voices the same idea with different words in a discussion which, at the beginning of the novel, seems to suggest that Yossarian is crazy, and that Clevinger is sane. The crazy rhetoric and the terrible development which will follow will prove the contrary:

> "Then why are they shooting at me? Yossarian asked."
>
> "They're shooting at *everyone*," Clevinger answered, ""They're trying to kill everyone."
>
> "And what difference does that make?" (Heller 16)

Norman Gelber, among the many critics who note this, and alongside some of the characters who ultimately realize it, rationalizes Yossarian's apparently zany comments, as well as his final, "moral" decision:

> His indignation arises from the frustrating and absurd situation in which his enemies comprise not only the anti-aircraft gunners who would destroy him but also the American air Force officers whose *Catch-22* would expose him to destruction. His escape and his justification reveal a rational mind arriving at a moral decision. (Gelber 431)

It turns out that Yossarian is actually the most sensible man in the war theatre, but the likes of Clevinger are unaware of it, and Heller will make them see the light, although a very tragic one for them (Clevinger, Nately).

The madness and absurdity that accompany war are present in both books. The similarities are often striking, and somehow parody echoes of *A Farewell to Arms*, intentional or not, are occasionally to be found in *Catch-22*: similar scenes or situations are re-enacted in a more grotesque way.

In *A Farewell to Arms*, many of the pragmatic Italians argue that nothing is worse than war. Passini, one of the drivers, is particularly outspoken on the subject of the war, claiming that, "When people realize how bad it is, they cannot do anything to stop it because they go crazy." (*FA* 50) A welcome defeat would allow them all to go home, he says, whereas the war would not really end with a victory. The soldiers of the defeated army would return home after the war's end, while those of the victorious army would probably be asked to help maintain order in the nation they have defeated. It is also possible that they believe that a victory would encourage their leaders to consider starting future wars.

Italian attitudes towards the war are equally skeptical in *Catch-22*. "There are now 50 or 60 countries fighting in this war," an old Italian man tells the idealistic and patriotic nineteen-year-old Lieutenant Nately. Surely so many countries can't all be worth dying for." As a response to Nately's statement that "it's better to die on one's feet than to live on one's knees," the old man tells him that the saying makes more sense if it is reversed in order to read, "It is better to live on one's feet than die one one's knees."

The conservative Norman Podhoretz, being critical of Heller's book, interprets the message of *Catch-22* as one saying that:

> love of country is a naive delusion, that the military is both evil and demented, and that for a soldier to desert is morally superior – more honourable – than to go on serving in the face of mortal danger" as well as "war is simply a means by which cynical people commit legalized murder in pursuit of power and profits; that patriotism is a fraud; and that nothing is worth dying for. (Podhortez 32)

His interpretation would fit perfectly *A Farewell to Arms* read by large numbers of American people in the last stages of the Vietnam war.

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