
Catch-22: A Book Review

Published in 1961, *Catch-22* is an absurd novel that spoke to the preoccupations of the second half of the 20th century. One can detect its absurdity from the very first chapter as Joseph Heller intentionally flouts the conventions of traditional novel form with a non-linear chronology, a fragmented plot, and aimless actions that highlight the chaos and challenge any preconceptions of logical progression of cause and effect or any assumptions about an inherent meaning within its world.

The novel, set during WWII, tells the journey of Yossarian, a captain in the Army Air Force stationed on Pianosa island in the middle of the Mediterranean. His sole purpose of survival drives the novel's plot; a goal that is constantly hindered by his superior's ambition, who incrementally raises the number of flight missions required whenever Yossarian nears the end of his service. As a result, Yossarian finds himself stuck in a never-ending cycle that consists of him flying dangerous missions that threaten his very existence and taking refuge in the hospital to delay—albeit temporarily—his annihilation. His entrapment is aggravated by “Catch-22”, a rule that uses a Möbius strip logic, twisting around itself and leading right back to where it started. Such a rule is devised by the military bureaucracy to maintain control and dominate its subjects.

Heller portrays a host of bizarre characters and caricatures of officials who are either self-serving or indifferent to the madness that surrounds them. The dialogues go around in circles without actually saying anything of substance. The language is almost nonsensical, full of tortured negations and non-sequiturs and reflecting an evasiveness and an inability to communicate, and quite reminiscent of productions by Samuel Beckett and Eugene Ionesco.

The world of *Catch-22* presents a funhouse mirror reflection of an exaggerated version of the social order of the 1950's, and parodies the paradoxes of postwar America, depicting an image of human condition as a merry-go-around devoid of reason and embedded in absurdity. Joseph Heller incorporates satire, dark humor and the absurd to voice his mistrust of a military institution that is equal parts controlling and incompetent. Indeed, the novel provides a brilliant insight into the inexorable rise of bureaucracy. Thus, Yossarian's struggle is not only against the ongoing war but also against the self-serving officials at the heart of the military institution, whose *raison d'être* is self-perpetuation and hegemony. The book gained acclaim among the counterculture generation that came to define the 1960's and 1970's in America, with their anti-war and anti-establishment attitudes, especially with the US's involvement in the Vietnam conflict.

The centralization of power that leads to a self-perpetuating oligarchy. Still unsurprisingly still relevant to today's issues.

The expression “Catch-22” has been integrated in popular use to signify absurd and paradoxical situations enforced by bureaucracy from which there seems to be no escape.

Recently a mini-series adaptation of the novel has premiered proving not only the continued appreciation of the the novel as a classic, but most importantly that its message still resonate with the issues of our times.

