About This Volume: How *Catch-22* Changed the Narrative of War

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The scholars who respond to *Catch-22* in this collection bring a breadth of insight into a novel that seems to have an endless number of entry points. In her essay that contextualizes *Catch-22,* "Historical Context of *Catch 22:* Joseph Heller's Wars," Melinda Knight asserts "It would not be an exaggeration to say that Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*. . . . became one of the most popular—if not the most critically appreciated—novels in the second half of the twentieth century." Knight explains how Heller may have set his novel during World War II, but focuses his narrative on the unique personal perspectives of the war's participants more than the war itself. As such, it is a war novel to end all war novels. Heller deploys a seemingly disjointed, non-chronological structure in his storytelling, and, even though it is clearly the story of one iconoclastic U.S. Army Air Force captain, John Yossarian, the world at war is seen through several narrative points of view. Knight goes on to explain how Yossarian—as anti-hero—navigates his wartime world where characters react to and work within a bureaucracy that is ubiquitous and excessive. Knight astutely exhorts the reader to separate Heller's memories and experiences from those he ascribed to Yossarian. However, as Knight shows, several scholars have perhaps proven that some aspects of *Catch-22* do indeed correspond to real experiences and real people during Heller's time. In either case, the novel is one of those exceptional pieces of literature that, no matter how hard readers and critics try, will always exceed the sum total of its parts.

With the publication of Heller's second novel, *Something Happened*, in 1974, scholarship on *Catch-22* slowed a bit and has tended to focus on the same themes as initial studies. Reader interest, however, continued to grow. *Catch-22* became a campus classic, defining a generation, and thousands of college students since have read and studied it.[4]

Cult Novel of the Sixties

Heller claimed in an interview that Vietnam was the war he felt "lurking in the future when wrote" *Catch-22* (Greenfield 53). The paperback edition, as noted earlier, reached phenomenal sales shortly after its release. As early as 1962 it was being taught in universities throughout the country, and Dell soon began promoting the book in college newspapers. The novel became a "campus classic almost as subtly as the term 'catch-22' became part of the English language" as representing any kind of bureaucratic no-win situation (Eller 516). Within 13 years, the novel had sold over six million copies and moved into the top fifty of all-time paperback sales, surpassing even *The Great Gatsby*. *Catch-22* achieved iconic status for everyday readers when it appeared in the comic strips of both Beetle Bailey and Peanuts (515). Aldridge confirmed the novel's importance for those opposed to the Vietnam War: "[W]ith the seemingly eternal and mindless escalation of the war in Vietnam, history had at last caught up with the book and caused it to be more and more widely recognized as a deadly accurate metaphorical portrait of the nightmarish conditions in which the country appeared to be engulfed" (55).

As is well known, the war in Vietnam (known in that country as the "American War"), greatly escalated in the 1960s, with a presence of some five hundred thousand U.S. troops on the ground by 1966. Daily newscasts brought the horrors of the war into people's living rooms, becoming the first "television" war. Opposition to the war increased on many fronts, and reports of the My Lai massacre in November 1969, in which the U.S. military murdered some six hundred men, women, and children, provided further impetus for resistance. *Catch-22* was to become the definitive cultural product

warm and provide a means for cooking and heating water. "You'll have the best stove in the squadron when I'm through" (320), he tells Yossarian. There's at least one passage that suggests O'Brien might be paying tribute to Heller with his own character variation. When Yossarian talks to Orr about all those times he was shot down and had to ditch his aircraft, the topic turns to an incident in Rome when a prostitute was beating him over the head with the heel of her shoe, both of them naked. Orr looks at his roommate and just "grinned like a gargoyle" (312). In *Going After Cacciato*, when Cacciato's squad finally reaches Paris in their pursuit of him, Paul Berlin describes Notre Dame in symbolic rather than descriptive terms that parallel Cacciato's waving to them from a hillside when he first walked away from the war, waving and flapping his arms awkwardly, "unpracticed, but still flying" (25). In Paris, Paul Berlin experiences the same exhilaration that Yossarian did when he learned Orr had made it to Sweden and realized it *was* possible to leave the war for Europe; Paul Berlin sees in one of Paris's most famous landmarks "a gargoyle's wild eyes. The gargoyle is torn from its mount, wings flapping, and it flies—it does!" (343). The gargoyle becomes a metaphor for Cacciato.

Despite the barrage of insults describing both men as being dumb, it's implied that Orr and Cacciato are the only ones smart enough to actually do what others wish they could do: walk away from the war. Orr is described as having less fear than Yossarian (51) and at one point even says, "I don't mind flying missions. I guess they're lots of fun" (320). Cacciato, meanwhile, is recalled by Paul Berlin as having done some "brave things too," like the time "he dragged that dink out of her bunker . . . and the time he shot that kid" and earned a Bronze Star. "You can't call him a coward. You can't say he ran out because he was scared" (29). Neither Orr nor Cacciato is cowardly, which reinforces the idea that to walk away from a war isn't a defect of personality or an act of impulsiveness prompted by fear; it's a rational act, as Yossarian later realizes. "I'm not running *away* from my responsibilities. I'm running *to* them. There's nothing negative about running away to save my life" (461), he declares, after making up his mind to follow Orr to Sweden.

sexist portrayal of Nurse Ratched, the novel also routinely describes her own minions as "black boys" in a work that also contains racist language towards African Americans. Central to the delivery of the story is its narrator Chief Bromden, whom Kesey develops in greater detail as the novel progresses.

One way to approach Bromden in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, and indeed the most common one, is to consider his mental state. The novel's institutional setting encourages this sort of reading, one that attempts to determine the extent to which Bromden's narration can be trusted. When McMurphy arrives, Bromden is the most veteran occupant who has been there for at least ten years since the end of World War II. He remains silent and minimally responsive, so everyone believes that Bromden is deaf and mute. Fully concealing himself, Bromden describes a place where all are considered either a Chronic or an Acute. Chronics are those whose conditions are so severe that they are to remain institutionalized indefinitely, and they are further subdivided into Walkers, Wheelers, or Vegetables. While Chronics represent the majority of the members within the ward, Acutes are those with a chance at recuperating from their various conditions. As these generalized designations suggest, patients do not represent people in the novel so much as categories for management. In response, Bromden remains silent in order to retain the semblance of control. Early in the novel, he states, "I'm cagey enough to fool them . . . If my being half Indian ever helped me in any way in this dirty life, it helped me being cagey" (4). However, if what another character, Dale Harding, the president of the Patient's Council, suggests is true, Bromden has experienced more than two hundred shock treatments. Harding describes Bromden this way: "There's your Vanishing American, a six-foot-eight sweeping machine, scared of its own shadow" (62). From these two perspectives, Bromden's and Harding's, the image of Bromden does not extend beyond a quiet, cagey, and docile occupant until McMurphy's arrival.

While some argue that Bromden as a narrator is an ingenious literary move, Kesey's presentation of Bromden relies on a damaging stereotype. Author Tom Wolfe describes the narrative perspective as useful because it allows Kesey to "present a schizophrenic state

reapplied the term to include his own platoon and their commanding officer. Yossarian suggests that an enemy "is anybody who's going to get you killed no matter which side he's on, and that includes Colonel Cathcart" (122). To Yossarian the "enemy" is "anybody" and it does not "matter which side he's on"; this individual can end your life by fighting with you or against you. This is one of many realizations that Yossarian makes in the novel, which Heller's uses to expose how "military bureaucracy exploits war for personal advantage" (Malik 159) and profit. In this exchange, Heller demystifies the war by offering conflictual narrations that dichotomizes the word "enemy" as an internal and external threat to Yossarian's survival. Midway through the novel, Yossarian becomes determined to survive the war even though he is surrounded with death and the physical specters that have been pervading his memories and consciousness.

In desperation, Yossarian begins tampering with bombing maps, sabotaging equipment and missions as well as attempting to poison his fellow soldiers to prevent them from carrying out Colonel Cathcart's directives. Yossarian's actions, however, are challenged by Colonel Cathcart and Colonel Korn who issue him an ultimatum. They offer Yossarian the opportunity to return to the United States on the condition that he speaks highly of them and their leadership prowess. This offer would enable Yossarian to survive the war but would lead to the unnecessary death of other young men; yet his refusal would result in court martial and a dishonorable discharge. Caught in the proverbial catch-22, Yossarian instead decides to flee, a decision that enables him to escape the war and death he has endured for years and survive on his own terms. These are the catches that Salinger's and Heller's novels reimagine through their characters' overlapping and divergent narratives.

No Longer Apples and Oranges

Returning to the titles of Salinger's and Heller's novel, I revisit how these authors explored complex dynamics inherent in physical confrontations using the words "catcher" and "catch," respectively. In Salinger's text, Caulfield dreams of becoming a "catcher" and as such he assumes responsibility for any children in danger of

War Ration(ality): *Catch-22*, History, and the Rhetoric of Fictionality

Michael Hedges

When confronted with a fictional text, readers are likely to approach said text with a mindset formulated by preconceived notions of what reading a piece of fiction requires. That is, accomplished readers *know* what fiction is, and encounter a piece of fiction with some level of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "willing suspension of disbelief" in mind. What makes *Catch-22* fictional? We might be tempted to say that *Catch-22* is fictional because the events that take place within its pages didn't happen. To draw this conclusion would be to subscribe to a common-sense definition of fictional narratives that many of us recognize: fiction doesn't *really* happen*,* whereas in nonfiction the events contained therein presumably do. Thus, for *Catch-22* to be classified as fiction, the story it tells must not have happened. This assessment of Joseph Heller's novel, and fiction in general, fails to stand up to much scrutiny. A great deal of what happens in *Catch-22* is based on Joseph Heller's real-life experience as a bomber during World War Two. Heller really did fly dozens of missions over Europe, as do the novel's protagonists. So, to say that the events of *Catch-22* didn't happen is a complicated business. As with much fiction, it is unclear where recollection ends and imagination begins.

Catch-22 blurs military history and uproarious satire. The novel is a bizarre juxtaposition of unfeasible occurrence that we infer not to have happened as described, on the one hand, and documented occurrence that *seems* unfeasible but *actually happened* on the other. One of *Catch-22*'s great strengths is that it isn't always obvious which of these categories a passage falls into. The ambiguity surrounding whether or not something took place strengthens Heller's anti-war agenda, as the distinction between farce and fact becomes difficult

Surely so many countries can't all be worth dying for" (190). Here, Heller states the futility of war because nobody actually wins one. Also, while some damage caused by war is immediately visible, most lingers for decades in air, water, and Earth.

Throughout *Catch-22*, Heller brings into sharp focus the anxieties and vitiated agency of those who seem to be in control. Yossarian believes that "everybody around him was crazy . . . that people hated him and were conspiring to kill him" (13). He makes a striking remark about his colleague McWatt; to Yossarian, he is the "craziest combat man" only because he is "perfectly sane" and still does not "mind the war" (43). What war is doing to these men emerges most powerfully when Major Danby says to Yossarian:

> 'It must be nice to live like a vegetable,' he conceded wistfully.
>
> 'It's lousy,' answered Yossarian.
>
> 'No, it must be very pleasant to be free from all this doubt and pressure,' insisted Major Danby.
>
> 'I think I'd like to live like a vegetable and make no important decisions.'
>
> 'What kind of vegetable, Danby?'
>
> 'A cucumber or a carrot.' 'What kind of cucumber?
>
> A good one or a bad one?'
>
> 'Oh, a good one, of course.'
>
> 'They'd cut you off in your prime and slice you up for a salad.'
>
> Major Danby's face fell. 'A poor one, then.'
>
> 'They'd let you rot and use you for fertilizer to help the good ones grow.' (344)