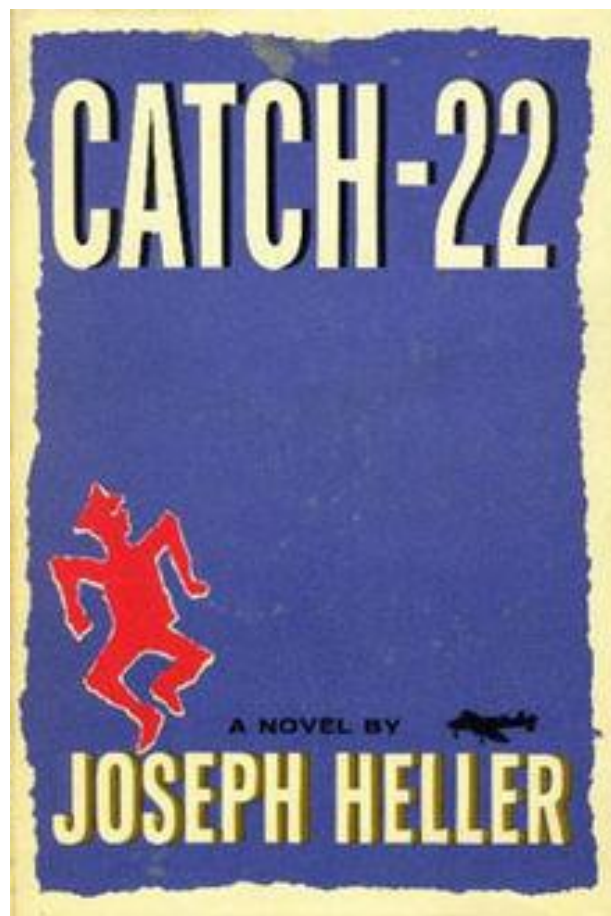


## *Joseph Heller's Dark Satire: Catch 22*



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Catch-22 often attracts writers who praise as if it suddenly emerged with total originality; as if it was without precedent, prior influence or a genre. Ground breaking as it was in 1961 and influential as it became, it had precedents, a genre and similarities to both earlier and later American novels.

The despairing, sullen, restless mood so evident in the American literature from the 1930s into the early 1950s started to change around 1952, as America began a period of economic prosperity which would last into the 1970s and the extraordinarily popular General Eisenhower won the presidency by a landslide with his traditional right wing program of liberty against socialism, rooting out subversives, strengthening defence, and cutting taxes, bureaucracies and

government control of business. Like so many rightists, he presented an image of a charismatic military leader who was still a folksy man of the people. His 1952 election victory marked the triumph of American conservative politics which had begun six years earlier with the start of the Cold War, was strengthened by Joe McCarthy's rise to power in 1950 and was then perpetuated in American literature during the next decade.

This political trend, the widespread public fear of communism and the notorious blacklists ensured that American fiction from the late 1940s into the early 1960s was usually remarkably conservative. Even in many novels which criticise American society and question the nature of normality, the warrior or the veteran ultimately upholds the American way. Such popular works from the first half of the 1950s as *The Caine Mutiny*, (1951) Audie Murphy's *To Hell and Back*, (1949), Leon Uris's *Battle Cry* (1953) and Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1956) all do this explicitly.

Saul Bellow adumbrates this tendency in his novel *Dangling Man* (1944). This goes beyond doing this explicitly to ultimately being joyously blatant about conformity. The central character and narrator, Joseph, is a former communist who while waiting to have his enlistment tries to stand alone without beliefs in wartime Chicago. He fails and as he goes into the army he ends up gleefully renouncing his individuality, his self-determination and even being accountable for his own actions. The novel actually ends with him cheering regular hours, supervision of the spirit and regimentation. Was Bellow being ironic or ambiguous with this conclusion? This is an obvious and likely possibility, but considering that this novel was published in wartime the answer must remain uncertain.

In many other works this idea gets more subtle presentations, reinforced by showing the defeat, destruction, humiliation, exile or sufferings of the hero or protagonist for departing from American orthodoxy. Whatever their writer's intention, this becomes evident in novels which focus on soldiers, veterans or assorted other fighters: they all reveal this pattern. A listing of such works includes many of the bestsellers from this era: Norman Mailer's *The Naked and The Dead* (1949), Irwin Shaw's *The Young Lions*, (1949) and *The Troubled Air* (1951), Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood* (1950), James Jones's *From Here to Eternity*, (1952), John Steinbeck's *East of Eden* (1952) and *The Winter of Our*

*Discontent* (1962), Glendon Swarthout's *They Came to Cordura*. (1958), John O'Hara's *From the Terrace* (1958), *Ten North Frederick* (1959) and *Ourselves to Know* (1960), Hamilton Basso's *The Light Infantry Ball* (1959), Edward Abbey's *Brave Cowboy* (1960), Richard McKenna's *The Sand Pebbles*, (1962) and E.M. Nathanson's *The Dirty Dozen* (1966).

This conservative mood was so pervasive that even many works about veterans which boldly questioned American values without destroying the main character for doing so, sometimes unintentionally reinforced conservatism. An early example which typifies this appears in the conclusion to Gore Vidal's *Williwaw* (1946) when conformist characters talking about the central character who alone opposes a fake and trivialised naval investigation, sum up what is wrong with him, he has too much imagination. They are also succinctly expressing what is one of the main things wrong with this numbingly conformist, conservative era. The right are not the only ones suffering from this malaise. Norman Mailer's *Barbary Shore* (1951) depicts the world of American socialists as being so claustrophobic, unimaginative, dreary and hopeless that it alienates the reader away from the radical character's politics. His *The Deer Park* (1955) Mailer shows the power of both the Hollywood system and the McCarthyists against Hollywood's liberals and anyone unorthodox. In both Mailer's novels the narrators create the impression they survive because they are passive observers. Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957) starts as exuberant and optimistic, but ultimately becomes a sad portrayal of the beat generation. In Bernard Wolfe's *The Great Prince Died* (1958) Paul Teleki, the only character among the radicals to survive happily, does so by giving up politics and managing his wife's business.

Despite the conservative simplicity of the "I like Ike" politics and the punishment of the unorthodox, American literature reveals no widespread return to the simple optimism and religiosity of the nineteenth century. Not one of the previously mentioned works goes back to either idea, instead accepting limitations emerges. America no longer appears as God's own country, the land of opportunity and pioneering liberty, but has become a place where those who do not escape find that compromises have to be made with society or the individual faces negative consequences. In *From Here to Eternity* this becomes explicit when Sergeant Milton Warden in assessing Robert E. Lee Prewitt as an independent individualist states that perhaps in the days of the pioneers a man

could go his own way, but the world has changed, to survive a man must now play ball with the powers that be. That idea would find obvious expression throughout the conservative era – and after. Individuals would try to live by the codes of the old Wild West long after that society had become civilised.

Although conservatism was dominant in Eisenhower's America, particularly in Middle America, from 1955 onwards a youth rebellion spread, starting with culture before going political. Despite some lulls and fashion changes, it still continues, albeit in a now familiar, stale form that continually becomes absorbed into the consumerist system. The new youth rebellion resembled that of the 1920s in that both emerged against a background of post war prosperity and both indulged in hedonism and in outraging drab social values and fixed gender roles. Both cultures developed in reaction against society's material concerns and both created new heroes in the image of alienated moody loners: James Dean, Marion Brando, Montgomery Cliff, Paul Newman and sometimes Marilyn Monroe would embody them on the screen. In cinema Fellini, the French New Wave and the Italian neo-realists came to the cultural rebellion from a different angle. Reading Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, Norman Mailer, Henry Miller, Arthur Miller, Simone De Beavoir, J.D. Salinger and Kerouac, listening to blues and jazz, Buddy Holly and Juliet Greco were the most obvious cultural manifestations of a hunger to escape from the western world's dull conformity and materialism., Heller's *Catch-22* (1961) would be a later addition.

American literary manifestations of this rebellion also emphasised the outsider. He might like Robert E. Lee Prewitt in *From Here to Eternity* and Red Valsen, in *The Naked and the Dead* bear witness against the system, but like Prewitt he would ultimately try to escape from it. The relation between the hero and his society was changing. The old heroes used to protect society from society's enemies, but now society itself has become the hero's enemy.

This reveals a seminal change in what the modern American hero represented. Such crusaders and rebels as Ernest Everard in Jack London's *The Iron Heel* (1908), Amory Blaine in *This Side Of Paradise*,(1920), Joe Bonham in *Johnny Got His Gun* (1939), Robert Jordan in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940) and Robert Hearn in *The Naked and the Dead* are contemptuous towards social hypocrisy and staidness. They may doubt their idealistic beliefs

and find themselves battling with the society they were trying to defend or improve, but they do believe they could change society and that ideas can play a part fight for human improvement or liberation. Many of the soldiers and former soldiers who emerged in post war fiction were either dubious or cynical about such efforts. They frequently found themselves in opposition to their organisations or leaders. In the 1940s and early 1950s they were either killed by the system like Robert Hearn, Noah Ackerman and Robert E. Lee Prewitt, or they were absorbed into it like Saul Bellow's Joseph, Mark Bradley in James Hilton's *Nothing So Strange* (1948) and Red Valsen. From the 1950s onwards another alternative frequently emerges, the permanent rebel who survives by never settling down; they avoid being destroyed or incorporated. This happens in the following novels: A.B. Guthrie's *The Big Sky* (1947), Wallace Stegner's *Joe Hill* (1950), Jack Thompson's *The Getaway* (1952), Kerouac's *On the Road*, (1957), Arthur Miller's *The Misfits* (1957), Edward Abbey's *The Brave Cowboy*, (1956), Larry McMurtry's *Horseman Pass By* (1960), *Catch 22*, *The Sand Pebbles* (1962), Thomas Berger's *Little Big Man* (1964), Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962) and *Sometimes a Great Notion* (1964) and James Leo Herlihy's *Midnight Cowboy* (1966). For the protagonists in these novels society emerges as a hostile, repressive force and not only ideologies or beliefs, but relationships are traps. These novels assume disillusionment with both ideology and society as a starting point. Any ideology or any belief in human goodness rarely gets a mention and if so usually dismissively, briefly or disparagingly. The protagonists in these novels are cynical or disillusioned and often self-centred and misanthropic. The protagonist's attempt to preserve their life, their individuality or their integrity from society's threats became the focus of these and many other works. Increasingly the characteristics of independence, acumen, isolation and distrust became shields against the attacks of a society that could not be changed. That left the alternatives of fight or flight.

*Catch-22* was published in 1961 and began its literary life as part of the counter culture experience. Like so many cultural works from that milieu this work is focused on an anarchic individual trying to escape the power of the American state, especially in its military form. Unlike earlier works *Catch-22* Heller permeates his first novel with black comedy and absurdist satire. Few other works resemble it in being ultimately optimistic in its conclusion. This came as a welcome contrast to so many of the earlier post war books about the American

military experience, usually in World War II. Dreary in their style, pessimistic in their outlook and tragic in their conclusions, they did not match the rebellious, hopeful mood or attitudes of the 1960s youth generation: *Catch 22* did. All of these factors account to some extent for its immense popularity, making it one of the twentieth century's bestsellers. Other factors for this success include the sharply delineated characters, scenes and situations, the vividness of the writing and the astuteness and wit in its observations. Its publication date also helped with its success, almost matching President Eisenhower's famous televised critique of the sinister and growing power of the Military Industrial Complex in January 1961. Many others would also soon criticize the linked manifestations of politics, business and defence as the cultural blacklist ended in 1960 and then both the Vietnam War and opposition to that conflict escalated.

Like so many of the previously listed novels, escaping to the Wild West does not appear as an option. Yossarian, the central character, does not quixotically try to live by pioneer values in a very different world. This becomes clear from the first pages, when the only echoes of the West come from the Texan in hospital and he shows his Western values as being childishly simple and annoying. Stupidly and loudly, he credits the immobile, mentally moribund casualty who can only artificially survive with having nothing wrong with him. By doing this the Texan also shows that his frontier values and optimism are also dead, even if people like him adamantly insist that they are not against blatantly obvious evidence.

In *Catch-22* the idea of escape shows some ironic reversals. Yossarian's dream of escape involves returning to America from Pianosa, a Mediterranean island near Elba. Normally such a setting would seem idyllic, but Heller sets much of the story in 1944 and early 1945, when Pianosa serves as an American air base for bombing raids against northern Italy and eastern France. The military dominates the island and all aspects of Yossarian's life there.

As in so many other previously mentioned novels written after the Second World War, the central character, Yossarian, appears as one among an ensemble who show some heroic characteristics, while Heller depicts the would-be heroes among the officers as mediocre, callous intriguers who serve the impersonal, authoritarian Military Industrial Complex to fulfil their selfish ambitions. In



complete contrast to most of those previously mentioned post war heroes, Yossarian, has become totally hostile to military ways and actively fights his own military, if not with violence with virtually anything else. Far from clinging to military ethics and traditions, he despises the military to the extent that at one stage he walks naked rather than wear a uniform and he prefers to be sick or labelled insane to serving on active duty.

Self-survival has become his life goal as the military threaten this they are therefore his enemies. He has put self-survival above duty because, like Joe Bonham and Robert Hearn, by experiencing the realities of the military structure and war he has become disillusioned. Yossarian parodies both his wariness and the heroic ideal in an attempt to be certified insane and by doing so, demonstrates the inane absurdity of mythic heroism in a real modern war. After manufacturing an image of himself as a paranoid by referring to people being out to get him and insisting on his invincibility because of his sound mind and pure body, he then insists that he has multiple and simultaneous identities from popular culture and literature being Tarzan, Mandrake, Ulysses, Flash Gordon, Shakespeare, Cain, the Flying Dutchman, Lot in Sodom, Deirdre of the Sorrows, Sweeney in the nightingales among trees. He even insists that he was miracle-ingredient Z-247 incarnate. Here the absurd delusion of the mythic hero functioning in a modern wartime situation becomes apparent. Yossarian even takes it beyond that, showing that it is deluded beyond any level of sanity.

He finds that this act cannot work because of Catch-22, a much quoted, never seen in writing phrase that the military world use to block or dismiss whatever they dislike. In this case the authorities judge him to be sane because he does not wish to fly more dangerous missions, only an insane man would.

As this concept indicates, this novel works very differently to earlier novels where a regretful tone for lost ideals appears as the protagonists go through a process of disillusionment and ultimately are destroyed or absorbed with little resistance. *Catch-22* starts with Yossarian being a disillusioned protagonist. Only much later in the novel that his earlier self, the conscientious, dutiful and brave war hero, emerges briefly. The narrative focuses on his vigorous, cynical and often successful attempts to escape both bureaucratic military control and the actions of men who want to be heroes.

As in *The Naked and the Dead* idealists, would-be heroes and patriots abound among the military in *Catch-22*, but Heller depicts them with black humour and without bitterness as at best naïve, simple, foolish or false. They often uphold the traditional ideas of patriotism in ways that make both them and their beliefs seem absurd irrelevant. The Texan in hospital who chatters to the inert soldier totally encased in white plaster serves as the first and most obvious example. This inert soldier embodies both the cost of war and the death of the old heroic ideals. Just as he must endure a feeding of stale, colourless pap of his own waste products in his mouth, he must endure the Texan's stale platitudes in his ears. Already inert and useless, he does not so much die as fade away unnoticed by the military who serves him while his last believer, the Texan, insists that nothing is wrong with him. For others in the ward, the front soon becomes preferable to hearing the old simple attitudes.

Other air force personnel at the Pianosa base, Nately and Clevinger, also have a naïve quality about them, as if they will remain untouched by the war, which destroys them. Nately, who believed in the invincibility of American military might and in the American business system, dies in a failed mission he has to fly to aid Milo Minderhender's financial plans. Heller describes Clevinger, the liberal academic, and idealistic militant as being possessed with great amounts of intelligence but lacking in brains. He quarrels over his passionately held principles to the extent of seeming insane. Like Hearn, Goldstein, Ridges and Roth in *The Naked and the Dead* Clevinger tries to read a pattern into casualties of war and keep his humanitarian principles in the army, but has little idea of reality.

As this assessment of Clevinger shows, *Catch-22* offers no offers no panaceas to social problems, but satirises the character who does. Clevinger's idealistic defence of humanity makes him hated by the political people he associates with and Scheisskopf and other officers hate him more than any Nazi gunner could. Yossarian takes on an echo of the heroic role by trying to protect him, but the world of *Catch-22* destroys idealists. Like Hearn and Roth, Nately and Clevinger die, not so much directly because of enemy actions, but because people on their side create situations where they will die. Clevinger appropriately disappears into a cloud while flying a mission, as if he has become the victim of his own cloudy ideas and confused thoughts.



Other situations show that there another, more dangerous side to naïve patriotism and its frequent expression, that “everything is fine” menaces. The pilot Aarfy appears as the salient example. By habitually taking that attitude in the middle of dangerous bombing missions Aarfy endangers Yossarian’s life and that of their crew. Aarfly acts as if enemy fire on the bombing missions are interesting points on a flying tour which he surveys while calmly puffing on his pipe. His patriotism has a cheerful brainlessness to it. His absorption in American mores (such as being a fraternity man, loving cheerleading and class reunions) remains so strong that he cannot see war’s realities, insofar as his basic survival instincts do not function. He embodies an almost traditional American attitude fuelled by continual victories from the French and Indian Wars onward: it was a view which would die in Vietnam.

Heller, himself a WW2 former pilot, depicts this apparently heroic calmness as not being a military merit. Yossarian and McWatt manage to pull their crew through by violently dodging the heavy shelling, while Aarfy tries to distract them with idle chatter. Nevertheless it is Aarfy and the callously stupid, somewhat naïve, unreflecting men like him who survive and prosper by mixing patriotism, opportunism, self-confidence and servility. Colonel Cathcart, Major Milo Minderbender, Captain Black, Scheisskopf and Whitcomb all gain power, profit or promotion in this way. Here Heller stays in line with so many other fictional writers about the American experience in WW2, both those who wrote before *Catch-22* and those who came after.

In contrast, those characters who dislike the military system, but reluctantly try to do their duty either die or are outcast in different ways. McWatt, Kid Sampson, Dobbs, Nately, Hungry Joe and Chief White Halfoat all die, while Doc Daneeka, Clevinger, Major Major, Dunbar and Orr all vanish or suffer ostracism or exile.

Heller places both groups, the patriotic opportunists and the disaffected, superficially within the heroic tradition, although as in *The Naked and the Dead* and many another protagonist in American World War II novels the entire cast of *Catch 22* fail to be heroes. Superficially as in more traditional novels, the disaffected, and those who are genuinely naïve exist within this framework by serving, suffering and dying for the national good. However Heller, like Mailer, looks beneath the superficialities into the intricate, absurd, repressive workings

of both the military as an organisation and the psyche of the soldier, and both reveal vanity, mediocrity, selfishness and cunning.

The men who suffer or die are too reluctant, sullen, self-interested, paranoid and cynical to be heroes. Unlike heroes they lack solutions, energy, optimism and some belief in themselves and a good order. Their dream is to return home alive. They show little enthusiasm in their sense of duty and patriotism. Unlike every traditional hero they are almost as hostile to their organisation and leaders as they are to the enemy - and they have reason. Dunhar is “disappeared” by the authorities. Chief White Halfoat has spent much of his life being forcibly removed from reservations by the government he fights for. Hungary Joe becomes paranoid due to the strain of flying the endless missions. Nately has to endure the Aarfy’s humiliating treatment of the woman he wants to marry. Dobbs dreams of killing Cathcart before Cathcart kills him with his endless missions.

Their officers serve their interests and that of the domineering Military Industrial Complex, not the people or the cause. For Generals Peckham and Dreedle, the important conflict is against each other for promotion and power: the war seems something that helps or hinders their efforts in their battles with each other. Captain Black, a parody of Joe McCarthy and his 1954 investigations into socialists and degenerates within the forces, tries for recognition and promotion by seeking enemies and traitors in the army, disrupting the war effort by doing so.

Scheisskopf reveals himself not to be the an organisational genius as he thinks, but a naïve idiot who obsesses over marching and winning parade pennants and knows virtually nothing else about military life and even less about warfare, nor does he care to know. Despite being one of the most militarily ignorant characters and never having faced enemy fire; he becomes a lieutenant general due to a bureaucratic rule, so he reaches the highest rank among the officers scheming for rank in *Catch-22*. His rank however becomes meaningless as the novel’s lowest ranking character, x-pfc Wintergreen, has more direct power over the running of the military machine than the generals because he serves as a filing clerk. He can shift, hide or alter information and delay communications and decisions. He can decide what the rules are and what will be the supposed truth. The war machine is bureaucracy and the man who processes the

information that is the lifeblood of the bureaucracy becomes all powerful. Like James Hilton in *Nothing So Strange* for Heller war cannot be about warriors fighting warriors anymore. Even the pilots are technocrats of a kind, using planes and bombs to kill an enemy they never see: not a single enemy soldier appears in *Catch-22*. Like the atomic scientist Mark Bradley in *Nothing So Strange* Wintergreen remains remote from the fighting, mousy and concerned with ideas – and more powerful than any warrior.

As with Red Valsen, for Yossarian the enemy are particularly those who want to make themselves heroes, because they do this by exploiting and endangering him. Milo is one such false if adored hero. He lacks Wintergreen's direct influence over the war machine, but his influence on its higher figures and his ability to make money for the war machine and those connected to it give him enormous influence. The Sicilians elect Milo mayor of Palermo and have parades in his honour. Many of the people he trades with even worship Milo as a hero; the Maltese enshrine his portrait as a British colonel and the Africans carve his features into a totem. All three reactions demonstrate that they are trying to fit Milo, who now exists as both the new conquering force and major economic factor in their world, into their heroic moulds. This sham was not a calculated takeover, as Milo started as a clever, greedy requisition officer whose main ability was an opportunistic way of trading in a world he did not understand, nor does he try to. He conquers through profit and trade rather than weapons and armies. His primal devotion always goes towards the profit motive. This dominates him and his syndicate, even to supervising the bombing of his airfield for a payment from the Germans, who are regular trading partners. With this factor Heller takes reality beyond satire and replaces it with fantasy,, for although some American companies made profits out of wartime Nazi Germany while fighting it, no account of bombing their own airfields for profit has emerged, but who knows what revelations the future holds?

Milo has enough brains to know that to seem heroic and so gain the desired fame and medals and publicity he must seem to fly more combat missions. He persuades Colonel Cathcart that Nately should fly his missions while Milo gets the credit and any medals Nately wins, but Nately dies on the next mission.

One incident Heller creates does have a well-known basis in reality. When Chaplain Shipman reluctantly agrees to Cathcart's demands for snappy prayers

for successful bombing missions so that they will put his picture in *The Saturday Evening Post* he reveals not only his own weakness, but that of individual Christianity and rationality before military power. He can only temporise and advise. Cathcart tries to make himself seem heroic and advance his promotion by having his squadron fly more missions than others. This incident seems based on a real incident when publicity loving General Patton's request for snappy prayers.

Colonel Cathcart is another crass, ambitious careerist who more than any other character resembles Mailer's Major Dalleson as he dreams up platitudinous press releases and schemes to gain himself public praise and publicity. His schemes also reveal that the old beliefs in heroism, God and duty are now cliched propaganda tools in the service of both the individual careerists within the Military industrial Complex and the whole service itself.

As Colonel Korn often remarked, the war was crawling with group commanders who were merely doing their duty, and it required just some sort of dramatic gesture like making his group fly more combat missions than any other bomber group to spotlight his unique qualities of leadership. One such dramatic gesture includes volunteering his group for a dangerous mission because high casualties will gain him publicity. Here publicity and reality are antonyms. Cathcart's combat mission record totals two and one of these really involved black marketeering. His leadership is also sham; as his decisions are often quite literally echoes of what Milo, Peckham, Dreedle and Korn suggest. Apart from black-marketeering Cathcart also involves himself in currency manipulation, fraud, embezzlement, extortion and income tax evasion. Cathcart foolishly believes that these are legal because Korn, a peacetime lawyer, assures him that they are.

These are the people who surround Yossarian in this ensemble piece. On one side are the dupes and victims of the war machine and on the other are the manipulators who serve it. By trying to avoid being pushed into either group and becoming either the user or the used, Yossarian affirms his individuality. In a debate with Clevinger Yossarian also emphasises the importance of his individuality when he succinctly defines that the enemy are anybody who will get him killed, regardless of which side they serve and that this should never be forgotten because remembering it will extend their lifespan. Yossarian not only

determines to survive, but will do anything to escape flying more missions. His assorted attempts at malingering, desertion and refusing to fly missions are distinctly unheroic, as are some of his attempts to survive in combat. In one bombardment situation he longs to cower on the floor and he thinks that his cowardice has a basis in his desire to stay alive. His frantic, desperate behaviour while flying missions shows Yossarian's attitude, his honesty, his desperate desire to survive, his frantic, energetic incisiveness. It also shows him as being fully aware of the dangers he faces. He appears as one of the few characters who can see this and the bigger picture of the war clearly.

Colonels Cathcart and Korn, Milo Minderbender, Generals Peckham and Dreedle, Scheisskopf, Wintergreen, and Aarfy all advance and prosper in the war due to either their narrow, self-interested foolishness or that of others. They see the war effort as an opportunity for themselves, not as a massive horror, a duty or a crusade to end fascism. Their very success works as one factor that shows that there no order, justice or goodness really exists in the world. Fools and scoundrels prosper while brave men like Nately and Dobbs die because of the scoundrel's policies. Such characters and views are common in post war literature, but few depict it as blatantly as Heller.

*Catch-22* became unusual in that unlike so many anti-war novels, it goes beyond protesting about war's injustices and disorders as if they are an anomaly in the pattern of life. In, *A Farewell to Arms*, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, *Nothing So Strange* and *The Naked and the Dead*, the implicit idea of disorder, injustice, tragedy and absurdity being inherent in existence appears: the military life serves as only the most salient example of this. Heller presents this idea explicitly and unlike Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Hilton and Mailer, he continually finds black humour in this situation, without accepting it.

Yossarian sees all this in training camp during his pillow talk with Mrs Scheisskopf, when he questions why God created apparently purposeless disorder. This old and common question in literature, usually appears with solemnity, but the way Yossarian flippantly and blasphemously rejects God as an incompetently muddled minor functionary with immense power which he misuses was rare by this novel's publication in 1961.

Heller also launches a full frontal assault on the core idea of traditional heroism. The traditional hero has godlike qualities and therefore comes closer to God than most mortals. Yossarian also tries to be close to God, for he challenges God in an arrogant, blasphemous way, as if God was a lesser being he can throttle. This goes against every religious aspect of traditional heroism. However Yossarian realises that there are no gods, not even absurdist or cruel ones. He realises Man's place in existence when one of his crew, Snowden is shot while flying a mission. Yossarian opens Snowden's flak suit and as a result of his wound, Snowden's guts spill out over the plane's floor. The reference to reading entrails mocks the religious idea of reading omens in dissections. Yossarian realizes that there are no supernatural meanings and that humanity exists as matter.

This realisation changes Yossarian from a brave pilot willingly flying missions into a hostile dissenter trying to escape military service. He learns that not only God, logic and goodness do not exist but the rules do not either: Catch -22 probably did not exist, but people believing in it gave it a false power and its very improbability made it impossible to refute, destroy or defeat. This sense of despair which initially came from the realisation that he was fighting an intangible enemy increases as Yossarian wanders around Rome at night. There he sees poverty, exploitation and brutality, not all of it tied to the army. Just as he realises that Catch 22 does not exist, he realises that there no certainty exists in appearances or signs of goodness or order, goodness might not exist either. All favourable appearances might be a facade for evil and few if any people were good, Albert Einstein being the only one named. Heller may have written more deeply than he consciously understood as Albert Einstein, gentle as he seemed, made discoveries which led to the development of the atomic bomb. This put me into a recollection of briefly meeting Andrei Sakharov in 1989. A more gentle, affable seemingly harmless individual would be hard to imagine: this was the man who in 1950 put the hydrogen bomb into the hands of Stalin. If Sakharov proves Heller's idea concerning appearances, Einstein shows that the road to hell can be paved by the meek.

Another difference between surface appearance and hidden reality occurs with the realisation that the state and the law are the people's enemy, not their protector. Yossarian discovers this when a man being carried away by police calls "Help Police!" The text reveals here that there are no certainties in an



absurdist narrative, he may be calling not for the police to protect him but for others to rescue him as the police attack him. Given that less than two years have passed since Rome's police loyally served Mussolini in a brutal police state, this interpretation appears well-justified. Heller however implicitly takes this farther than its 1940s Roman wartime setting; police are in themselves the enemy. This idea caught on in the middle of the 1960s, in part due to this passage.

Yossarian is no rescuing hero, he responds to his realization with a stealthy avoidance. He soon finds that normality is another facade. Aarfy, almost a parody of middle class American stability and normality, has raped and murdered a servant. His calm, confident, all too rational response shows that apparent normality can be weird, horrific and sociopathic, even if his logic, platitudinous certainties and clichés predictions about the situation are correct. Yossarian tries to argue that Aarfy must be insane from a humanist viewpoint, but Aarfy has his own knowing logic, based on knowing the rules - and how military order operates. Aarfy may be insane, but it is the insanity of a man who easily and smugly fits himself into expedient patterns: the servant had to die because she would have sad bad things about him and he could not tolerate that. He reveals himself to be less stupid than Yossarian previously thought and at times can be astute about how the system works. He knows that American officers are not jailed for murdering nationals in an occupied country in wartime, referring to himself in the third person as good old Aarfy, the one who will not be jailed. When a stunned Yossarian questions Aarfy's sanity and asks him to realise what he has done when he threw her into the street Aarfy smugly makes it perfectly clear that his sanity works on logic, self-interest and a smug baiting humour, all of which he directs at Yossarian through this incident. He tells him that the corpse has no right to be in the street as it is after curfew.

This incident recalls what reporters said about the Nazi defendants at Nuremberg and what Hannah Arendt's much quoted comment from the Eichmann trial, about the banality of evil. The fictional Aarfy works as another almost matching example.

The police prove both Yossarian's earlier suspicions about them and also Aarfy right when they rush up the stairs to arrest Yossarian for not having a leave pass

and apologise for their intrusion - to Aarfy. In a city filled with crime the police arrest Yossarian, the passive innocent observer to a murder.

Like the traditional hero, Aarfy commits to order, but Heller shows that order can be insane, the body in the street matters because it looks disorderly, being after curfew, the servant girl's death gets placed in an order of priorities at the bottom. She was killed to be silenced so her complaints would not disrupt the Americans heroic image in the community. Yossarian is the sane threat to this insane order, as his superiors realise.

As Colonels Cathcart and Korn know that Yossarian inspires the men to also avoid flying more missions, they give him alternatives Korn knowingly describes as odious. He can be either court-martialled for his night in Rome or he goes on his desired trip home - at Colonel Korn's price, which involves making him a glorified hero living in luxury by going on tours to gain them publicity for their war effort. Ironically Yossarian will get his cowardly wish of avoiding flying missions by becoming a manufactured hero; one created to serve not only the war effort, but the careers of Korn and Cathcart. They are asking Yossarian to put on a false display about war, not a true one. By agreeing to being a hero, he will reduce the discontent in the squadron and become unheroic, losing his inspiring position among the men and the courage and individuality he uses to fight the system. As with everything else in *Catch-22*, an absurdist outlook dominates and opportunists exploit heroism for its financial angle.

Yossarian's initial response shows the great weakness in being the unorthodox hero who sees the world clearly. He knows that the army have isolated him in a situation where he barely survives at the mercy of powerful forces. He initially caves in, saying those who do not wish to fly more missions should follow his resistant example. He agrees to becoming a pal to Korn and Cathcart, when ironically a murder attempt by Nately's whore saves him from a form of destruction and Korn and Cathcart, his enemies for most of the story, save his life. In *Catch-22* absurdity does not mean events have no meaning, events rebound unintentionally and even ironically, giving the characters unexpected if obvious choices within a confined, repressive structure which while powerful, cannot be fool proof. This differs from those post war novels where the omniscient state functions perfectly. In this aspect Heller's world resembles *The*

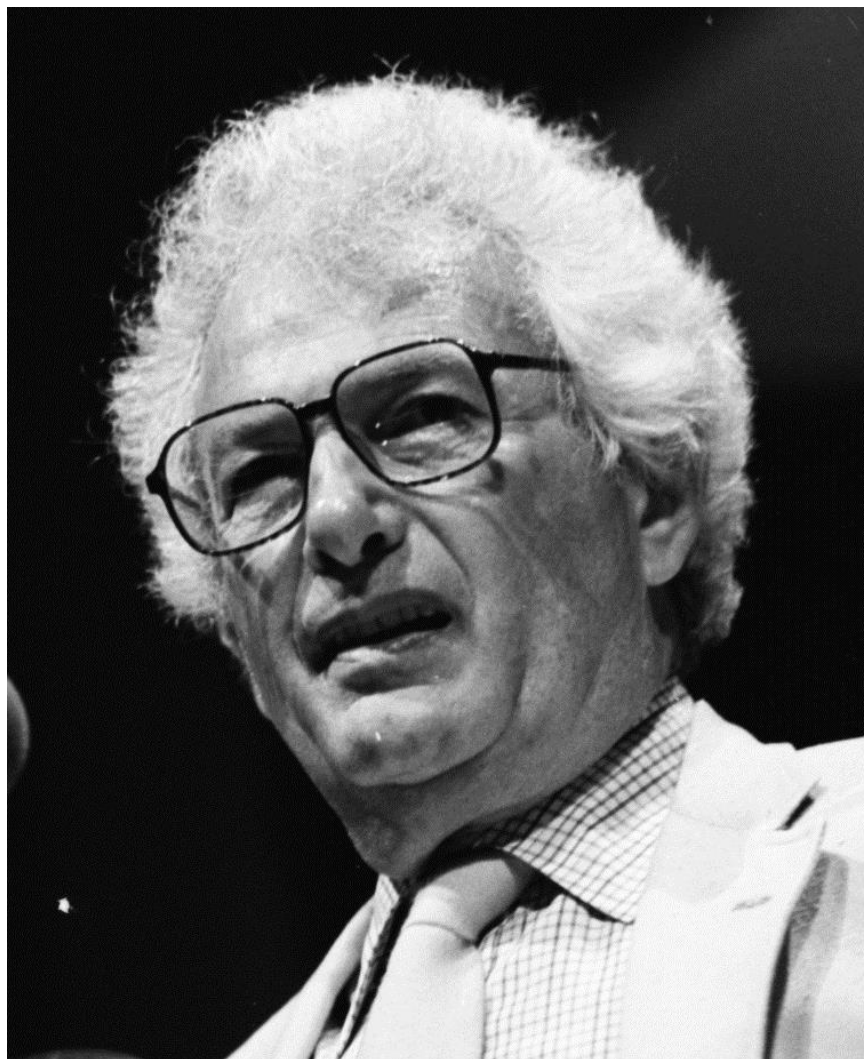
*Iron Heel, A Farewell to Arms, For Whom the Bell Tolls* and *The Naked and the Dead*, where the state functions as a powerful but imperfect enemy, which can be opposed with some chance of success.

In hospital after the knife attack by Nately's whore Yossarian has time to reflect and recall Snowden's death and chooses again. He chooses to renege on his deal and either fly more missions or desert. Yossarian realises that the deal with Cathcart and Korn will become a way to lose himself rather than save himself and concludes that the stabbing that put him into hospital was a good thing because he woke up to what the deal would do.

It is at this point that Yossarian and Danby consider any possible powerful ally and conclude that there are none. However just as Yossarian agrees, the *deus ex machina* operates and they gain news of Orr's miraculous rowing voyage from Pianosa to his Swedish haven, being roughly the distance from London to New York. Yossarian feels inspired to follow Orr and escape, while Major Danby and Chaplain Shipman become inspired to rebel against the authorities. All three men talk of Orr's miracle, and agree that the odds are against Yossarian, but still take comfort from the miracle- which reads unconvincingly. Heller may be attempting to show that even in the most extensive, repressive system escape remains a miraculous option, even when it seems impossible. However rowing to Sweden must be too improbable and suggests more of a longing for escape and a happy ending than a plausible solution to Yossarian's dilemma. Nevertheless an answer emerges here - grasp at any straw rather than compromise.

Yossarian survives, still fighting his desperate battle over his integrity. *Catch-22*'s absurd world, its sense of disorder, horror, buffoonery and cynical alienation combined with immense military power would typify American involvement in Vietnam, a war that produced few traditional heroes and many dissenters resembling Yossarian.

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*Joseph Heller 1923-1999*

*Courtesy Wikipedia*