

# Catch-22 and Post- Modernism

Dr. Alan Haffa

# Joseph Heller (1923-1999) WW

- WW II bombardier; flew 60 missions
- Education: MA Columbia University; Oxford as Fulbright Scholar
- Taught English at University of Pennsylvania
- Copywriter for Time, Look, and McCall's
- Published Catch-22 in 1961
- Movie in 1970
- Wrote three other novels but none received the same critical success

# Historical Context

- Based in part on experiences in WW II
- Written in 1950s though and Heller says it was really more Anti-War in relation to Korean War than to WW II or to war in general
- Repressive influences: McCarthyism and Committee on UnAmerican Activities
- Loyalty Oath first came into existence during 50s not during WW II
- He had to sign a loyalty oath to work at Penn St. University
- Eisenhower and warning about “Military Industrial Complex”

# Characteristics of Post-Modernism

- Fragmentation (Characters and timeline)
- Paradox
- Unrealistic and impossible plots
- Games and playfulness
- Dark and ironic humor
- Authorial self-reference
- Alienation
- World and life is meaningless; individuals and readers make meaning for themselves
- Metafiction
- Intra-textual (other texts are incorporated into the story)
- **Postmodern does not posit an objective Meaning; rather multiple meanings are imagined and reader and characters are permitted to shape individual meaning**

# Playfulness and Games (p.8)

- Censorship of Letters by Captain Yossarian:
- “To break the monotony he invented a game. 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 all articles. He reached a higher plane of creativity the following day when he blacked out everything in the letters but “a,” “an,” and “the.”
- Signed the letters with Washington Irving or Irving Washington
- This leads to an investigation by CID.
- Later Major Major will also sign letters with Washington Irving
- The Chaplain will be suspected
- Multiple investigators
- Parody of control over freedom of speech and oppression of 1950
- But also an example of games and play as a way to occupy oneself in a meaningless world

# Verbal Banter and Games: Meaning is twisted or deliberately mistaken (p. 98-99)

- Major Major Major (silly story behind rank and name highlights arbitrary nature of power and hierarchy)
- Unfit for his office, Major Major does not want any visitors. Anyone seeking him is to wait until after he has left.
- Talking to the man who takes care of his trailer he says, “I don’t want you to come here while I’m here to ask me if there’s anything you can do for me. Is that clear?”
- “Yes, sir,” said the orderly. “When should I come here to find out if there’s anything you want me to do for you?”
- “When I’m not here.”
- “Yes, sir. And what should I do?”
- “Whatever I tell you to.”
- “But you won’t be here to tell me. Will you?”
- “No.”
- “Then what should I do?”
- “Whatever has to be done.”
- “Yes, sir.”
- “That will be all,” said Major Major
- “Yes, sir,” said the orderly. “Will that be all?”
- “No,” said Major Major. “Don’t come in clean, either. Don’t come in for anything unless you’re sure I’m not here.”

# Catch 22 as Paradox (p. 45-6)

- Repeated many times as a motif
- “You mean there’s a catch?”
- “Sure there’s a catch,” Doc Daneeka replies. “Catch-22. Anyone who wants to get out of combat duty isn’t really crazy.”
- 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.”

# Rules only Apply when those in Power want them to Apply (p. 58)

- Yossarian learns from Doc Daneeka that 27<sup>th</sup> Air Force Headquarters requires 40 missions before a tour is complete, but Colonel Cathcart has raised it ten more to 50.
- “I still don’t get it, “ Yossarian protested. Is Doc Daneeka right or isn’t he?”
- “How many did he say?”
- “Forty.”
- “Daneeka was telling the truth,” ex-PFC Wintergreen admitted. “Forty missions is all you have to fly as far as Twenty-seventh Air Force HQ is concerned.”
- Yossarian was jubilant. “Then I can go home, right? I’ve got forty-eight.”
- “No, you can’t go home,” ex-PFC Wintergreen corrected him. “Are you crazy or something?”
- “Why not?”
- “Catch-22.”
- “Catch-22? Yossarian was stunned. “What the hell has Catch-22 got to do with it?”
- “Catch-22...says you’ve always got to do what your commanding officer tells you to.”
- “But 27<sup>th</sup> Air Force says I can go home with forty missions.”
- “But they don’t say you have to go home. And regulations do say you have to obey every order. That’s the catch.”

# Intra-textuality: Shakespeare's Hamlet

- “Clevinger knew everything about the war except why Yossarian had to die while Corporal Snark was allowed to live, or why Corporal Snark had to die while Yossarian was allowed to live. It was a vile and muddy war, and Yossarian could have lived without it—lived forever, perhaps. Only a fraction of his countrymen would give up their lives to win it, and it was not his ambition to be among them. **To die or not to die, that was the question**, and Clevinger grew limp trying to answer it. History did not demand Yossarian premature demise, justice could be satisfied without it, progress did not hinge up on it, victory did not depend on it. That men would die was a circumstance, and Yossarian was willing to be the victim of anything but circumstance. But that was war. Just about all he could find in its favor was that it paid well and liberated children from the pernicious influence of their parents.”

# Parody of mindless bureaucracy: Trial of Clevinger (pp 76-81)

- Clevinger is smart, too smart. When Lieutenant Scheisskopf (Shithead) asked the cadets what he could do better, Clevinger told him, earning him the eternal hatred of Scheisskopf.
- “Clevinger had a mind, and Lieutenant Scheisskopf had noticed that people with minds tended to get pretty smart at times. Such men were dangerous, and even the new cadet officers whom Clevinger had helped into office were eager to give damning testimony against him. The case against Clevinger was open and shut. The only thing missing was something to charge him with.”
- Circular logic: “Clevinger was guilty of course, or he would not have been accused, and since the only way to prove it was to find him guilty, it was their patriotic duty to do so.”

# Bureaucratic Repetition and Pointlessness (p. 92-3)

- Major Major is bored with being a major. He signs documents all the time but they always come back for another signature.
- “No matter how many times he signed one, it always came back for yet still another signature, and he began to despair of ever being free of any of them. One day, it was the day after the first CID man’s visit, Major Major signed Washington Irving’s name to one of the documents instead of his own, just to see how it would fee. He liked it. He liked it so much that for the rest of that afternoon he did the same with all the official documents. It was an act of impulsive frivolity and rebellion for which he knew afterward he would be punished. The next morning he entered his office in trepidation and waited to see what would happen. Nothing happened.
- He had sinned, and it was good, for none of the documents to which he had signed Washington Irving’s name ever came back! Here at last was progress, and Major Major threw himself into his new career with uninhibited gusto. Signing Washington Irving’s name was not much of a career, perhaps, but it was less monotonous than signing “Major Major Major.”

# Major Major Major's character and *12<sup>th</sup> Night* quote about Malvolio (p. 83-85)

- “Major Major had been born too late and too mediocre. Some men are born mediocre, some men achieve mediocrity, and some men have mediocrity thrust upon them. With Major Major it had been all three. Even among men lacking all distinction he inevitably stood out as a man lacking more distinction than the rest, and people who met him were always impressed by how unimpressive he was.”
- “He was polite to his elders, who disliked him. Whatever his elders told him to do, he did. They told him to look before he leaped, and he always looked before he leaped. They told him never to put off until the next day what he could do the day before, and he never did. He was told to honor his father and mother, and he honored his father and his mother. He was told that he should not kill, and he did not kill, until he got into the Army. Then he was told to kill, and he killed....Major Major's elders disliked him because he was such a flagrant nonconformist.”

# Loyalty Oath (p113-7)

- “Without realizing how it had come about, the combat men in the squadron discovered themselves dominated by the administrators appointed to serve them. They were bullied, insulted, harassed and shoved about all day long by one after the other. When they voiced objection, Captain Black replied that people who were loyal would not mind signing all the loyalty oaths they had to. To anyone who questioned the effectiveness of the loyalty oaths, he replied that people who really did love their country would be proud to pledge it as often as he forced them to. And to anyone who questioned the morality, he replied that ‘The Star Spangled Banner’ was the greatest piece of music ever composed. The more loyalty oaths a person signed, the more loyal he was.”
- “National defense is everybody’s job,” Captain Black replied to Milo’s objection. “And this whole program is voluntary, Milo—don’t forget that. The men don’t have to sign if they don’t want to. But we need you to starve them to death if they don’t. It’s just like Catch-22. Don’t you get it? You’re not against Catch-22 are you?”
- Finally Major ----- de Coverly wants to eat and ends the starvation for everyone. But Captain Black is still please because “We completed our task. Our purpose was to make everyone we don’t like afraid and to alert people to the danger of Major Major, and we certainly succeeded at that.”

# Milo Minderbinder and War Profiteers (p. 252-3)

- Polish sausage is going for peanuts in Cracow,” Milo informed him [General Dreedle] “Polish sausage,” sighed the general nostalgically. “You know, I’d give just about anything for a good hunk of Polish sausage. Just about anything.”

“You don’t have to give anything. Just give me one plane for eah mess hall and a pilot who will do what he’s told. And a small down payment on your initial order as a token of good faith.”

“But Cracow is hundreds of miles behind the enemy lines. How will you get to the sausage?”

“There’s an international Polish sausage exchange in Geneva. I’ll just fly the peanuts into Switzerland and exchange them for Polish sausage at the open market rate. They’ll fly the peanuts back to Cracow and I’ll fly the Polish sausage back to you...You’ll be paying the money to yourself when you buy from the syndicate, since you’ll own a share, so you’ll really be getting everything you buy for nothing. Doesn’t that make sense?”

# Milo's Capitalism Revealed as Self-Interested and Anti-Nationalist (254-5)

- Milo trades with every country on all sides, except Russia.
- “one day Milo contracted with the American military authorities to bomb the German-held highway bridge at Orvieto and with the German military authorities to defend the highway bridge at Orvieto with anti-aircraft fire against his own attack. His fee for attacking the bridge for America was the total cost of the operation plus six percent, and his fee from Germany for defending the bridge was the same cost-plus-six agreement augmented by a merit bonus of a thousand dollars for every American plane he shot down.”

# Who Is Responsible for Effects of War? (p. 255)

- “The arrangements were fair to both sides. Since Milo did have freedom of passage everywhere, his planes were able to steal over in a sneak attack without alerting the German anti-aircraft gunners; and since Milo knew about the attack he was able to alert the German anti-aircraft gunners in sufficient time for them to begin firing accurately the moment the planes came into range. It was an ideal arrangement for everyone but the dead man in Yossarian’s tent, who was killed over the target the day he arrived.”
- “I didn’t kill him!” Milo kept replying passionately to Yossarian’s angry protest. “I wasn’t even there that day, I tell you. Do you think I was down there on the ground firing an anti-aircraft gun when the planes came over?”

# Profit Transcends Nationality (256)

- Milo shook his head with weary forbearance. “And the Germans are not our enemies,” he declared. “Oh, I know what you are going to say. Sure, we are at war with them. But the Germans are also members of the syndicate, and it’s my job to protect their rights as shareholders. Maybe they did start the war, and maybe they are killing millions of people, but they pay their bills a lot more promptly than some allies of ours I could name. Don’t you understand that I have to respect the sanctity of my contract with Germany? Can’t you see it from my point of view?”
- “No,” Yossarian rebuffed him harshly.

# Yossarian Faces Death and has Seen it Up Close— whereas Milo is shielded from it. (p.436-40)

- Snowden is a man who has died in combat and we hear bits and pieces about him. But near the end, chapter 41, we get the detailed story of his gruesome death in the bombardier bay, with Yossarian.
- Yossarian sees the wound in Snowden's thigh and struggles to give him first aid but is confident Snowden will live.
- "I'm cold," Snowden said softly. "I'm cold."
- "You're going to be all right, kid," Yossarian reassured him with a grin. "You're going to be all right."
- "I'm old," Snowden said again in a frail, childlike voice. "I'm cold."
- "There, there," Yossarian said, because he did not know what else to say. "There, there. There, there."

# Snowden's Secret: Man is Matter (King Lear) 439-40

- "I'm cold," Snowden moaned. "I'm cold."...
- "There, there," said Yossarian, with growing doubt and trepidation...
- "Yossarian bent forward to peer and saw a strangely colored stain seeping through the coveralls just above the armhole of Snowden's flak suit. Yossarian felt his heart stop, then pound so violently he found it difficult to breathe. Snowden was wounded inside his flak suit. Yossarian ripped open the snaps of Snowden's flak suit and heard himself scream wildly as Snowden's insides slithered down to the floor in a soggy pile and just kept dripping out...He forced himself to look again. Here was God's plenty, all right, he thought bitterly as he stared—liver, lungs, kidneys ribs, stomach and bits of the stewed tomatoes Snowden had eaten that day for lunch."...
- He felt goose pimples clacking all over him as he gaped down despondently at the grim secret Snowden had spilled all over the messy floor. It was easy to read the message in his entrails. **Man was matter, that was Snowden's secret. Drop him out a window and he'll fall. Set fire to him and he'll burn. Bury him and he'll rot, like other kinds of garbage. The spirt gone, man is garbage. That was Snowden's secret. Ripeness was all.**
- "I'm cold," Snowden said. "I'm cold."
- "There, there," said Yossarian. "There, there." He pulled the rip cord of Snowden's parachute and covered his body with the white nylon sheets.
- "I'm cold."
- "There, there."

# Yossarian Takes Responsibility

- He is offered a chance to go home after 70 missions if he will lie. He has to tell the men that it has nothing to do with refusing to fly another mission—or they will all rebel and no one will fly more missions. And he has to lie when he gets home and tell everyone his commanders are great leaders. Doing so, would satisfy his desire to save his life, but it would be to abandon his responsibility to his friends and society.
- He has a choice: lie and get what he wants, or tell the truth and be court martialed.
- “But you can’t just turn your back on all your responsibilities and run away from them,” Major Danby insisted. “It’s such a negative move. It’s escapist.”
- “I’m not running away from my responsibilities. I’m running to them. There’s nothing negative about running away to save my life. You know who the escapist are, don’t you, Danby? Not me and Orr?”

# Summary

- Catch-22 is a classic postmodern novel: fragmentation; no universal meaning; Catch-22 rule is a paradox; Playfulness with language; Intratextuality with Shakespeare and Dostoevsky (Raskolnikov)
- Critique of mindless bureaucracy
- Critique of senseless demands for obedience that benefits those in power
- Critique of capitalism that puts profit above morality and humanity and even patriotism
- Yossarian makes his own choice and meaning, driven by his love of life and his sense of responsibility to others.