

Bloom's Modern Critical

# INTERPRETATIONS

Edited and with an Introduction by HAROLD BLOOM

Joseph Heller's  
**Catch-22**

NEW EDITION



## *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations*

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Joseph Heller's

*Catch-22*

*New Edition*

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*Edited and with an introduction by*

Harold Bloom

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**Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*—New Edition**

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## *Editor's Note*

My Introduction amiably consigns *Catch-22* to the vast heap of Period Pieces, a strange dumping-ground on the moon of a planet in another solar system. There Heller's extended joke joins other celebrated fictions that will be forgotten, including *On the Road*, *Beloved*, and the sacred seven Harry Potter tediums.

There are twenty or so contributors to this volume who do not agree with me, but that does not disturb the aged canonical critic, the pariah of his self-slain profession.

I can single out Robert Brustein, Christopher Buckley, and Sanford Pinsker for keeping some sense of balance in this volume. Alas, I myself find nothing in *Catch-22* that might provoke balance. It will not last, and there's an end on it.



HAROLD BLOOM

*Introduction*

JOSEPH HELLER'S *CATCH-22* (1961)

*Catch-22* (1961) after more than forty years is definitive of what is meant by a Period Piece, a work not for all time, but for the 1960s and 1970s. If *Catch-22* prophesied anything, it was the spirit of the Counter-Culture that began in the late 1960s and was dominant in the 1970s. By now, the Counter-Culture has been assimilated and co-opted; its principal organ is *The New York Times*. In the aura of an official Counter-Culture, *Catch-22* can be read with nostalgia (though not by me) or with the qualified patience that a four-hundred-fifty-page extended joke demands if it is to be read at all.

Heller's half-dozen subsequent books were scarcely readable; his time had passed. World War II ended in 1945: to parody it before 1960–61 would have been in poor taste. Whether it could be parodied then, or now, is a problematic question, to which the likely answer is "No." Heller's perspective is that of individual survival, which is jeopardized by a war being run as a racket. Any perspective upon killing and being killed is legitimate, but Yossarian is not Sir John Falstaff and Joseph Heller was not Shakespeare. Madness is mocked by *Catch-22*, but the mockery loses control and enters the space of literary irreality, where only a few masters have been able to survive. Heller was not one of them.

I remember going to a performance of Heller's play, *We Bombed in New Haven*, featuring Ron Leibman, in New Haven, though I cannot recall the year. Before the intermission, I was gone, irritated by the same qualities that caused my incredulity when reviewers proclaimed *Catch-22* "an apocalyptic masterpiece." It is neither apocalyptic nor a masterpiece, but a tendentious

burlesque, founded upon a peculiarly subjective view of historical reality. Subjectivity, to be persuasive, requires lucidity, and nothing in *Catch-22* is lucid. Compare Heller to the great parodist Nathanael West, and Heller vaporizes. One need not invoke *Miss Lonelyhearts*; the cheerfully savage *A Cool Million*, read side-by-side with *Catch-22*, easily eclipses Heller. After many rereadings, I uneasily laugh and wince my way through *A Cool Million*. *Catch-22*, zanily comic in its motion-picture guise, no longer induces either laughter or shock.

Rather than continue to drub *Catch-22*, which will for perhaps another decade still find an audience, I prefer to meditate briefly upon the subliterary phenomenon of Period Pieces. The Harry Potter books manifestly are for a time only; they simply are too poorly written and too weakly characterized to survive as classics of children's literature. There are permanent works of popular literature, like the detective novels of Agatha Christie, but I doubt that *Catch-22* will achieve Christie's status. Period Pieces have several distinguishing stigmata. Either they are satires or parodies whose targets have faded away (or become unassailable) or they embody stances and attitudes that reflect the spirit of a particular moment or two.

Yossarian's war ends with his departure for Sweden, a desertion that Heller presents as a triumph, which it has to be, if the war as aptly characterized by Heller's parodistic cast of con-men, schemers, profiteers, and mad commanders. War is obscene, necessarily, but the war against Hitler, the SS, and the death camps was neither World War I nor the Viet Nam debacle. Heller isolates the reader from the historical reality of Hitler's evil, yet nevertheless the war against the Nazis was also Yossarian's war.

ROBERT BRUSTEIN

*The Logic of Survival in a Lunatic World*

“The man who declares that survival at all costs is the end of existence is morally dead, because he’s prepared to sacrifice all other values which give life its meaning.”

— Sidney Hook

“... It’s better to die on one’s feet than live on one’s knees,” Nately retorted with triumphant and lofty conviction. “I guess you’ve heard that saying before.” “Yes, I certainly have,” mused the treacherous old man, smiling again. “But I’m afraid you have it backward. It is better to live on one’s feet than die on one’s knees. That is the way the saying goes.”

— *Catch-22*

Like all superlative works of comedy—and I am ready to argue that this is one of the most bitterly funny works in the language—*Catch-22* is based on an unconventional but utterly convincing internal logic. In the very opening pages, when we come upon a number of Air Force officers malingering in a hospital—one censoring all the modifiers out of enlisted men’s letters and signing the censor’s name “Washington Irving,” another pursuing tedious conversations with boring Texans in order to increase his life span by making time pass slowly, still another storing horse chestnuts in his cheeks to

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give himself a look of innocence—it seems obvious that an inordinate number of Joseph Heller's characters are, by all conventional standards, mad. It is a triumph of Mr. Heller's skill that he is so quickly able to persuade us 1) that the most lunatic are the most logical, and 2) that it is our conventional standards which lack any logical consistency. The sanest looney of them all is the apparently harebrained central character, an American bombardier of Syrian extraction named Captain John Yossarian, who is based on a mythical Italian island (Pianosa) during World War II. For while many of his fellow officers seem indifferent to their own survival, and most of his superior officers are overtly hostile to him, Yossarian is animated solely by a desperate determination to stay alive:

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. . . . That men would die was a matter of necessity; which men would die, though, was a matter of circumstance, and Yossarian was willing to be the victim of anything but circumstance.

The single narrative thread in this crazy patchwork of anecdotes, episodes, and character portraits traces Yossarian's herculean efforts—through caution, cowardice, defiance, subterfuge, strategem, and subversion, through feigning illness, goofing off, and poisoning the company's food with laundry soap—to avoid being victimized by circumstance, a force represented in the book as *Catch-22*. For *Catch-22* is the unwritten law which empowers the authorities to revoke your rights whenever it suits their cruel whims; it is, in short, the principle of absolute evil in a malevolent, mechanical, and incompetent world. Because of *Catch-22*, justice is mocked, the innocent are victimized, and Yossarian's squadron is forced to fly more than double the number of missions prescribed by Air Force code. Dogged by *Catch-22*, Yossarian becomes the anguished witness to the ghoulish slaughter of his crew members and the destruction of all his closest friends, until finally his fear of death becomes so intense that he refuses to wear a uniform, after his own has been besplattered with the guts of his dying gunner, and receives a medal standing naked in formation. From this point on, Yossarian's logic becomes so pure that everyone thinks him mad, for it is the logic of sheer survival, dedicated to keeping him alive in a world noisily clamoring for his annihilation.

According to this logic, Yossarian is surrounded on all sides by hostile forces: his enemies are distinguished less by their nationality than by their ability to get him killed. Thus, Yossarian feels a blind, electric rage against the Germans whenever they hurl flak at his easily penetrated plane; but he feels

an equally profound hatred for those of his own countrymen who exercise an arbitrary power over his life and well-being. Heller's huge cast of characters, therefore, is dominated by a large number of comic malignities, genus *Americanus*, drawn with a grotesqueness so audacious that they somehow transcend caricature entirely and become vividly authentic. These include: Colonel Cathcart, Yossarian's commanding officer, whose consuming ambition to get his picture in the *Saturday Evening Post* motivates him to volunteer his command for every dangerous command, and to initiate prayers during briefing sessions ("I don't want any of this Kingdom of God or Valley of Death stuff. That's all too negative.... Couldn't we pray for a tighter bomb pattern?"), an idea he abandons only when he learns enlisted men pray to the same God; General Peckem, head of Special Services, whose strategic objective is to replace General Dreedle, the wing commander, capturing every bomber group in the US Air Force ("If dropping bombs on the enemy isn't a special service, I wonder what in the world is"); Captain Black, the squadron intelligence officer, who inaugurates the Glorious Loyalty Oath Crusade in order to discomfort a rival, forcing all officers (except the rival, who is thereupon declared a Communist) to sign a new oath whenever they get their flak suits, their pay checks, or their haircuts; Lieutenant Scheisskopf, paragon of the parade ground, whose admiration for efficient formations makes him scheme to screw nickel-alloy swivels into every cadet's back for perfect ninety degree turns; and cadres of sadistic officers, club-happy MPs, and muddleheaded agents of the CID, two of whom, popping in and out of rooms like farcical private eyes, look for Washington Irving throughout the action, finally pinning the rap on the innocent chaplain.

These are Yossarian's antagonists, all of them reduced to a single exaggerated humor, and all identified by their totally mechanical attitude towards human life. Heller has a profound hatred for this kind of military mind, further anatomized in a wacky scene before the Action Board which displays his (and their) animosity in a manner both hilarious and scarifying. But Heller, at war with much larger forces than the army, has provided his book with much wider implications than a war novel. For the author (apparently sharing the Italian belief that vengeance is a dish which tastes best cold) has been nourishing his grudges for so long that they have expanded to include the post-war American world. Through the agency of grotesque comedy, Heller has found a way to confront the humbug, hypocrisy, cruelty, and sheer stupidity of our mass society—qualities which have made the few other Americans who care almost speechless with baffled rage—and through some miracle of prestidigitation, Pianosa has become a satirical microcosm for many of the macrocosmic idiocies of our time. Thus, the author flourishes his Juvenalian scourge at government-subsidized agriculture (and farmers, one of whom "spent every penny he didn't earn on new land to increase the amount of



alfalfa he did not grow"); at the exploitation of American Indians, evicted from their oil-rich land; at smug psychiatrists; at bureaucrats and patriots; at acquisitive war widows; at high-spirited American boys; and especially, and most vindictively, at war profiteers.

This last satirical flourish, aimed at the whole mystique of corporation capitalism, is embodied in the fantastic adventures of Milo Minderbinder, the company mess officer, and a paradigm of good-natured Jonsonian cupidity. Anxious to put the war on a businesslike basis, Milo has formed a syndicate designed to corner the world market on all available foodstuffs, which he then sells to army messhalls at huge profits. Heady with success (his deals have made him Mayor of every town in Sicily, Vice-Shah of Oran, Caliph of Baghdad, Imam of Damascus, and the Sheik of Araby), Milo soon expands his activities, forming a private army which he hires out to the highest bidder. The climax of Milo's career comes when he fulfills a contract with the Germans to bomb and strafe his own outfit, directing his planes from the Pianosa control tower and justifying the action with the stirring war cry: "What's good for the syndicate is good for the country." Milo has almost succeeded in his ambition to preempt the field of war for private enterprise when he makes a fatal mistake: he has cornered the entire Egyptian cotton market and is unable to unload it anywhere. Having failed to pass it off to his own messhall in the form of chocolate-covered cotton, Milo is finally persuaded by Yossarian to bribe the American government to take it off his hands: "If you run into trouble, just tell everybody that the security of the country requires a strong domestic Egyptian cotton speculating industry." The Minderbinder sections—in showing the basic incompatibility of idealism and economics by satirizing the patriotic cant which usually accompanies American greed—illustrate the procedure of the entire book: the ruthless ridicule of hypocrisy through a technique of farce-fantasy, beneath which the demon of satire lurks, prodding fat behinds with a red-hot pitchfork.

It should be abundantly clear, then, that *Catch-22*, despite some of the most outrageous sequences since *A Night at the Opera*, is an intensely serious work. Heller has certain technical similarities to the Marx Brothers, Max Schulman, Kingsley Amis, Al Capp, and S.J. Perelman, but his mordant intelligence, closer to that of Nathanael West, penetrates the surface of the merely funny to expose a world of ruthless self-advancement, gruesome cruelty, and flagrant disregard for human life—a world, in short, very much like our own as seen through a magnifying glass, distorted for more perfect accuracy. Considering his indifference to surface reality, it is absurd to judge Heller by standards of psychological realism (or, for that matter, by conventional artistic standards at all, since his book is as formless as any picaresque epic). He is concerned entirely with that thin boundary of the surreal, the borderline

between hilarity and horror, which, much like the apparent formlessness of the unconscious, has its own special integrity and coherence. Thus, Heller will never use comedy for its own sake; each joke has a wider significance in the intricate pattern, so that laughter becomes a prologue for some grotesque revelation. This gives the reader an effect of surrealistic dislocation, intensified by a weird, rather flat, impersonal style, full of complicated reversals, swift transitions, abrupt shifts in chronological time, and manipulated identities (e.g. if a private named Major Major Major is promoted to Major by a faulty IBM machine, or if a malingerer, sitting out a doomed mission, is declared dead through a bureaucratic error, then this remains their permanent fate), as if all mankind was determined by a mad and merciless mechanism.

Thus, Heller often manages to heighten the macabre obscenity of total war much more effectively through its gruesome comic aspects than if he had written realistic descriptions. And thus, the most delicate pressure is enough to send us over the line from farce into phantasmagoria. In the climactic chapter, in fact, the book leaves comedy altogether and becomes an eerie nightmare of terror. Here, Yossarian, walking through the streets of Rome as though through an inferno, observes soldiers molesting drunken women, fathers beating ragged children, policemen clubbing innocent bystanders until the whole world seems swallowed up in the maw of evil:

The night was filled with horrors, and he thought he knew how Christ must have felt as he walked through the world, like a psychiatrist through a ward of nuts, like a victim through a prison of thieves. . . . Mobs . . . mobs of policemen. . . . Mobs with clubs were in control everywhere.

Here, as the book leaves the war behind, it is finally apparent that Heller's comedy is his artistic response to his vision of transcendent evil, as if the escape route of laughter were the only recourse from a malignant world.

It is this world, which cannot be divided into boundaries or ideologies, that Yossarian has determined to resist. And so when his fear and disgust have reached the breaking point, he simply refuses to fly another mission. Asked by a superior what would happen if everybody felt the same way, Yossarian exercises his definitive logic, and answers, "Then I'd be a damned fool to feel any other way." Having concluded a separate peace, Yossarian maintains it in the face of derision, ostracism, psychological pressure, and the threat of court martial. When he is finally permitted to go home if he will only agree to a shabby deal whitewashing Colonel Cathcart, however, he finds himself impaled on two impossible alternatives. But his unique logic, helped along by the precedent of an even more logical friend, makes him conclude that desertion is the better part of valor; and so (after an inspirational sequence

which is the weakest thing in the book) he takes off for neutral Sweden—the only place left in the world, outside of England, where “mobs with clubs” are not in control.

Yossarian’s expedient is not very flattering to our national ideals, being defeatist, selfish, cowardly, and unheroic. On the other hand, it is one of those sublime expressions of anarchic individualism without which all national ideals are pretty hollow anyway. Since the mass State, whether totalitarian or democratic, has grown increasingly hostile to Falstaffian irresponsibility, Yossarian’s anti-heroism is, in fact, a kind of inverted heroism which we would do well to ponder. For, contrary to the armchair pronouncements of patriotic ideologues, Yossarian’s obsessive concern for survival makes him not only not morally dead, but one of the most morally vibrant figures in recent literature—and a giant of the will beside those wary, wise, and wistful prodigals in contemporary novels who always accommodate sadly to American life. I believe that Joseph Heller is one of the most extraordinary talents now among us. He has Mailer’s combustible radicalism without his passion for violence and self-glorification; he has Bellow’s gusto with his compulsion to affirm the unaffirmable; and he has Salinger’s wit without his coquettish self-consciousness. Finding his absolutes in the freedom to be, in a world dominated by cruelty, carnage, inhumanity, and a rage to destroy itself, Heller has come upon a new morality based on an old ideal, the morality of refusal. Perhaps—now that *Catch-22* has found its most deadly nuclear form—we have reached the point where even the logic of survival is unworkable. But at least we can still contemplate the influence of its liberating honesty on a free, rebellious spirit in this explosive, bitter, subversive, brilliant book.

NELSON ALGREN

*The Catch*

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. He would be crazy to fly more missions and sane if he didn't, but if he was sane he had to fly them. Yossarian was moved very deeply by the absolute simplicity of this clause and let out a respectful whistle:

"That's some catch, that *Catch-22*," he observed.

"It's the best there is," Doc Daneeka agreed.

Yossarian was moved deeply day and night and what moved him more deeply than anything else was the fact that they were trying to murder him.

"Who's *they*?" Clevenger wanted to know. "Who, specifically, is trying to murder you?"

"Every one of them," Yossarian told him.

"Every one of *whom*?"

"Every one of whom do you think?"

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