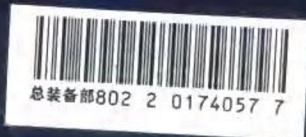


约克文学作品辅导丛书

YORK NOTES ON



CATCH-22

第22条军规

Joseph Heller



LONGMAN
LITERATURE
GUIDES

YORK NOTES

General Editors: Professor A.N. Jeffares (University of Stirling) & Professor Suheil Bushrui (American University of Beirut)

Joseph Heller

CATCH-22

Notes by Nicholas Bayley

MA PGCE (CAMBRIDGE)
*English Teacher and House Tutor,
Leighton Park School, Reading*



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Part 1

Introduction

The life of Joseph Heller

Joseph Heller was born in 1923 in Brooklyn, New York. By the time he graduated from High School in 1941 the Second World War was in progress and in 1942 he enlisted in the United States Air Force. His training was completed in 1944 and he was attached to a combat wing as a Lieutenant Bombardier stationed in Corsica. Before being discharged a year later, at the end of the war, he had flown sixty combat missions bombing targets in France and Italy.

After the war, Joseph Heller married. (He has two children, a son and a daughter.) He continued his education as an undergraduate at New York and Columbia Universities and as a Fulbright Scholar at the University of Oxford, England. He then taught composition at Pennsylvania State University for two years before moving back to New York where he became an advertising writer for *Time* magazine.

Heller has said that he always wanted to be a writer and he submitted short stories from an early age, his first being published by the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1948. This was the year that he graduated from New York University and it was not until 1953 that he began his first novel, although he had several other short stories published meanwhile. So, when he began *Catch-22*, he was thirty years old and the events of the war were eight years behind him. It was to be another eight years before the book was finished, and understanding why it took so long gives us an insight into his method of composition.

Superficially at least, the events of the novel are similar to Heller's own experiences in the Air Force. The events had gestated before Heller developed the unusual method of writing which he has used all his life. He says that he thought of the opening two sentences and the overall tone and form of the book in an hour and a half:

I was lying in bed in my four-room apartment on the West Side [of New York] when suddenly this line came to me: 'It was love at first sight. The first time he saw the chaplain, Someone fell madly in love with him.' . . . as soon as the opening sentence was available, the book began to evolve clearly in my mind . . . *

* George Plimpton (ed.), *Writers at Work: 'The Paris Review' Interviews, Fifth Series*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1981, p. 235.

The next day he wrote the first chapter but it was a year before he wrote any more. In the interval he was planning and preparing himself, using a unique system of notecards. He notes down ideas, in the form of sentences, on index cards and these are kept so that their place in the eventual work can be found. They act like seeds from which whole sections of the novel germinate. Altogether, the *Catch-22* cards occupy the length of a shoe box.

After eight years of writing, *Catch-22* was published in 1961 and was an instant success. Heller had meanwhile continued working for magazines, becoming in 1958 the Promotion Manager of *McCall's*. Though the novel was critically acclaimed and gained a cult following, it did not at first reach the best-seller lists and he went on working while continuing to write.

Joseph Heller tells his writing-course students that all novelists must expect to supplement their income by other work. After *Catch-22* he continued to teach and to work in advertising as well as doing some film and television writing. His own play *We Bombed in New Haven* was first performed in 1967. Meanwhile, following his unique method, he wrote his next novel between 1962 and 1974. *Something Happened* is told by Joshua Slocum, a business executive disgusted with what he is and what he does. It is a darker, more sombre book than *Catch-22* and explores the psychological dangers and anxieties of peace-time. Heller's third novel, *Good As Gold*, was published in 1979 when he was fifty-six. This book returns to the comic mood and is a farcical treatment of Jewish family life and the Washington political scene. The most recent novel, *God Knows* (1984) is a brilliant device to display the many skills of this talented writer. It is written in the person of King David, the second king of Israel in the Old Testament. In Heller's novel, King David reviews at the end of his life the events not just of his own life-span but of Western, Judaic and Christian history from his founding of the Jewish nation to the present of 1984.

Joseph Heller is a slight, smiling figure with a shock of white hair. He is modest in his aims as a writer, saying 'I don't have a philosophy of life . . . my books are not constructed to "say anything"'. And he is realistic about his skills: 'I can be funny—for one-half page at a time . . . I can be humorous in several ways—with irony, with dialogue, with farcical situations, and occasionally with a lucky epigram or an aphorism.'* He has been described by two critics recently as 'the outstandingly clever man of modern fiction'** with 'the modern, urban, decadent and paranoid consciousness'.***

* George Plimpton (ed.), *Writers at Work: 'The Paris Review' Interviews, Fifth Series*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1981.

** Jonathan Raban, *The Sunday Times*, 4 November 1984.

***Martin Amis, *The Observer*, 18 November 1984.

Historical background

In reading a novel as fantastic as *Catch-22* it is necessary to realise that real events lie beneath its surface. In fact, some details about the war are openly realistic, though many aspects of army life are wildly distorted. But, as well as the war, there are aspects of post-war, peacetime America to be discerned beneath the seemingly mad events in the novel. The political climate of that period influences many of the characters and events.

Joseph Heller has said that neither *Catch-22* nor *Something Happened* 'was intended to be autobiographical. Both were based to a certain extent on experience'. Just what were those experiences?

The United States entered the Second World War in July 1942. Because of the political isolationism and the military security of the United States, together with its relatively peaceful history before the twentieth century, war presented Americans with a peculiar psychological problem. Unlike Europeans, they saw no immediate danger to their homes or their nation. Though in favour of the war, they fought for political reasons, far from home. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Second World War (and more recently those in Korea and Vietnam) stimulated novels and films which sought to reconcile the contradictions implied by an America at war.

Heller was involved in just one part of the war in Europe: the attacks on enemy Italy and on occupied France. The Allies had invaded Sicily in July 1943 shortly before the fall of Italy's fascist dictator, Mussolini (1883–1945). After the Allies landed on the mainland of Italy in September 1943, Italy capitulated. From then on, despite continued German resistance on the ground, the Allies controlled the air and were not opposed by Italians. They advanced steadily northwards. Naples was freed in October, Rome (without any fighting) in June 1944 and Florence in August. This advance was co-ordinated with Operation Anvil which penetrated into southern France. Many of these events are referred to in the novel. For instance, the entry into Rome, the Salerno beachhead, the Gothic Line, the bombing of the bridges at Avignon, Florence, Bologna, Ferrara.

As a bombardier in a B-25 bomber, Heller was a crucial member of the six-man team. The plane was a twin-engined, twin-rudder, medium-range bomber carrying a pay load of 4,000 lbs, one of the most common types of American bombers. Its crew, exactly as described in the novel, consisted of pilot, co-pilot, navigator, two gunners and the bombardier who sat in the transparent plexiglass nose in order to aim the bombs. The terror of being separated only by glass from the anti-aircraft shells which the bombardier can see below and in front of him is realistically described in *Catch-22*.

Having survived his war service, Heller returned to post-war America

and, after seven years in universities, to his native New York where he joined the commercial world. After the economic boom caused by arms manufacturing during the war, the United States under President Truman became a powerful world force, abandoning its traditional stance of isolationism in its involvement with the League of Nations and then the United Nations Organisation. Billions of dollars were lent for the rebuilding of Europe and capitalist commercialism thrived under an administration which, despite such moves as increasing the minimum wage, was far from being socialist. This political mood of commercialism rather than social reform, of capitalism rather than nationalisation, and of financial power backed up by military strength is evident in *Catch-22*. For instance, the rise and rise of Milo Minderbinder, the prejudice shown towards the Anabaptist chaplain and the Red Indian, Halfoat, and the very existence of the regulation called Catch-22. Similarly, the spreading bureaucracy of the United States administration and of business is mirrored in the paper-pushing of Major Major and in the power wielded by the mail clerk, ex-P.F.C. Wintergreen.

Soon after the war, it became clear that the United States and Russia were the two opposing superpowers that they have been ever since. In one of its epidemics of feverish mistrust and public recrimination (similar to the witch hunts of the seventeenth century and the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s) America was swept by what came to be known as McCarthyism. Senator Joseph McCarthy set up the House Committee on Un-American Activities. There was a great fear that Russian spies and sympathisers were infiltrating public institutions. In a series of dramatic trials Americans were intimidated into admitting their Communist connections—however tenuous—and into denouncing their friends. The scare was short-lived, mainly because America in reality had no need to fear Communist penetration. Senator McCarthy, who had himself begun the scare in 1950 with the words, ‘I have in my hand a list of card-carrying Communists’, had testified to his own patriotism by claiming to have been a tail gunner on countless bombing missions. There is a clear connection between these events and incidents in the novel such as the arrival of the C.I.D. men, the chaplain’s interrogation, the Glorious Loyalty Oath Crusade and Colonel Cathcart’s oft repeated query that, if something is not illegal, ‘It’s un-American isn’t it?’

In Chapter 23, the Old Man states to Nately his apparently nonsensical ideas about the importance of losing wars. Joseph Heller, a sensitive, idealistic and individualistic man, wrote the novel after the United States with her allies had won the war. Her dollars, atom bombs and armies controlled or protected half the world but her citizens were little closer to the American Dream of equality and liberty for all people.

Literary background

On its publication, *Catch-22* was described in *The Observer* as ‘the greatest satire since *Erewhon*’. (*Erewhon*, (1872) was a satirical novel on the hypocrisy of society by Samuel Butler (1835–1902)). *Catch-22* certainly is hilariously funny and its humour is essentially satirical.

Satire in English literature can be said to have been influenced by two Roman writers: Horace (65–8BC) who gently poked fun at man’s idiosyncracies, and Juvenal (AD60?–?140) who savagely ridiculed man’s sins. Satire is a powerful force in English poetry, as is shown, for instance, by John Donne’s (1572–1631) ‘satires’ (1633), John Dryden’s (1631–1700) ‘Absalom and Achitophel’ (1681), Alexander Pope’s (1688–1744) ‘The Rape of the Lock’ (1714) and Samuel Johnson’s (1709–84) ‘The Vanity of Human Wishes’ (1749). In prose it appears in Jonathan Swift’s (1667–1745) *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726) and *A Modest Proposal* (1729).

Since the eighteenth century, it has been more usual for a work to be satirical in part or in general intention and satire has become a mood or standpoint rather than a genre. In the twentieth century it can frequently appear in novels, exposing what writers dislike in their society.

Catch-22 has a definite place in the history of literature. Though its confusing narrative is brilliantly unexpected and has an avant-garde effect, it is certainly not a unique experiment. There have been many other post-war novels which deliberately baffle and confuse the reader. Similarly, the book’s construction, in which facts and portraits and miscellaneous details matter as much as the narrative, has its precedent very early in the development of the novel. Both *Tristram Shandy* (1760–7), the great eighteenth-century novel by Laurence Sterne (1713–68), and Herman Melville’s (1819–91) *Moby Dick* (1851), its nineteenth-century American counterpart, have a similar approach. The roots of this method lie probably in the Elizabethan ‘anatomy’ (a detailed examination), such as Robert Burton’s (1577–1640) *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621). Furthermore, Heller deliberately ‘places’ his novel by the use of literary references, allusion and quotation.

The literature alluded to in *Catch-22* is revealing. Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821–81), Marcel Proust (1871–1922), Franz Kafka (1883–1924), James Joyce (1882–1941), T.S. Eliot (1888–1965), all of them major and innovatory writers, and all of them referred to by Heller, are among the founders of Modernism in literature. Other references and allusions are to François Villon (1431–?), William Shakespeare (1564–1616) and William Wordsworth (1770–1850). The significance of all these references is that, despite being in some respects very American, *Catch-22* is in the mainstream of English and European literature. Furthermore, it is post-Modernist. The Modernists T.S. Eliot and James Joyce, together with Ezra Pound (1885–1972) and Virginia

Woolf (1882–1941) caused a revolution in literature during the early twentieth century. They were not a ‘school’ of writers, but individuals with certain things in common. They were a generation who overthrew the traditional conventions of straightforward narrative and characterisation in fiction and of logical progression and metrical regularity in verse.

What kind of novel, then, is *Catch-22*? Is it a war (or anti-war) novel? Or a novel of ideas? Is it a comedy? Or a satire? Or a fantasy? It has been described by various critics as all these things and more, and the answers will be discussed later in Part 3, Commentary (see pp. 49–56). It must be said, however, that though it is a novel in the English and European literary tradition, it is above all an American novel. It shares many preoccupations with other American novels. These preoccupations have been summed up by Tony Tanner:

We may say that a central concern for the hero of many recent American novels is this: can he find a freedom which is not a jelly, and can he establish an identity which is not a prison? . . . [And] the dilemma and quest of the hero are often analogous to those of the author. Can he find a *stylistic* freedom which is not simply a meaningless incoherence, and can he find a stylistic form which will not trap him inside the existing forms of previous literature?*

Relevant ideas: the Absurd

The world of *Catch-22* is the exact opposite to that implied in Robert Browning’s (1812–89) famous lines, ‘God’s in his heaven—All’s right with the world!’ Like many American and European post-war novels, it is written in a period when Christianity no longer seems to act as a generally accepted basis for morality or as a guide to spiritual needs. It is a novel of the Absurd.

It was two French writers who first articulated what was a generally felt mood of atheism after the Second World War. Jean Paul Sartre (1905–80) and Albert Camus (1913–60) both explored the problems man is faced with when he realises that there is no God. If there is no ultimate authority, no afterlife and therefore no salvation, then all that can be said is that we and things exist in a meaningless universe.

Camus’s view was that the absurdity of life derived from the fact that man is driven by a compulsion to search for order, but that the universe ultimately has none. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), Camus compares man’s quest for unity in an alien world with the labours of the legendary King Sisyphus, condemned for eternity to push a stone

* Tony Tanner, *City of Words: American Fiction 1950–1970*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1971.

up a hill. His ideas in this book were particularly relevant for novelists who also felt the disorder of existence and their own emptiness and had their protagonists searching absurdly for an order that did not exist.

The idea of man alone in an alien universe has certain implications for morality. If there is no God and no ultimate punishment or reward, what restraint can there be on human action? The first problem, according to Camus, is that of suicide. What is there to prevent one taking one's own life? The answer is that both Sartre and Camus, together with some of the heroes of Absurd literature, discover a new optimism. They reject nihilism and religious doctrine and find the humanity of man. If this world is all we have, we must enjoy it and make it better, since if there is no ultimate reward for good, there is also no ultimate reward for suffering. The anguish of man in a meaningless universe and his struggle for order are the only truths but they can lead to a robust humanist ethic.

I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain! One always finds one's burden again. But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well. The universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.*

In the world of *Catch-22*, then, God is dead—or a cruel joker—and religion continues only as a neglected and empty formality. The vital forces are human appetite and the twin drives for power and money. Some passages in the novel are erotic and many refer to or describe sexual appetites. These can be seen not only in the light of an absurd morality but also more simply as the natural result of war. Men taken from home and forced to live in constant danger and in rudimentary accommodation instinctively seek solace in female company and sexual release as well as in fantasy and lewd talk. Similarly, gastronomic appetites are enlarged. Underlying much of the satire of the novel, however, is the wish that the world was a better place. Heller sees the widespread ills of modern life: intolerance, neglect, bureaucracy, capitalism, patriotism, racism, the greed for money and power. Like Camus he is 'pessimistic about the nature of man but optimistic about human action'.

* Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. J. O'Brien, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1975, p. 111.

A note on the text

Catch-22 was first published in New York by Simon & Schuster in 1961 and in London by Jonathan Cape in 1962. It was an immediate success, both critically and commercially, the London edition being reprinted four times the first year. It acquired a cult following and by 1980 four million copies had been sold overall, including the paperback editions.

There are no variations in the text, so any edition will suffice for study purposes.

A new edition of *Catch-22*, Black Swan, London, 1985, has been published with *God Knows*, Black Swan, London, 1985. There is an introduction to *Catch-22* by Anthony Burgess.