

UNDERSTANDING

Joseph
HELLER

SANFORD PINSKER

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UNDERSTANDING

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EDITOR'S PREFACE

Understanding Contemporary American Literature has been planned as a series of guides or companions for students as well as good nonacademic readers. The editor and publisher perceive a need for these volumes because much of the influential contemporary literature makes special demands. Uninitiated readers encounter difficulty in approaching works that depart from the traditional forms and techniques of prose and poetry. Literature relies on conventions, but the conventions keep evolving; new writers form their own conventions—which in time may become familiar. Put simply, *UCAL* provides instruction in how to read certain contemporary writers—identifying and explicating their material, themes, use of language, point of view, structures, symbolism, and responses to experience.

The word *understanding* in the series title was deliberately chosen. Many willing readers lack an adequate understanding of how contemporary literature works; that is, what the author is attempting to express and the means by which it is conveyed. Although the level of criticism and analysis in the series has been aimed at a level of general accessibility, these introductory volumes are meant to be applied in conjunction with the works they cover. Thus they do not provide a substitute for the works and authors they introduce, but rather prepare the reader for more profitable literary experiences.

M.J.B.

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UNDERSTANDING

JOSEPH HELLER

Understanding Joseph Heller

Career

Joseph Heller grew up in the Coney Island section of Brooklyn, New York, a world tough enough to make him street-wise and yet vibrant enough for him to remember childhood fondly: "I cannot imagine a better place for a child to grow up in."¹ Like many other Jewish immigrants Heller's father had fled Czarist Russia, arriving in America in 1913. He drove a delivery truck for Messinger's bakery, but died—as the result of a botched operation—when Heller was five years old. At the time the young Heller did not grasp the full impact of what had happened, but readers of his adult fiction can recognize the effects. As Heller puts it, "I didn't realize then how traumatized I was."²

At the same time, however, there was a considerable difference between the easygoing, essentially secular, American-Jewishness of the Heller household and the neurotic, psychologically crippling childhood that Philip Roth associates with growing up Jewish in Newark, New Jersey. For Heller "closeness" was a literal fact of apart-

ment life in Brighton Beach's immigrant Jewish neighborhood, and the Coney Island fairgrounds bustled with barkers and assorted low-grade hucksters:

Later we came upon a . . . principle that trained us toward cynicism, the fact that it is often impossible to obtain fair value. We learned this from the barkers who offered to guess your weight, guess your name or occupation, the part of the country you came from or the date you were born, guess anything at all about you for a dime, a quarter, a half-dollar or a dollar, because here was a setup where the customer could never win.³

Here, writ small, are the double binds, the *Catch-22*'s, the entrapments variously represented in Heller's fiction by military regulations, corporate bureaucracies, or political machines.

Heller's formal education included Coney Island's P.S. 188 and Abraham Lincoln High School. After he graduated from the latter in 1941, he worked as a blacksmith's helper and as a shipping file clerk for a casualty insurance company (shades of the young Bob Slocum of Heller's second novel, *Something Happened*), before enlisting in the air force the following year.

Heller's military experiences are simultaneously reflected and comically exaggerated in *Catch-22*. From May 1944 to mid-1945 he was stationed on Corsica with the 488th Squadron of the 340th Bombardment Group. Heller flew sixty combat missions as a bombardier, earning the Air Medal, a presidential unit citation, and eventually a promotion to lieutenant. In large measure the war was winding down by the time Heller arrived overseas; enemy air strikes were uncommon, and much of his tour of duty could be described as "easy time"—playing

baseball or basketball with fellow aviators or simply whiling away the long stretches between bombing missions.

There was, however, one exception to Heller's idyllic time on Corsica. On his thirty-seventh mission—flying over Avignon—Heller suddenly realized that war is a game in which one's opponents are out to kill you. A member of his crew was critically wounded, and once again the Death Question had to be taken into full account. In *Catch-22* Heller would return, again and again, to the specter of Snowden slowly dying in Yossarian's arms.

After the war Heller met and married Shirley Held. He also enrolled in the University of Southern California under the GI Bill, but was soon persuaded to transfer to New York University by Whit Burnett, his mentor and editor of *Story* magazine. Heller graduated Phi Beta Kappa in 1948. During the next academic year he began his studies for an MA in English at Columbia University, taking, among others, a course in American literature taught by the eminent critic Lionel Trilling.

In 1949 Heller won a Fulbright and spent the next year at St. Catherine's College, Oxford, presumably reading for a BA degree. Although he read deeply in Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Milton—and by all accounts was making good progress—his serious work went into the writing of short stories.

Nonetheless, by 1950 Heller had become sufficiently informed about literature and literary study to get a job in Penn State's English composition program. His heavy Brooklyn accent and urban style no doubt contributed to whatever legacies of alienation he brought with him. In any event, he left Penn State two years later, and with the exception of limited stints teaching creative writing at Yale University and the City University of New York

(CUNY), he has shown little inclination to return to academe's groves.

From 1952 to 1956 Heller worked as an advertising copywriter for *Time* (the organization, Heller once told an interviewer, that also employs the Bob Slocum of *Something Happened*), and then served as a promotion manager at *McCall's* from 1958 to 1961.

All the while, of course, Heller was working on his own writing—first, a series of unrelated short stories, a few movie and television scripts under the pseudonym Max Orange, and then a long novel that he called “Catch-18.” “I Don’t Love You Any More,” published in Whit Burnett’s *Story* magazine, was followed by four short stories—two in *Atlantic Monthly*, two in *Esquire*—all during 1948.

But successful though Heller was as a short-story writer, it was the section of his novel-in-progress that appeared in *New World Writing* 7 (1955) which made the difference. Here was fiction not only unlike his earlier stories but also unlike anything one could remember reading. The selection had daring, dark humor, dazzling experimentation, and best of all, a distinctive voice.

Six years later the novel itself—now called *Catch-22*—appeared. Some of its earliest reviewers did not shower it with adulation. Writing in *The New Yorker*, Whitney Balliett complained that “it doesn’t even seem to have been written: instead it gives the impression of having been shouted onto paper.”⁴ But others—including novelists Nelson Algren and Thomas Pynchon—were enthusiastic in their praise. If *A Farewell to Arms* and *All Quiet on the Western Front* defined the initiation and disillusionment that marked the essential differences between literature about previous warfare and the literature about World

War I, *Catch-22* explored the ways a novel about World War II might not only avoid duplicating the formulas of a novel such as Norman Mailer’s *The Naked and the Dead*, but also come closer to the truth of war itself.

Heller chose to concentrate on issues of survival rather than on initiation and to see the military bureaucracy and its absurd logic—symbolized by “Catch-22”—as greater threats than Nazi gunfire. In this sense *Catch-22* is as much a parody of the war novel as it is a war novel per se; in other respects it is a war novel only by the accidents of time and place, of plot outline and superficial circumstance. For *Catch-22* tells readers more, much more, about the unexamined, overly organized life in corporate America than it does about World War II.

Nonetheless, for those protesting the war in Vietnam and in search of a metaphor equal to the absurdities that escalated along with America’s military involvement, *Catch-22* became the novel of choice. It struck just the right notes—at once loopy and antiestablishment—for those countercultural times. No matter that *Catch-22* is no more “about” the war in Vietnam than it was “about” the last months of the Italian campaign; Heller had touched a nerve, and the novel found no end of critics with close readings of its form and theories about its function.

Meanwhile, the love affair with Heller’s first novel continued, as sales hit the ten million mark on its twenty-fifth anniversary, and “catch-22” elbowed its way into the language and then into *Webster’s New World Dictionary of the American Language* (1970): “a paradox in law, regulation, or practice that makes one a victim of its provisions no matter what one does.”

Given a debut of such dizzying proportions, Heller’s next venture—a play with the prophetic title *We Bombed*

in *New Haven* (1968)—could only be a let-down, if not quite the unmitigated disaster, the “bomb,” that some reviewers made of it. For all its absurdist touches in the manner of Edward Albee, for all its strained surrealism, the play is an exercise in antiwar preaching and, as such, it preaches to the choir. Those anxious to number themselves among the angels were quick to point out the devastating ironies in Captain Starkey’s insistence that “there has never been a war, . . . nobody has been killed here tonight”—this, after sending his own son to a certain death—but those who felt that the drama should *dramatize* its point were neither amused nor convinced. The play closed after eighty-six performances, more a testimony to Heller’s growing reputation as the author of *Catch-22* than to his powers as a playwright.

Heller’s second novel—*Something Happened* (1974)—made it clear, however, that he was indeed a novelist to be reckoned with. No doubt *Catch-22* will remain the novel most associated with Heller, but many critics would argue that *Something Happened* is the more disturbing, and the richer, book.

Bob Slocum, the novel’s first-person narrator, is an extended portrait of the corporate world and its ability to deaden one’s moral sensibilities. If innocence energizes the Yossarian of *Catch-22*, experience makes Slocum by turns cynical and world-weary, anxious and paranoid. He *speaks*, rather than “writes,” his tale of how he was metamorphosed into a contemporary version of Everyman, a creature resigned to his sufferings at the office and his inadequacies at home. Apparently “something happened” when Slocum was young and put in time as a file clerk, but unlike Snowden’s “secret”—that man is matter, and that he can be blown apart by enemy gunfire—

Slocum can never quite find, much less touch, his formative wound.

Heller’s next novel, *Good as Gold* (1979), was also built upon a premise of great expectations coupled with absurdist disappointment. Professor Bruce Gold hopes that a contract—and a healthy advance—to write a book about the American-Jewish experience will put his financial affairs, and his life, into some order. In this sense he resembles Moses Herzog, Saul Bellow’s brainy but distracted protagonist. Like Herzog, Gold can think up projects faster than he can write manuscript pages. But *Good as Gold* suffers from its own excesses, from its inability to decide if it is going to be a satire of American-Jewish life largely played out at the Gold family dinner table, a send-up of the Washington bureaucracy and its endless capacity for double-talk (throughout the novel Gold twists in the wind as everything from an “unnamed source” to a possible Secretary of State), or a diatribe directed at Henry Kissinger. Sprawl has always been Heller’s identifying characteristic, but *Good as Gold* is a case where its liabilities outweighed its assets.

Much the same thing can be said of *God Knows* (1984), Heller’s attempt to yoke the story of David with the *shtick* of a Borscht Belt comic. King David’s insistence that his story has more literary dimension, more conflict, more sheer *style* than the other books of the Bible speaks to his sense of justice thwarted, to his conviction that he has been misunderstood by history. The result is something akin to “The Bible According to Joseph Heller”—an irreverent, often hilarious romp through the books of Chronicles and Samuel.

No Laughing Matter (1986), written with alternating chapters by his friend Speed Vogel, is a nonfictional treat-

ment of Heller's bout with Guillain-Barré syndrome and how the old gang (Mario Puzo, Mel Brooks, Julius Green) rallied round. Heller has hardly been shy about drawing fictional portraits from life experiences, but this time autobiography is all.

Heller's most recent novel, *Picture This* (1988), is an extended exercise in deconstruction, one that begins by "contemplating" Rembrandt's famous painting *Aristotle Contemplating the Bust of Homer* and ends by dismantling its component parts. At issue are not only the blurring lines that separate illusion from reality, art from life, but also what the greed and crimes of history have to say about our own time. On these points Heller can, and does, become tedious. Nonetheless, *Picture This* has touches that remind readers of Heller's style at its satiric best. No doubt these same readers will look forward to the sequel of *Catch-22* that Heller keeps promising, but until that day there is a considerable body of work worthy of their attention and their thought.

Overview

Joseph Heller's fiction has a nervous, anxious edge, as if the world, and especially its language, is shifting so rapidly, so absurdly, that any discoveries a protagonist might make are not likely to come in time. As the "lessons" of *Picture This* try to demonstrate, only names and places change; history itself repeats itself in a relentless saga of political machination and private scheming, of pointless wars and meaningless deaths. Into the teeth of the world's storms Heller hurls one-liners.

Disorder is, in short, the order of the day. Ordinary citizens are victimized not so much by bureaucratic rules as by the rule of bureaucracy. Or to alter Lord Acton's formula, authority corrupts, and absolute authority corrupts absolutely. Heller chronicles the abuses—whether they occur on the battlefield or in corporate board rooms—with bemused contempt. Bubbling just underneath the amazement, however, is a satiric indictment of systems so familiar, so logical in their illogic, that we accept the absurdities as "normal."

Because *Catch-22* so dominates contemporary thinking about Heller, it is hardly surprising that he strikes critics as a death-haunted, death-obsessed novelist. Indeed, there are too many dangers in *Catch-22*, too many potential murderers and too many likely perils for Yossarian to keep track of them all. Nonetheless, he tries to account for the major menaces, and the result is a darkly comic listing that reveals as much about Heller's style as it does about the shivery condition of Heller's world:

There was Hitler, Mussolini and Tojo, for example, and they were all out to kill him. There was Lieutenant Scheisskopf with his fanaticism for parades and there was the bloated colonel with his big fat mustache and his fanaticism for retribution, and they wanted to kill him, too. There was Appleby, Havermeyer, Black and Korn. There was Nurse Cramer and Nurse Duckett, who he was almost certain wanted him dead, and there was the Texan and the C.I.D. man, about whom he had no doubt. There were bartenders, bricklayers, and bus conductors all over the world who wanted him dead, landlords and tenants, traitors and patriots, lynchers,

leeches and lackeys, and they were all out to bump him off. That was the secret Snowden had spilled to him on the mission to Avignon—they were out to get him; and Snowden had spilled it all over the back of the plane.⁵

Put simply, Yossarian wants to know *why*. What he discovers, of course, is that nothing can be put simply, and that even though the war's outcome is no longer in doubt, the number of bombing missions keeps multiplying. In a world where commanders worry about "tight bomb clusters," where a man named Major Major is given a commission because the possibilities of a Major Major are too good to pass up, where the fine print of air force regulations can be as deadly as enemy flak, Yossarian wants, above all else, to *survive*.

An obsession with what Saul Bellow has called the "Death Question" need not, however, take such surrealistic turns. In *Something Happened*, for example, Bob Slocum tries desperately to avoid stumbling into evidences of the Grim Reaper's handiwork, but his is a case of ignorance breeding anxieties rather than bliss. The very fact that Slocum doesn't *want* to know reinforces the fear that the unknown breeds.

When police cars collect, I don't want to know why, although I'm glad they've arrived and hope they've come in time to do what they've been called to do. When an ambulance comes, I'd rather not know for whom. And when children drown, choke, or are killed by automobiles or trains, I don't want to know which children they are, because I'm always afraid they might turn out to be mine.

I have a similar aversion to hospitals and the same misgivings and distaste for people I know who fall

ill. . . . When friends, relatives, and business acquaintances are stricken with heart attacks now, I never call the hospital or hospital room to find out how they are, because there's always the danger I might find out they are dead. . . . This sometimes strains relationships (even with my wife, who is always asking everybody how they are and running to hospitals with gifts to visit people who are there), but I can't care. I just don't want to talk to people whose husband or father or wife or mother or child may be dying, even though the dying person himself might be someone I feel deeply attached to. I never want to find out that anybody I know is dead.⁶

That a writer so given to grisly descriptions of the dead and dying, the sick and the sickly, should find himself the victim of Guillain-Barré syndrome is an irony that only a Heller could fully appreciate—especially when a world-class hypochondriac and *tumbler* such as Mel Brooks pays a "sick call"—and that only a Heller could turn into the stuff of *No Laughing Matter*.

Nonetheless, Heller's canon is not the endless cataloging of bizarre deaths that his readers imagine. Language misused or misappropriated, language debased and debunked, figures much more prominently in the long arc of his career. Consider, for example, this representative exchange from *Good as Gold*:

"Oh, yes," Ralph assured him. "It's always like this when it's this way."

Gold succeeded in speaking without sarcasm. "How is it when it isn't?"

"Isn't what, Bruce?"

"This way."

"Different."

"In what way, Ralph?"

"In different ways, Bruce, unless they're the same, in which case it's this way."

"Ralph," Gold had to ask, "don't people here laugh or smile when you talk that way?"

"What way, Bruce?"

"You seem to qualify or contradict all your statements."

"Do I?" Ralph considered the matter intently. "Maybe I do seem a bit oxymoronic at times. I think everyone here talks that way."⁷

As Gold soon discovers, everyone in the Washington bureaucracy does indeed talk precisely this way. Disorder is the political animal's natural order; obfuscation comes with the territory of internal memos and press releases. For Heller the result more closely approximates Theater of the Absurd—say, Eugene Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano*—than *politics* as Aristotle defined the term. "No one governs," Gold observes. "Everyone performs. Politics has become a social world." And indeed the widely disparate social worlds that Heller's novels explore—World War II's Italian front, corporate America, biblical Judea, classical Athens, or seventeenth-century Holland—count finally for less than Heller's dark, satirical conviction that language *is* power, that language *is* what passes for reality, and that the Real and the Rational have, at best, a slim chance for a hearing. Come up with the right phrase—whether it be "catch-22" or "mind-boggling"—and the world snaps to attention.

In *The Waste Land* T. S. Eliot makes a case for seeing the London of his day as an "unreal city," cut off from sources of myth and culture that had once given vitality to the past. Heller is too street-smart, too cynical, too much the absurdist, to put much stock in visions of a Golden Age. He prefers instead to think of the sweep of civilization as "unreal," and history itself as the story of man's linguistic inhumanity to man. In short, what goes around comes around—as Heraclitus and Vico, contemporary slang and the "soldier in white" know all too well:

The soldier in white was encased from head to toe in plaster and gauze. He had two useless legs and two useless arms. He had been smuggled into the ward during the night, and the men had no idea he was among them until they awoke in the morning and saw the two strange legs hoisted from the hips, the two strange arms anchored up perpendicularly, all four limbs pinioned strangely in air by lead weights suspended darkly above him that never moved. Sewn into the bandages over the insides of both elbows were zippered lips through which he was fed clear fluid from a clear jar. A silent zinc pipe rose from the cement on his groin and was coupled to a slim rubber hose that carried waste from his kidneys and dripped it efficiently into a clear, stoppered jar on the floor. When the jar on the floor was full, the jar feeding his elbow was empty, and the two were simply switched quickly so that stuff could drip back into him. All they ever really saw of the soldier in white was a frayed black hole over his mouth.⁸

The world teaches protagonists such as Yossarian and Bruce Gold hard lessons—namely, that slogans of progress

are a lie, and that progress is an illusion. Once caught up in the nets of language that those in power wield, one can only thrash about helplessly. Words simply will not stand still. As Frederick R. Karl rightly points out,

Heller often works by defining or suggesting elements through the negative. His entire novel [*Catch-22*] is an expanded litotes, that form of understatement and irony in which something is expressed by way of the negative of its opposite. Litotes is, also, a form of wit. One never says "not many" but says "not a few," creating a dialectical confusion as to how many or how few. "Catch-22" as a phrase which has entered the language is connected to its litotic function. For it expresses an underlining negative aspect: if you are crazy, you need not fly, but if you do not want to fly, that proves you're not crazy. The expression upsets our notions of what is, what is not, in the way a comic uses wit to express the opposite of what we ordinarily take for granted.⁹

In similar ways Bruce Gold finds himself embroiled in worlds where terms are so balanced that they cancel each other out; for a writer—and especially one as ambitious and as naïve as Gold—the result is to pile one confusion upon another until he strikes paydirt. The right turn of phrase, however meaningless, might just do the trick. Unfortunately, Gold fares no better than other Heller protagonists. Like the number of bombing missions that always climbs just out of reach, Gold finds himself being "hoped" to death.

In Heller's fictive world a protagonist's persistent complaint often boils down to this: *Who's got the story?* And if the worry afflicts a Yossarian at the receiving end of

Catch-22's insidious, death-dealing blows or a Bruce Gold trying to tiptoe his way across the linguistic minefields that line Pennsylvania Avenue, it also bothers those uneasy regal heads upon which crowns rest. King David—the slayer of Goliath, psalmist *extraordinaire*, and the character with what he insists is "the best story in the Bible"—is hardly an exception. Indeed, the more he thinks about his life, the more he concludes that the biblical account doesn't do him justice. After all, he protests,

I think I had a nobler subject in Saul and Jonathan than he did in Sampson, that crude, blundering jackass who bullied his parents into arranging marriages they disapproved of. . . . A *naar* like him they make a Judge, while I don't even have one book in the Bible named after me. What really gets my goat is that Samuel has I and II, even though he dies in I and doesn't get a single mention in II, not one. Is that fair? And those two books of Samuel should be named for me, not for him. What's so great about Samuel?¹⁰

Ironically enough, the dynamics of protest change when the clutches of Guillain-Barré syndrome—a mysterious, debilitating condition that attacks the central nervous system—force Heller to turn his absurdist humor inward. His protagonists may have bad cases of what Bob Slocum calls "the willies," and they may feel, like King David, that they are at the mercy of other people's stories about them, but one always had the sense that Heller was behind the scenes, fully in charge. After all, *story* is what a writer controls; it is his "power" in a world that too often defines the term in the doublespeak of corporate memos or administrative policy. None of this, however, applies to those who suffer from Guillain-Barré syndrome. Suddenly

Heller—as writer, as literary personality, as *bon vivant*—is rendered powerless, helpless, dependent.

To be sure, *No Laughing Matter* is hardly as grim a book as the description above might make it sound. But the very fact that Heller alternates his chapters with those written by Speed Vogel suggests a new condition, one in which important aspects of his “story” are consigned to a perspective other than his own.

Granted, *No Laughing Matter* is an exception. When his affliction disappears as mysteriously as it had arrived, Heller returns to his old post at the helm of “story.” Moreover, he returns with what can only be called a historical vengeance, as he casts a sourly imperial view over the sweep of man’s cruelty to man. It is at once an easy posture to assume and one that grows increasingly complicated, endlessly embroidered, in the telling. But one thing, at least, is clear: Heller has the *story*, which is to say, the “goods,” on what makes for war as well as art.

Heller can be written down as a social satirist, as one who comments ironically on a world that most people accept too quickly and too unthinkingly. But that characterization, however correct, misses the fiercely prophetic note that lies just behind his protagonists’ befuddlements. For Heller’s attacks on the body politic, on corporate bureaucracy, on the machinery of war as well as the machineries of domestic life, have the look of a jeremiad. In short, Heller can be numbered among those who bring the comfortable and complacent “bad news” about their lives. When his fiction is working most successfully—as it is in *Catch-22* and *Something Happened*—ironic distancing and black humor keep message and medium at a delicate balance; when the vehicle works less successfully (as is the case with *Picture This*), one gets the point with-

out also getting the traditional satisfactions that well-wrought fictions give.

Heller learned early, and painfully, that life has a nasty habit of throwing spitballs and then of covering over the infractions with layers of doublespeak. His fiction provides a way both of patterning and of controlling a chaotic universe, one in which the possibilities of an old-fashioned heroism have been gradually eroded. Nonetheless, his protagonists, like the zany versions of Kafka’s Joseph K. that they are, manage to persist, to force their antagonists into darkly comic dialogues, and even, at moments, to effect versions of triumph. To say that Heller strikes many readers as the quintessentially contemporary American man is to belabor the obvious. He is that, and he is much, much more. He is, for example, among contemporary American literature’s most accomplished, most dazzling stylists, and a writer who has put his undeniable stamp on the landscape of his generation’s best fiction.

NOTES

1. Heller, “Coney Island: The Fun Is Over,” *Show* 10 (July 1962): 51.
2. “Coney Island” 53.
3. “Coney Island” 102.
4. Whitney Balliett, “Mrs. Jolly and Mrs. Flack,” *The New Yorker* 9 Dec. 1961: 247.
5. Heller, *Catch-22* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1961) 176–77.
6. Heller, *Something Happened* (New York: Knopf, 1974) 4–5.
7. Heller, *Good as Gold* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979) 122.
8. *Catch-22* 10.
9. Frederick R. Karl, *American Fictions: 1940–1980* (New York: Harper, 1983) 310.
10. Joseph Heller, *God Knows* (New York: Knopf, 1984) 31.

Catch-22

For Heller a novel generally begins not with a structure, an intricate plan or “plot” to be worked out, but with a sentence, one that simply popped into his head and then rattled around there, haunting him. *Catch-22* begins not only in medias res—in the middle of things—but also in something akin to wonderment: “It was love at first sight.”¹ Heller’s readers often feel the same way; they fall in love with the novel’s playful sense of the absurd, with the way Yossarian shapes up as a rebel out to outfox the system.

Readers first meet Heller’s aviator-protagonist in the infirmary rather than the wild blue yonder. Yossarian is afflicted by a pain in his liver that falls “short of being jaundice” (7) but at the same time is sufficiently puzzling to require extended hospitalization. Presumably the doctors could deal with jaundice, and they could certainly return him to active duty if it were *not* jaundice, but “this just being short of jaundice all the time confused them.” To the military bureaucracy Yossarian’s liver is both a puzzle and an aggravation; and as the novel unfolds, the same things might be said of Yossarian himself.

Nothing, of course, unsettles rigid bureaucratic minds more than an aberration lodging stubbornly “between the cracks” and just beyond the grip of rules. Yossarian’s case of near-jaundice is a tiny example; Yossarian himself is a much larger one. He spends as much time as possible in the hospital, not only because the meals are better there or because he can flirt with the nurses, but mostly because there he is *safe*.

Yossarian enters the world of his novel knowing what the protagonists of earlier war novels such as Erich Maria Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929) or Ernest Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) soon discover; namely, that the life of a combat soldier is nasty, brutish, and likely to be very, very short. Heller’s protagonist has even fewer illusions about the patriotic rhetoric of recruitment posters or about the “romantic” character of war. He seeks out pockets of safety because he wants, above all else, to survive. As he tells Clevinger, a character whose principles are matched only by the mindless passion with which he holds them, “They’re trying to kill me” (17). Not surprisingly, Clevinger, who points out that “they’re shooting at *everyone*,” concludes that Yossarian is “crazy.” Clevinger’s opinion is widely shared by those who come to hate and fear Yossarian’s increasingly desperate efforts to survive; for them war is not only necessary but, more important, also perfectly sane, and those who throw monkey wrenches into its bureaucratic machinery must by definition be crazy.

Indeed, *crazy* is one of the novel’s “charged words,” symptomatic of a world neatly divided into the one character (Yossarian) whose sanity renders him suspect and the others whose versions of craziness are regarded as sane. Smiling down on such a world—one in which aerial