

# A FASHIONABLE NIHILISM OF THE PAST DECADE, “ CATCH – 22 “

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**ABSTRACT**-To accept a new myth about ourselves is to simplify our memories – and to place our stamp of approval on what might become an epitaph for our Era in the shorthand of History. This, in my opinion is why critics condemn our most significant books, poems and plays when they first appear, while praising feebler creations. The birth of a new myth fills them with primitive dread, for myths are so effective.

The maker of myths “Joseph Heller “whether he intends to be or not, is the most brilliant teller of an oft-told tale.

**KEY WORDS:** implied affirmation, nihilism, farce & fantasy, sick humor, icy casualness, shadowing flashbacks, comic invention, Skepticism.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joseph Heller, an American novelist and playwright, won immediate recognition with his first novel, “Catch 22” – a lethal blend of Farce and Fantasy, sick humor and icy casualness. Heller’s long awaited second novel “ Something Happened “, is a depressing and profoundly affecting statement about the condition of modern mankind. With the publication of his 2<sup>nd</sup> novel, Heller is recognized as a major contemporary novelist.

The alternating play of humor and horror in “ Catch 22 “ creates a dramatic tension throughout; that it allows the book to be labelled as a classic both of humor and of war. The artistic strategy relating to the thesis of the novel, put simply is this: War is irrational; and the representative things happen in war are likewise irrational, including man’s behavior in war. This thesis is an underlying assumption, illustrated not documentarily but imaginatively throughout the book.

What he asks is that his readers accept the credibility of his characters and their actions. The responsive reader of “ Catch 22 “ is made to walk a tight – rope as he leans first to riotous humor and then tips to the side of black tragedy. The book illustrates Charlie Chaplin’s dictum that “Humor is Pain”

Joseph Heller is notable for being a slow worker as well as for being one of a few American novelists able to sustain a reputation on the basis of a single nook. Before the appearance of “Catch 22 “, anti-heroism in American fiction was well on its way to being established; it can be read as a mass over the death of heroism itself. It held that, in the mad impersonal killing of modern warfare, heroism was a joke, and only seeing after one’s own survival, made sense: in an insane world, only the man who pretended to insanity can be judged sane.

## LITERARY ASPECT

A basic narrative structure can be discovered holding the novel subtly together. Heller uses the narrative technique of fore shadowing flashbacks ( conventional flashbacks repeated for thematic effect).The result is the paradox of suspense through flashbacks, as this paradox suggests an ingenious fusion of time planes into the simultaneity of existential time, a fusion entirely consistent with what seems to me the fundamental existential theme of the work.

Heller has done something in each chapter – to link it to the preceding chapter – a continuing action for condition. Despite many and sudden shifts in scene, episode, character, motif and time, then the narrative makes it clear that Heller has distributed sufficient elements of continuity and transition to give the work a controlling structural design beneath its kaleidoscopic surface. However much this narrative may disguise it, Catch 22 is built in a 5 part alternating structure in which sections developing the central conflict and sub plots in the narrative present provide additional background and exposition.

## PLOT

There are so many villains and power mongers in Catch 22 that it is easy to minimize or overlook Yossarian’s culpability in the world. Yossarian is responsible for nearly every significant event mentioned in the novel, including most of the deaths we witness. The irony of the novel is that Yossarian is not aware of his powers and spends much of his time blaming others. What Yossarian learns in the course of the book is that he, and on one else, is in control of his fate. The characters in the novel who are most often cited as the “ real “ controllers of power are ‘ Milo Minderbinder ‘ and ex P.F.C.Wintergreen. Yossarian is guilty of complicity. His essential sin is in lending his presence and his tacit sanction to the system perpetrated by the USAF and distorted by Cathcart and Korn.

By not deserting and by continuing to fly missions, his feeble protests against bureaucracy are worse than useless because they not only do not stop anyone from getting killed, but they engender further tragedy.

By making everything in the novel, the good as well as the evil Yossarian’s “ fault “, Heller argues that the individual, not bureaucracy or the establishment, still holds the final trump. Throughout most of the book, Yossarian behaves according to White Head’s proposition that without the living subject there is nothing, nothing, nothing. Heller’s presentation of the conflict between

this subject and the society that attempts to kill it claims, in principle, that right is on the side of the subject. The contention that nothing can be important to a dead man ; however true, cannot justify a man's running off from the field of battle to let other's die in his place.

**'THE ENEMY IS ANYBODY WHO'S GOING TO GET YOU KILLED, NO MATTER WHICH SIDE HE'S ON'**

### **THE STYLE**

The narrative technique, the tone and methods of characterization, serves to frustrate the reader's expectations. It simultaneously shows man's illusory view of the world, employ's techniques to suggest the irrational nature of the world and is itself an object against which the truth of its statements may be tested.

The novel capitalizes upon the unwilling but very human fascination for the painful and the grotesque. The novel, however, conveys an implied affirmation; it is a relevant, affirmative, ultimately moral book – clearly an indictment and a recommendation for something better.

### **CONCLUSION**

Despite the flaw running up the center of Catch 22, the novel had a winning exuberance and a wealth of comic invention. More than with most novelists', the universe of Heller's novels is a self-enclosed one. Accept his assumptions and his conclusions inevitably, sometimes hilariously follow. The assumptions of Catch 22 are that Courage, Bravery, Liberty, Integrity and other human virtues are all a joke, a hideous cover-up for the urge toward self-advancement, the will to power and simple craziness.

Interestingly in its assumptions Catch 22 is a pre cursor to much of the fiction that arose out of the past decade, but with an even deeper Skepticism about conventional explanations of human character and how the world works.

Skepticism slices to the bone : Character counts for nothing ; Plot is a laugh, since cause can no longer be held effective to explain effect ; and language itself is no more than a stick of a blind man ; a thing which we use to grope our way around in the dark but which really light up nothing.

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