

# The war novel – catch 22



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War. On the homefront, everyone is a hero; society has made it custom to feel gratitude and admiration for the service that veterans sacrificed for one's country. Within the war, however, a man's identity is not masked by their service; these veterans, the heroes that we are conditioned to salute have true colors, colors that are truly revealed to their fellow men in uniform.

World War II was deadly. In a war where countries fought for the sake of their nation's flag, *Catch 22*, by Joseph Heller, awakens the reader to the philosophy that the war wasn't for the purpose of a nation; it was a war in which every man was for himself. In his brilliant piece, Heller artfully draws upon allusions to the Bible to create depth and color to the fictional story.

A key component to the success of Heller in *Catch 22* is his use of allusion to biblical themes throughout the text. A radio-gunner in Yossarian, the protagonist and bombardier for the American forces' plane, passes tragically while being raided by anti-American forces, and the men are rattled with sadness. Three days after the passing of the soldier, Snowden, Yossarian climbs a tree, stripped of clothing, and is accompanied by Milo, a character who some would say is the antagonist of the piece. The squadron chaplain, a young man whose faith in God is truly tested throughout the war, relates a vision he has at the funeral to his alleged déjà vu problem, and Heller is successful in his parallel of the tree scene with that of the story of the Tree of Knowledge and the Garden of Eden. Heller writes as follows: The possibility that there really had been a naked man in the tree — two men, actually, since the first had been joined shortly by a second man clad in a brown mustache and sinister dark garments from head to toe who bent forward ritualistically along the limb of the tree to offer the first man

something to drink from a brown goblet- never crossed the chaplain's mind. (Heller, 272). Rich with biblical references, it becomes apparent in this scene that the allusion being made is a parody of the temptation of Christ by Satan, and of the temptation endured by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Yossarian parallels a Christ-figure whereas Milo, who formerly bombed his own squadron, parallels Satan. Heller is also strategic in that the event takes place three days after Snowden's passing, which alludes to the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ and his resurrection from the dead three days following.

Biblical echoes are quite prevalent throughout Joseph Heller's work in *Catch 22*, and can be attributed to giving the piece such pronounced depth. Heller creates Yossarian to be a man of sanity among chaos; his character parallels a Christ-like figure throughout the piece, beyond merely the scenario with Milo and the tree. Exemplifying this is the contrast made between Yossarian's sanity among the army, to Christ's sanity among a chaotic world. This theme is represented in the novel in that Heller writes, (Yossarian) thought he knew how Christ must have felt as he walked through the world, like a psychiatrist through a ward full of nuts, like a victim through a prison full of thieves (Heller, 414-415). The bombardier brings a hopeful light to his fellow soldiers, fighting against the catch 22 system and the power of bureaucracy in extending the men in the squadron's missions to an unreasonable quantity.

*Catch 22* is a war novel like no other; it strips the fabrication from war, and provides an awakening to bare combat through the eyes of a soldier. Heller

is expert in telling a wartime novel, adeptly alluding to biblical concepts to enhance the unique American tale. “