

Catch 22: the novel  
one is not supposed  
to like



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Catch 22 is an outrageous novel, one designed to provoke the reader and to evoke a sense of uneasiness and disturbance. Its complexity can drive one completely mad with frustration. A lot of people fall in the trap of believing that Catch 22 is supposed to be a hilarious novel derisive of World War II, and become very disappointed when they find themselves experiencing emotions that provoke anything but laughter. This text can be found amusing, but also frustrating and even sad. Joseph Heller, whether intentionally or not, created a brilliant piece of literature that is not meant to amuse the reader, but rather to provoke and trigger him. A book about war should not excite the reader because there is nothing exciting or positive about war. A book about war should enrage and frustrate the reader. This is what makes Catch 22 such a successful book because with its language, plot and characters it fully captures the insanity of World War II. Catch 22 has all the characteristics of a bad novel – a disturbed and convoluted plot, undeveloped characters, and repetitive and irrational language, but surprisingly all these characteristics contribute to the brilliance of the novel.

When one reads Catch 22, initially it seems that there is not a very structured plot. The scenery and location in the novel changes abruptly and it is hard for the reader to follow the connections between these changes. Every chapter seems to be telling a completely different story. The action and main focus are inconsistent. The only plotline that keeps the whole novel together is the one that may seem insignificant at first – the death of the new cadet Snowden. The first time that he is mentioned in Chapter 4 the author does not give any background or explanation to this story. “...and then there was Yossarian with the question that had no answer: ‘ Where are

the Snowdens of yesteryear?' The question upset them, because Snowden had been killed over Avignon" (Heller 35). The first time one reads these lines, one may think that this is just another example of Yossarian's mad talk. The whole passage simply does not make sense. One may think that this is another example of wordplay meaning to convey the absurdity of war. However, this passage is really a brilliant example in which the author leaves clues for the reader, which become tremendously significant as the story unfolds. It is easy for the reader to overlook this detail among everything else that is happening. However, the story of Snowden develops in more than six chapters in the novel, keeping the plot together and sending different messages to the reader. Snowden's death becomes almost an excuse for Yossarian's madness. Every time that he does something crazy or acts inexplicably, Yossarian mentions Snowden's death. " Yossarian lost his nerve on the mission to Avignon because Snowden lost his guts" (Heller 225). The story about Snowden begins to unfold here and the reader becomes aware of how tremendous an impact it has had on Yossarian. The strongest point of this plotline, however, is at the very end. " Man was matter, that was Snowden's secret" (Heller 440). During the time of war man is " matter" (Heller 440) but man does NOT matter. No one cares about Snowden's death besides Yossarian. No one even bothered to remember Snowden's name because he is just another soldier like all the rest of them. When he dies, there will be another one to take his place. This short sentence in the novel is the most significant one of all and the one that sends the most important message - human life is insignificant during war. Snowden begins as an insignificant character in the story, created only in

order to die. This character and the episode of his death manage to unite the whole text together and send the most important message of the novel.

All the characters in the novel are portrayed one-sidedly and in a very clear and simple way. Heller prefers to exaggerate a certain characteristic and build a character solely based on it. The characters serve as a means to convey bigger ideas. Most of the secondary characters have extremely important roles as sending hidden messages to the reader, not only about the novel, but also about war and politics in the 20th century. The man in white is a metaphor for the way that war dehumanizes people. He has lost his whole identity under the bandages. The man in white is simply one of the many soldiers in the hospital who is completely stripped from any characteristic that makes him human. He cannot drink, eat or perform any physical functions normally. The only responsibility the nurses have towards him is to check his temperature to make sure he is still alive and to change the two jars with liquids coming out and flowing into his body. "When the jar on the floor was full, the jar feeding his elbow was empty, and the two were simply switched quickly so that stuff could be dripped back into him" (Heller 10). Any norms of hygiene are being disregarded to the point that the nurses put the same liquid that the man produces back into his body. This shows how unimportant human life is during war. Life is determined solely by the presence or lack of normal temperature. If the man survives he will be sent back to war. If he dies, soon there will be another man in white. And this man will be regarded as the previous one because what is under the bandages does not matter. At the end of the novel, when Yossarian is back in the hospital, he sees another man in white, but to him this is the same exact

person “ He had lost a few inches and added some weight, but Yossarian remembered him instantly by the two stiff arms and the two stiff, thick, useless legs all drawn upward, and by the frayed black hole in the bandages over his mouth” (Heller 365). As much as Yossarian tries to escape the degrading effects of war, he is now devoid of empathy and humaneness. The man in white is obviously not the one he encountered at the beginning of the novel and Yossarian subconsciously realizes this by noting that he is different in height and weight. However, what the author wants to emphasize with the merging of the two men in white into one is that it does not matter who is the person under the bandage. It could be anyone, but there is no one to care during the war. If he dies in the hospital he will be replaced by another soldier. If he dies on the battlefield he will still be replaced by another soldier - the point is that no man is irreplaceable.

Milo Minderbinder’s character is another important character in the novel because he is a metaphor for America’s capitalist syndicate. His motto is “ What’s good for M & M Enterprises will be good for the country” (Heller 436). This slogan becomes like a refrain during the most crucial and critical times during the novel. When all the bombardiers find out their life-saving parachutes are taken away, all they find is a note with Milo’s slogan. When Yossarian tries to save Snowden, he finds out that all the painkillers are taken by Milo and substituted by his business card with the slogan on it. When Milo makes a deal with the Germans to bomb his own base instead of them, the ominous slogan can be heard again. What is good for the country turns out to be good only for Milo and everyone who is a part of the syndicate. He is willing to sacrifice the life of his fellow soldiers for the name

of the syndicate. The syndicate, as it becomes more and more clear as the plot unfolds, truly consists only of Milo himself. Everyone else is just a means to achieve a certain goal. During Snowden's funeral, about which only Yossarian cares, Milo climbs on the tree next to Yossarian, yet he does not even seem to notice the funeral. He is completely devoid of empathy. If he does not see money in something, he has no interest in it. Completely oblivious to Yossarian's tragedy he forces him to try to eat chocolate-covered cotton. " Yossarian gagged convulsively and sprayed his big mouthful of chocolate-covered cotton right out to Milo's face. ' Here take it back!' [...] ' Have you gone crazy?' [...] ' But I've got to make the mess hall feed it to the men [...] they've got to swallow it.' Milo ordained with dictatorial grandeur" (Heller 261-62) He is not even a bit concerned for the wellbeing of the people around him as long as he makes money. He is willing to feed the whole squadron completely inedible food, at the cost of the health of the soldiers, hiding behind the slogan that what is good for the syndicate " will be good for the country" (Heller 436). Milo shows the tragic truth about syndicates and greedy businessmen during the war who are ready to sacrifice everyone else for their own benefit. Catch-22 can also be regarded as a character itself. In the novel it is portrayed as an unescapable situation, from which one can never come out a winner. While the catch is obviously not a human, it seems to be given more personality and appears more alive than most of the characters in the novel. Not only it is humanized and personified, in contrast to the dehumanized soldiers, but it is also omnipresent and in fact the only character in the novel that is discussed from various angles and on many levels. There was only one catch and that was Catch-22, which specified that a concern for one's own safety in the face of dangers that

were real and immediate was the process of a rational mind. Orr was crazy and could be grounded. All he had to do was ask; and as soon as he did, he would no longer be crazy and would have to fly more missions. Orr would be crazy to fly more missions and sane if he didn't, but if he was sane, he had to fly them. If he flew them, he was crazy and didn't have to; but if he didn't want to, he was sane and had to. (Heller 46) This is one of the most famous quotes from Catch 22 and one that fully shows Heller's mastery of the irrational and confusing language, on which the whole novel is based. Catch-22 accurately summarizes the paradox of war in a few short sentences. No matter in what form the catch is presented throughout the novel, there is one major point - there is no escape from it. It is so well thought and so absurdly framed that no one can trick the system. Catch-22 is a metaphor for the absurdity and inescapability of war, because the irony of war is that there can never be a win, only losses. There are many less significant forms the catch takes throughout the text. One of the captains assumes without any solid ground that Major Major is a communist because he has not signed a loyalty oath that the captain makes all the soldiers sign during lunch. However, the only reason that Major Major has not signed the oath is because the captain will not let him. The captain does not want to let him, because he thinks Major Major is a communist. This never ending circle is so frustrating but it is the mean that keeps people at war. When the whores in the house in Italy were taken away and the whole house was destroyed, the old woman who remained there repeated only one word - Catch-22. These episodes completely drive Yossarian mad because he realizes that the catch is used to cover all the actions for which the military does not want to give explanation or account for and no one has the right to stop them or even

physically read the law that grants them this power. Catch-22, although not human, is the most powerful character in the novel. It is a living, breathing, growing creature, which consumes the identity of everyone that comes in touch with it, completely deprives them of their human rights and often times of their lives as well. Additionally critical to the novel is the language. The boorish, arrogant and uncensored language in the novel serves to express the degradation that all the characters during the World War II experience. It seems like the only word that the characters know for a woman is a "whore" (Heller 161). This general disrespect and disregard for women speaks volumes about how the characters have given way to their animal nature. After Nately falls in love with one of these women everyone refers to her as "Nately's whore" (Heller 355). The woman is not perceived as a human, but simply as a toy in the hands of the dehumanized soldiers. Aarfy was the character that refused to sleep with a woman and pay for it. At the end of the novel, however, when he gives way to his animal instincts, he not only rapes and kills her but he does not appear to feel guilty about it. 'I only raped her once,' he explained. Yossarian was aghast. 'But you killed her, Aarfy! You killed her!' 'Oh, I had to do that after I raped her,' Aarfy replied in his most condescending manner. 'I couldn't very well let her go around saying bad things about us, could I?' (Heller 418) After this terrifying confession he goes on to say "They aren't going to put good old Aarfy in jail. Not for killing her" (Heller 418). From this becomes clear that human life does not mean anything during war. Not only the Colonels and Generals send their soldiers to certain death without thinking twice about it, but soldiers themselves are completely demonized. The only thing Aarfy is concerned about is that if he has let the woman go she will ruin his reputation. His



name is more important than a human life and he has no second thoughts about it. Not only this but he is absolutely sure that killing someone so insignificant will not get him in trouble. Ironically when the police comes, they take away Yossarian for not having a pass, and completely ignore the motionless human body lying on the pavement in front of the hotel. Aarfy does not get in trouble whatsoever and proves the point that during war there are no such things as humans or morals. Just like animals, the only purpose in life of the people at war is to ensure their survival and to satisfy their basic instincts for food and sex. The pointless manner of living only serves to strengthen even more the idea of the characters' dehumanization, which demonizes them and gives way to their bestial nature.

Most of the characters are masters of wordplay. In most of the conversations in the novel the language either aims at achieving deception with the help of intricate word play in order to trick people, or other times simply mean to show the insanity that infects everyone like the plague during war. In a conversation between Don Daneeka and Captain Black the language of trickery can be seen very clearly: "What makes you so sure Major Major is a Communist?" "You never heard him denying it until we began accusing him, did you? And you don't see him signing any of our loyalty oaths." "You aren't letting him sign any." "Of course not," Captain Black explained. "That would defeat the whole purpose of our crusade. (Heller 114) Catch-22 has its grip around everyone and the madness leaks through the language. Yossarian and Major Major decide to use deception out of pure boredom and risk the lives of many people including the chaplain, because of their naïve wordplay. When Yossarian was assigned to censure letters in the hospital,

while he was lying to everyone, faking a liver condition, in order to not fly any more missions, he grew bored of the simple task he was assigned. “Most letters he didn’t read at all. On those he didn’t read at all he wrote his own name. On those he did read he wrote, ‘ Washington Irving.’ When that grew monotonous he wrote, ‘ Irving Washington” (Heller 8) Later on Major Major engages in the same seemingly silly task. Neither of the characters realize, however, that their actions and deception can have consequences. The irony in the end is that the only punished person for this crime was the most pure and honest one of all - the Chaplain. His inferior position could not save him from interrogation and punishment, unlike the people of higher positions. The superior use deception and trickery to hold people in control and to benefit greatly of the situation. Milo makes this observation quite early in the novel by saying “ people who did lie were, on the whole, more resourceful and ambitious and successful than people who did not lie” (Heller 116). Sadly, this is the means through which all of the successful characters in the novel achieve their goals. Colonel Cathcart and Korn are willing to let Yossarian go home as long as he portrays them as heroes in front of everyone back in their home country. ‘ What? What must I do?’ Colonel Korn laughed curtly. ‘ Like us.’ [...] ‘ Like you?’ ‘ That’s right,’ said Colonel Korn, nodding, gratified immeasurably by Yossarian’s guileless surprise and bewilderment. ‘ Like us. Join us. Be our pal. Say nice things about us here and back in the States. (Heller 426) The people in charge put the inferior in such inescapable situations that they are forced to abolish their morals and values in order to achieve their goals. Initially Yossarian agrees to this immoral plan to deceive the people in the States and make them believe that Colonel Cathcart and Korn deserve to become generals because of their

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great contribution to the country. At the end of the novel, however, Yossarian rediscovers his moral values. He chooses the risk to run away and if captured to be sent to court-martial, rather than to be a puppet in the hands of those in power and to let Catch-22 win. Yossarian's rediscovery of his humanity makes him the only winner in the novel who manages to fight and escape Catch-22. After painting such a disturbing picture of humanity, Joseph Heller, after all, decides to give the reader a beam of light at the end of the tunnel. He ends the novel with hope that no matter all the flaws, people are intrinsically good. And if they are able to rediscover their human nature, they will be redeemed. This is an important message to humanity that Heller has hidden in the seemingly insignificant decision of Yossarian to run away. However, Heller does not mean to convey to the reader the idea that running away from a situation is the way to escape it. What he means by this ending of the novel is, that humanity after all always wins in the end, and the only way one can escape from the Catch is to rediscover and reconcile with one's own human nature.