

Free book review on catch-22 by joseph heller

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



Book Review: Catch-22

This book, written by Joseph Heller and published in 1961, is perhaps best known for its title alone, which has become a familiar expression in the English language, meaning any “no-win” situation, originally derived from a specific set of circumstances occurring in the novel. Heller set his novel in 1943 in World War II, much of the action located on a small island called Pianosa, near to Elba on the Italian Tuscan coast in the Mediterranean Sea. (The island is real, but much smaller than this work of fiction purported it to be). The main character is Captain John Yossarian, a B-25 bombardier in the fictional 256th squadron of the U. S. Army Air Force. Yossarian and his fellow flyers are portrayed as being in an environment controlled by bureaucratically-orientated and fiercely ambitious senior officers, who see the aircrew personnel merely as a resource to be utilized in the furtherance of their own careers.

Chapter 1 - The Texan - sets the scene and the tone of this satirical novel which nonetheless has a serious, historical element to it. On the surface it is a light-hearted account of the experiences and life of Yossarian and his air force colleagues, written mostly in a quite unusual narrative style. In chapter 1 Yossarian is a patient in the camp hospital, faking possible jaundice to avoid being returned to duty and thus to survive the war, by not risking his life on yet more bombing missions. An example of the satirical humor Heller uses is the description in this first chapter of a soldier fellow patient wholly encased in bandages. He is fed by tube from a drip and his urine drained via a catheter and tube into a bottle. Yossarian recounts that when the drip is empty and the urine bottle full, the nurses simply swap them over to recycle

the contents (!)

Another example, also in chapter 1, is Yossarian's account of the arrival of the fellow patient he refers to as the Texan in his hospital ward. He writes: "The Texan turned out to be good-natured, generous and likable. In three days no one could stand him." In the same chapter Yossarian has a long and seemingly pointless conversation with a visiting chaplain that takes up almost four pages of the book. However, although the conversation seems rather banal on the surface, readers can see a sub-text where Yossarian is quietly ridiculing the chaplain, and throughout the conversation injects little flashes of humor. One such is when he tells the chaplain that his friend and fellow patient Dunbar is: "A true prince. One of the finest, least dedicated men in the whole world."

Heller's writing style is to say the least interesting. Several of the events described during the telling of the tale are described repeatedly, but from the perspective of different characters, each account adding detail, sometimes ending the final iteration of the story with the completion of a situation that began in an earlier chapter. Although some of the events in the narrative are out of chronological sequence, they are nevertheless described in a way that assumes the reader is already familiar with them, sometimes (in this reader's case at any rate) requiring a look back through the pages to seek the earlier detail. On the other hand, Heller does thoughtfully supply links in places to help the reader connect from one episode to the next. For example chapter 1 (The Texan) ends with: "everybody but the C. I. D. man, who had caught cold from the fighter captain and come down with pneumonia." Then chapter 2 (Clevinger) begins with: "In a way the C. I. D.

man was pretty lucky,” thus neatly linking the two chapters.

But how about the title of the book, and that now so familiar expression “Catch-22”? The main context is in Chapter 5 when Yossarian is discussing with Doc Daneeka, the medical officer, the possibility of grounding a man who is crazy. This is in the wider context of the retrospective imposition of a constantly-increasing number of combat missions before a tour duty is considered completed, which is causing many of the flyers to struggle with their sanity. The doctor explains to Yossarian that he can only ground someone if the man asks to be grounded because he’s crazy. However, he then goes on to explain further, that in fact if someone asks to get out of flying combat missions because he’s crazy, then Catch-22 means that he can’t be grounded on that basis because “a concern for one’s own safety in the face of dangers that were real and immediate was the process of a rational mind”. Ergo, such a person cannot be crazy.

Perhaps because the writing style is unusual, this book is not especially easy to read, but is fascinating nonetheless. Because the story incorporates the use of “flashbacks”, it can broadly be split into several parts. The first few chapters follow the main thread of the story, covering various of the characters in the year of 1943. Then the second part of the tale flashes back to accounts of events connected with the earlier siege of Bologna (date not specified), then returns once again to the main thread of the story and to events set in 1943.

The story continues switching scenarios in this way until the latter chapters of the book when Heller focuses more on serious treatment of the brutalities of the war. Until this part of the book, Heller had rather glossed over the true

horrors of war, but now lets the reader experience the full shock and futility of some of the events such as, in chapter 29, the plan to bomb and totally destroy an undefended Italian village, giving the innocent inhabitants no warning, merely to block a road to delay German reinforcements against an American offensive that they (command) know is not planned anyway. Another example is chapter 39, set in Rome, which vividly depicts and underlines the deprivation, destruction and misery of life in a heavily-bombed and now occupied city. Yossarian - who has refused to fly any more missions - walks through the streets, witnessing brutal incidents of a man savagely beating a boy, then another man cruelly beating a dog tied to a post. He then recounts how Aarfy (Captain Aardvark), one of his fellow officers, brutally raped Michaela, a plain, uneducated Italian maid, then threw her out of the apartment window to be killed on impact on the street below. When the military police arrive soon after, they ignore the girl's body, and burst into the apartment. However, in a typical Heller twist, the police also ignore Aarfy, but arrest Yossarian for being in Rome without a leave pass! It is as though because there is a war on, killing other people is a requirement of the time so can be excused, whereas the more serious offence of being in Rome without a leave pass must be duly punished. It is interesting to note that there are relatively few characters in the novel that could actually be called "minor" characters; i. e. that the story is largely centered around a relatively small number of characters, all given more or less equal prominence, other than Yossarian and perhaps the chaplain. And what sort of character is Yossarian as drawn by Heller? He comes over as a self-centered individual, caring little for others or for participating in

communal effort for mutual benefit. For example, in chapter 2, the topic of the officers' club comes into the story. The club was built by the officers themselves in their free time but without assistance from Yossarian who "throbbed with a mighty sense of accomplishment each time he gazed at it and reflected that none of the work that had gone into it was his." As an added touch of humor, the tale continues with: "Actually there were many officers' clubs that Yossarian had not helped build, but he was proudest of the one on Pianosa."

As the novel draws towards its end, and following Yossarian's arrest in Rome after he had refused to fly more missions, the problem of what exactly to do with him was exercising the minds of his senior officers. After being returned to Pianosa under arrest, he was marched by the M. P. s into the Headquarters Building and into Colonel Cathcart's office, where he was placed in front of Colonel Korn, who announced: "We're sending you home." However, as Yossarian immediately realised, there was a catch, namely Catch-22. The colonels offered him a deal that either he would face a court-martial for going absent without leave to Rome, or in return for being promoted to Major and being returned to the States, he would "say nice things" about his senior officers and tell the other men that his refusal to fly missions was only a temporary thing after he'd been told in confidence he was going back to the States. After some thought Yossarian accepted the deal, then was minutes later stabbed by the girlfriend of a now dead fellow officer (Nately) and wound up in the hospital. Realising that the deal he'd accepted was "odious" and that his colonels were still scheming to Yossarian's potential disadvantage and to promote their own self-serving

goals, then that his friend Orr who he'd believed dead had in fact escaped to Sweden, Yossarian decided to follow his example, to desert and to make his way to Sweden, too.

Overall I found this book an entertaining read, albeit sometimes hard going, perhaps because of Heller's unusual style. The basic theme of the aircrews becoming unbalanced due to pressures of having to fly an ever-increasing number of combat missions was thought-provoking and brought home the real human losses caused in war, especially as Heller made those losses so personal for Yossarian. I did wonder if portraying the senior officers as unanimously inept was too simplistic; whether perhaps the story could usefully have had at least one senior officer that Yossarian could respect, which no doubt could thus have affected the novel's ending. Maybe Yossarian would then have agreed to fly more missions and died as a consequence?

Work Cited

Heller, Joseph. *Catch-22*. (1961). Web. 30 May 2012.