

A story about a yo-yo:
how catch-22 comes
full circle without
being circular



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It seems fitting that Yossarian's nickname in *Catch-22* is "Yo-Yo." A yo-yo is a perfect metaphor for the recurring images of circularity and linearity that characterizes the chaotic world of Joseph Heller's novel. On one hand, a yo-yo follows the straight-line, linear path of its string, but on the other hand, a yo-yo bobs up and down continuously and always finds its way back to the palm, exactly where it began. Yossarian's moral development in *Catch-22* is one of the many circularly linear (or linearly circular) themes in the novel, but unlike the rest, it ultimately succeeds in breaking out of the hopeless circularity of Heller's world. Heller sets up a series of binary and corresponding moral dilemmas that Yossarian must face, and through parallel comparison allows his protagonist to finally come to a moral awakening. Many of Yossarian's experiences in *Catch-22* occur in twos. Trying to convince the doctors that he is indeed insane, Yossarian proclaims, "I see everything twice" (190). Yossarian does indeed see many things twice, and throughout the novel comes to similar moral impasses twice before making the "right" decision. Though the novel is not written chronologically, it often returns to two instances in Yossarian's past: the bombing raids over the cities of Ferrara and Avignon. Yossarian receives a Distinguished Flying Cross and is promoted to Captain for flying over Ferrara (twice) and destroying a bridge, "because he was brave then" (146-149). Even though Kraft and his crew died as a result of going over the target twice, Yossarian is uncertain about how he ought to feel: He stepped into the briefing room with mixed emotions, uncertain how he was supposed to feel about Kraft and the others, for they had all died in the distance of a mute and secluded agony at a moment when he was up to his own ass in the same vile, excruciating dilemma of duty and damnation. (147) However, when <https://assignbuster.com/a-story-about-a-yo-yo-how-catch-22-comes-full-circle-without-being-circular/>

Yossarian witnesses Snowden's death during the following raid over Avignon, he decides that he wants nothing to do with the war. When Yossarian receives his Distinguished Flying Cross, he arrives at the ceremony rebelliously nude. Colonel Korn asks Captain Wren why Yossarian is naked, and Captain Wren answers, "A man was killed in his plane over Avignon last week and bled all over him. He swears he's never going to wear a uniform again" (228). By witnessing Snowden's death, Yossarian realizes that without life, without a soul, "man was matter," and resolves to live as long as he can (450). But the circular world of Catch-22 is not so easily escaped, and after this first parallel experience, Heller plunges Yossarian back into combat with the raid over Bologna." By the time of the mission to Bologna, Yossarian was brave enough not to go around over the target even once..." (150).

Ironically, Yossarian is ordered to go over Bologna not once, but twice. After faking a defective intercom, Yossarian discovers that Bologna had been a milk run, and when ordered to go over Bologna again, he makes the false assumption that there would be no flak. On the contrary, there is heavy combat and many men in Yossarian's squadron are killed (156-161). In Catch-22, Heller denies the possibility of conjectures, because one cannot gauge the logical probability of anything in a topsy-turvy world plagued by illogic. Instead, it is when we have no expectations that we allow for room for hope to grow. Of all the characters, Orr is the one Yossarian expects the least out of. He is short, ugly, and stupid, and his plane is shot down on every mission. "Who would protect a warmhearted, simple-minded gnome like Orr from rowdies and cliques and from expert athletes like Appleby who had flies in their eyes and would walk right over him with swaggering conceit and self-assurance every chance they got" (322)? When his plane is shot

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down for the last time in Bologna, Orr is assumed to have drowned at sea. Then, at the end of the novel, it is revealed that Orr was found, miraculously, on a beach in Sweden. Yossarian cries, “ There is hope after all! Can’t you see? Even Clevinger might be alive somewhere in that cloud of his, hiding inside until it’s safe to come out” (459). Heller’s point is not that we should not have expectations at all, but that in times of war and chaos, we must learn to expect the worst. Orr continually expects the worst on every mission — that his plane will be shot down — and he survives every time. During Bologna, Yossarian expects a milk run and is nearly shot down, and Orr expects to be shot down and ends up in neutral Sweden. After Bologna, Yossarian realizes that life is vitally important and that one must always be on the lookout for life-threatening dangers. With these realizations, Yossarian becomes more and more depressed that people are trying to kill him, and his growing sense of powerlessness leads him to use mindlessly exercise power over others. At the start of the novel, Yossarian is in the hospital censoring letters written by the enlisted-men patients, and he alters them for his own amusement. “ Death to all modifiers, he declared one day, and out of every letter that passed through his hands went every adverb and every adjective. The next day he made war on articles. He reached a much higher plane of creativity the following day when he blacked out everything in the letters but a, an, and the” (16). His disregard for others’ letters comes back to haunt him after his brief affair with Luciana. Yossarian falls in love with her and even asks for her hand in marriage, but when she gives him her contact information he instantly tears it into pieces, symbolically tearing her into pieces (169-173). He did not have to destroy the letters or Luciana’s address, but he did simply because he could. Exercising power over the paper

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indirectly exercises power over the people who wrote on it, and, in being so indirectly despotic, Yossarian is no better than Milo, Colonel Cathcart, and General Scheisskopf. Unlike them, however, Yossarian eventually realizes “the enormity of his error in tearing her long, lithe, nude, young vibrant limbs into tiny pieces of paper so impudently and dumping her down so smugly into the gutter from the curb” (173). Heller gives Yossarian a conscience, and through trial-and-error, Yossarian learns how to use it. Yossarian begins to understand that the blind exercise of power over others is immoral and that he himself is trapped in a world where his autonomy is subject to the whims of those more powerful. Yossarian’s moral development is given a vague chronology through Heller’s parallel dilemmas. Heller sets up situations in which Yossarian is faced with similar moral dilemmas twice — the first in which he makes the ‘wrong’ decision and the second in which he makes the ‘right’ decision. The chaplain aptly describes this sensation of reoccurrence: “Deja vu. The subtle, recurring confusion between illusion and reality that was characteristic of paramnesia” (214). The chaplain sees Yossarian naked in a tree at Snowden’s funeral, but not realizing that it is Yossarian, he assumes it was an apparition. Unable to put his finger on whether it was *deja vu*, *presque vu*, or *jamais vu*, he is thoroughly puzzled (214). Though the chaplain does not realize it, Yossarian as the naked apparition is all three. Yossarian is, in fact, in a constant state of *deja vu*, because the circular world in which he lives forces him to commit seemingly similar acts over and over again. He is also *presque vu* because though he realizes that his existence is futile, but he resists against the circularity of his life anyway; whenever he almost escapes, he is sucked back in. Heller draws the world of *Catch-22* like an enormous circle, and Yossarian’s life as sets of chords within the circle. In <https://assignbuster.com/a-story-about-a-yo-yo-how-catch-22-comes-full-circle-without-being-circular/>

this sense, Yossarian's life is also *jamais vu*, because Yossarian's experiences dissect the circle at two points, like a chord, but they never unravel the circle or break through its path. As such, Yossarian represents linearity within circularity: a yo-yo. Just as the chaplain questions the metaphysics of the naked apparition, Yossarian also learns to question the reality of his world. The soldier in white makes two appearances in *Catch-22*. When Yossarian encounters the bandaged soldier the first time, he assumes that there is a person beneath the bandages (18). But when the soldier returns and Dunbar declares that he is not real, but "hollow inside, like a chocolate soldier," Yossarian wonders if Dunbar's crazed accusation is true (376). "Did anyone see him?" Dunbar asks (377). If nobody saw him, then he cannot be real. Yossarian applies this same logic to *Catch-22*, when he asks the old woman in Rome: "Didn't they show it to you?" When she says no, he exclaims, "Oh, God damn! I bet it wasn't even really there" (418). At the beginning of his novel, all Yossarian wants is to make it out of the war alive, regardless of what happens. He does not care where his bombs fall or who he harms, so long as he escapes the incoming flak. By the close of the novel, Yossarian accepts responsibility for the consequences of his actions. "Someone had to do something sometime. Every victim was a culprit, every culprit a victim, and somebody had to stand up sometime to try and break the lousy chain of inherited habit that was imperiling them all" (415-416). Filled with remorse, Yossarian goes on a mission to find Nately's whore's kid sister in Rome with Milo, but loses hope when Milo chooses to pursue illegal tobacco instead of the girl (421). In Rome, Yossarian witnesses instance upon instance of people abusing their powers to harm others, culminating with Aarfy senselessly raping and murdering an innocent girl (427-428). Yossarian finally grasps

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that it is never justifiable to use other people as a means to an end, not even if to benefit oneself. Heller draws the novel to a close with one final moral dilemma: will Yossarian choose to be court-martialed or will he allow himself to be sent home at the price of publicly validating a war that has killed so many people (434-437)? Either way, Yossarian knows he cannot break free of the circular power structure he is confined within. If he chooses to be court-martialed, he will not have the “odious” act of validating the war on his conscience, but he will be used as an example by the military to dissuade other enlisted men from refusing to fight. Yossarian laments, “Between me and every ideal I always find Scheisskopfts, Peckems, Kornes and Cathcarts. And that sort of changes the ideal” (455). He decides to be sent home and tells Major Danby that he wants to think only of himself. But he pauses, saying, “You know, I have a queer feeling that I’ve been through this exact conversation before with someone else. It’s just like the chaplain’s sensation of having experienced everything twice” (456). Heller never misses an opportunity to be ironic, for at this point Yossarian’s development at last comes full circle. Yossarian learns that Orr was found in Sweden and that there is hope in the world. He knows that he cannot use other people to benefit himself. He realizes that he does not want to exist within the confines of a ruthless power structure bent on destroying him. Risking his own life, Yossarian decides to flee Catch-22 instead of existing under its tyrannical tenets. So he jumps (463).