CHAPTER IV
A WAR NOVEL WITH A DIFFERENCE
STRUCTURE AND MEANING IN CATCH 22

War novel publication in the United States followed an interesting pattern in the period from 1944 to 1962. By the late fifties more than two hundred and fifty novels had been published dealing with the subject of war. Of these, most had been written between 1944 and 1952. Thereafter, publication became sporadic. Furthermore, war in these novels was still treated in conventional terms as a vastly impressive experience; the author’s main object was not always to express a sense of revulsion.

Between 1957 and 1962 the publication of a small but important group of novels heralded a new approach to war literature on the part of the American writers. The historical experience of Korea and Vietnam had generated a complex and radically new consciousness of war for Americans. In the immediate years following the Second World War, the development of sophisticated nuclear technology and the continuing economic expansion of the US seemed to presage an unbroken era of military supremacy: in reality America’s involvement with Asia proved otherwise. Both Korea and Vietnam turned out to be wars significantly different from earlier “conventional” wars. Specifically the Vietnam War revealed both the limits of American power and the moral ambivalence of advanced technology.

Earlier, in the Second World War the rise of fascism had provided a legitimate enemy demanding the involvement of the US. The United States in its turn, through the supply of material resources and manpower, could claim to have played a major part in the defeat of Nazism. Vietnam was different in that it produced a backlash of
negative opinion, and in the final analysis, it was impossible to win either militarily or politically.

During the last two decades, literary production of American war novels has continued to be prolific. In the realm of "serious" literature, the American war writer has drawn upon a situation of productive crisis rather similar to that experienced by earlier Anglo-American modernists in the 1920s. John Barth, looking back upon the period, has coined the phrase "literature of exhaustion" to describe the intense formal experimentation whereby genre has been mined to the point of ultimacy. The era from 1960 is sometimes termed the era of post modernism in the United States when, "after a cultural bypass the legacy of modernism was realised through the explosion and dismemberment of traditional notions of genre".

A look at the books written initially in response to Vietnam seems to corroborate such a prediction; there does seem to be a vast body of literature which attempts technical innovation. It is useful to acknowledge the practical situation of the war writer and to attempt to reconstruct his literary context. The ambiguous and shifting nature of literary production and its relation with such material conditions such as readership and methods of distribution imply complexly evolving cultural relationships and forces. An example of particular relevance to the writing of specifically "war" books is the fluidity and interchange of conventions and styles made possible in a mass paperback market aimed at a mixed readership. The rapid growth of paperback sales meant not only a more profitable market for the gung-ho type of war novel, but also more interestingly, communication to a wider audience of some of the techniques of experimental fiction.

1 John Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion" originally published in Atlantic Monthly, August 1967
2 Walsh, Jeffrey – American War Literature, 1914 to Vietnam (New York, 1982) Pg. 187
Between 1957 and 1962, the publication of a small but important group of novels signalled the arrival of a new group of novelists. Kurt Vonnegut’s *Mother Night* (1962), Joseph Heller’s *Catch 22* (1961) and to a certain extent James Jones’ *The Thin Red Line* (1962) share the common characteristic of treating warfare in different terms than their predecessors. It is perhaps important to define that these novels form a quite clearly identifiable group. They were all published within a period of five years and they appeared when publication of conventional wartime fiction had tapered off. Heller confirms that in his case at least, his timing was no accident: “I put off writing my own (novel) for eight years because of them”. In this sense, it is clear that *Catch 22* was influenced by the work of writers like Norman Mailer and yet is in quite a different category from their novels.

By the end of the decade of the fifties, with its smug conservatism, American intellectual culture was restless. Historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. expressed this discontent in an *Esquire* article (Jan. 1960):

As yet the feeling is incoherent and elusive. But it is beginning to manifest itself in a multitude of ways: in freshening attitudes in politics; in a new acerbity in criticism, in stirrings, often tinged with desperation, desperation among the youth; in a spreading contempt everywhere for reigning cliches. There is evident a widening restlessness, dangerous tendencies towards satire and idealism, a mounting dissatisfaction with the official priorities, a deepening concern with our character and objectives as a nation.

In American literary circles, many critics were seeking an alternative for the mainstream mimetic novel, which had been pronounced dead by a number of them following the great pre-war era that had produced the masterpieces of the modernist canon. For many, Joyce’s *Ulysses* had taken the realistic novel as far as it could go, even to the brink of mythic fantasy. Many looked to Europe, particularly France for inspiration where the existential novel of Camus and Sartre, the theatre of the absurd

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3 Etheridge, James M. (ed) – *Contemporary Authors* (Detroit, 1962) Pg. 238
and the *nouvelle roman* of Alain Robbe-Grillet were changing the face of European letters. None, however, translated well to the needs of American fiction.

Amid the literary ferment of letters after Joyce, amid the restlessness and satire and general scepticism of American artistic and political values, the new decade of the sixties began. Arthur Schlesinger Jr. predicted that it would be "spirited, articulate, inventive, incoherent, turbulent with energy shooting off in all directions".\(^{5}\)

Into this environment, in the first year of the Kennedy presidency came *Catch 22*. As the blurb inside the book jacket of the first hard cover edition proclaimed:

*Catch 22* is like no other novel we have ever read. It has its own style, its own rationale, and its own extraordinary character. It moves back and forth from hilarity to horror. It is outrageously funny and strangely affecting. It is totally original.

In fact, *Catch 22* heralded a new direction in American literature, combining naturalistic detail with satirical and surreal exaggeration, mingling slapstick and gloom, fantasy and history, real issues and two-dimensional characters. Not until the 1970s would America realise that *Catch 22* was not an aberration fitting loosely within the black humour genre, but the advance guard of a whole new approach to the novel, a movement now generally known as "post modernism".

Fifty million people were killed in World War II. If that is the first sentence what could be the second? There is nowhere to go except to add that writing the sequel is the obligation of post modernism.

It goes without saying that *The Naked and the Dead* (1948) and *From Here to Eternity* (1951) are the great war novels of the immediate post war period, and that *Catch 22* constitutes a revised tradition of the World War II novel. Heller's *Catch 22* and Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) are still read, and not by

\(^{5}\) Ibid, Pg. 60
antiquarians only, but the young reader as well. Perhaps this merely testifies that anything after 1960 is contemporary. Heller's and Pynchon's war novels can be classified as post modernist while Mailer's and Jones' novels as late modernist war literature. There was a modernist and a post modernist World War II: the Second World War may have set the terms of post war writing, but post war writing conceived and reconceived the Second World War.

There is something adolescent about these books – brilliantly adolescent, a term applied analytically rather than dismissively. All of these books of course are sophisticated as well.\(^6\)

Two facets of the adolescentness of these books are crucial. First, there is a "sweet helplessness" to almost all of Heller's, Vonnegut's and Pynchon's characters. Yossarian, Dunbar, Doc Daneeka and the chaplain in Catch 22 all seem to possess it. These characters are all ostensibly heterosexual, but they seem not to experience that condition as a code, a stance or an anxiety. In The Naked and the Dead wounds confirm one's masculinity; the combination of victimage and viscusness that is army life in general enrages most of Mailer's soldiers. But Yossarian, Heller's hero is an adolescent with no future, no idea of succession.

Adolescent pathology is in Erik Erikson's analysis characterised by what he calls the "diffusion of time perspective", "a loss of consideration of time as a dimension of living".\(^7\) Adolescents are required to sum up everything they have become and make it continuous with everything they are supposed to be - much of it radically different - in the future. Catch 22 of course is a classic example of time inversion. Yossarian trapped between an impossible innocence and an impossible

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\(^6\) Limon, John - Writing After War (Oxford University Press, 1994) Pg. 129
\(^7\) Quoted Ibid, Pg.140
adulthood has frequent experiences of something akin to *déjà vu*, the (anti) narrative principle of the novel, so that experience seems to precede itself, precede innocence – a distinctive feature of the post modern: humanity cannot stand too much history.

If *Catch 22* is notably adolescent, it is equally obvious that it is paranoid. Since World War II, Erikson tells us “we have recognised the same central disturbance in severely conflicted young people whose sense of confusion is due, rather, to a war within themselves, and in confused rebels and destructive delinquents who war on their society”.

The sixties’ delinquent fights World War II without weapons. The modern disciplinary society or Michel Foucault’s “carceral city” that creates delinquents does the same. Delinquency may be taken as a psychological fact or as a political fact. Delinquent post-modernism is in either case the registering of contemporary history as an interior Second World War. The confrontation with history has been so profound that history has been psychologised – there is no longer the possibility of a merely personal pathology – and thus apparently de-historicised.

Both Foucault’s critique of the carceral system and Erikson’s analysis of adolescence contain the shared reference to war as a metaphor – the degree to which the particular misery of the World War II soldier could be generalised in the sixties with respect to Vietnam era adolescents whose sense of confusion is due to a war deep within themselves.

An unexpected discovery related to the post modernist war novels of Heller, Pynchon and Vonnegut is the recognition that they all involve the European war, as opposed to the pacific war of Mailer and Jones. Was the war with Japan the modernist war and the war with Germany and Italy a culturally subsequent event? The division

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8 Ibid.
is not merely coincidental because of the basis of post-modernism in terrorism. Japanese cities were terrorised, but neither Jones nor Mailer is concerned with that fact, less because of racism, than because they did not fight and live among terrorised civilian population. The humour drops out of Catch 22 when Yossarian is asked to bomb an unarmed village innocent of military targets.

Other aspects of the post modernist novel fortify the sense of a new combat genre. (1) The interest in what may be slightly misnamed overkill. The American army demands in the post modern combat novel more than one death from each soldier: destruction is separately psychological, physical, spiritual. Yossarian is not brave enough to die only once. (2) The anticipation of apocalypse and in this case genocide is the nearest approximation of apocalypse (3) Black or Yiddish humour; the three novelists Heller, Pynchon and Vonnegut make the point that they are all Jews. Heller's Yossarian is of Assyrian descent. Each individual may be scattered; every man his own diaspora.

These commonalities seem to indicate the existence of a post modernist war novel, yet it does nothing to justify it. If the modernist World War I novel hopes (or despairs) that art can negotiate a separate peace (A Farewell to Arms), if the early World War II novel hopes to find the possibility of style somewhere in military life itself, even if it exists as a contradiction in the face of army violence (The Naked and the Dead) no such hopes survive in Heller.

Post modern combat fiction seems to be deeply allegorical. Yossarian survives while most of his friends are destroyed. Yossarian wanders through Rome at night and keeps confronting catch 22. But the oddest fact about post modern World War II novels is how textualised are the lives led by its characters - they exist, they seem to acknowledge in books. The experience of being in World War II is best translated into
literature not merely as an allegory, but as an allegory in which the characters understand that they are allegorical. *Catch 22* is almost a compendium of postmodernist self-reflexive techniques. Heller anticipates the comic proliferation of fiction within life.

"Are you sure you didn’t imagine the whole thing (the attacks of Nately’s whore)?" Hungry Joe inquired hesitantly after a while.

"Imagine it? You were right there with me, weren’t you? You just flew here back to Rome."

"Maybe I imagined the whole thing too."\(^9\)

He is the inventor of John Barthian echolalia, the persistence of language after reality has absconded.

"Now where were we? Read me back the last line."

"Read me back the last line," read back the corporal, who could take shorthand.

"Not my last lines stupid!" the colonel shouted, "Somebody else’s."

"Read me back the last line," read back the corporal.

"That’s my last line again!" shrieked the colonel, turning purple with anger.

"Oh, no, sir, “corrected the corporal, “That’s my last line."\(^10\)

Heller anticipates some of Pynchon’s demonstration that signifiers can serve various masters, so that even proper nouns can be expropriated. “John, Milton is a sadist.” “Is anybody in the john, Milton?” “Have you seen Milton, John?”

And all the looking glass double going of Nabokov, Borges and descendents is implicit in the title itself.

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\(^9\) Heller, Joseph — *Catch 22* (New York, 1961) Pg. 407
\(^10\) Ibid, Pg. 80-81.
“There was an elliptical precision about its perfect pairs of parts that was graceful and shocking, like good modern art.”

As important as what Heller prefigures is what he postfigures; at least this is equally important if the case is that Heller is a post modernist. All three writers of the post-modernist sample confess their tardiness in the history of literature as Jones and Mailer do not. Heller manages, for instance, to get the name T.S.Eliot bouncing down one page and up the next.

“Name for e.g., one poet who makes money.”

“‘T.S.Eliot’ Ex-P-F-C Wintergreen said.”

“Well what did he say?”


And so on for quite a bit longer. Capturing “T.S.Eliot” ‘within single quotes within double quotes might be one way of epitomising the post modern resentment.

There is also in Catch 22 an extraordinary implication of Emily Dickinson. Orr assures Yossarian that there are flies in Appleby’s eyes. Then Yossarian wonders why Appleby does not know it, the answer is: “How can he see? He’s got flies in his eyes.” The Heller/Pynchon/Vonnegut generation is a late rendering of a lineage that includes Dickinson and Christina Rossetti and culminates in Sylvia Plath and Ann Sexton: the tradition is female and its theme is living death.

This may be an excessively gloomy hypothesis. But in Heller’s case fabulation, that is the making up of stories not professedly out of reality but out of

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11 Ibid, Pg. 47
12 Ibid, Pg. 47-48
language, the sense that all the enemies of the self are purely linguistic and so is the self, is precisely the characteristic mode of army history. Knowing oneself to be composed of words is an experience of mortality; it is the prematurity of that experience that the military finds congenial. When McWatt unintentionally flies his plane into Kid Sampson and then intentionally into the side of a mountain, Dr. Daneeka is supposed to be on board, accumulating flight time, so for the sake of bookkeeping clarity he is considered to be as dead as McWatt. In Heller's army, bookkeeping generally produces reality; it is a type of book-writing. The result is that when we descend in Catch 22 from allegory to first order deconstruction, to the free-play of signifiers, we experience it with Rousseau's terror: "so many things were testing his faith. There was the Bible, of course, but the Bible was a book, and so were Bleak House, Treasure Island, Ethan Fromme and The Last of the Mohicans." A universal empty fictionality merely opens up space for the army, which occupies it not by means of illiterate force, but by a knowing and radical deployment of fictionality itself.

Does Yossarian escape? The question is where to go. Perhaps the typical Heller joke is on the omnipresence and eternality of absence, as for example,

"When didn't you say we couldn't find you guilty?"

"Late last night in the latrine, sir."

"Is that the only time you didn't say it?"

"No, sir. I always didn't say you couldn't find me guilty, sir."
If one transforms infinite non-existence to the non-existence of the infinite one has a Paul de Manian allegory.

"I thought you didn’t believe in God."

'I don’t," she sobbed, bursting violently into tears. “But the God I don’t believe in is a good God, a just God, a merciful God. He is not the mean and stupid God you make him out to be.”

Heller recognises that paranoia is too simple a mechanism. There is no easy opposition to army and divine madness. From a world mocked by the absence joke, it is difficult to know how to go about absenting oneself. Certainly, there is no escape into the imagination – from the imagination is closer to it. When Yossarian sits naked on a tree in Snowden’s funeral, critics have traditionally seen in the gesture a sixties hippy-ish protest. But Yossarian is not protesting, he is repudiating; he is not making a symbolic plea for non-uniformity, he is taking off a literal uniform, that does not symbolically refer to Snowden but is literally stained by Snowden.

Sweden is the book’s Switzerland – an echo of Hemingway’s vision of a beautiful elevated asylum in A Farewell to Arms – except that it cannot be imagined (is it intentionally an echo of Snowden, type of the always present absence?). Yossarian in flight from the army’s fictionality, can do no more than name an alternative as if the name “were a rip in the text to escape through.”

Catch 22 imagines absolute incarcerations in so many forms that it can gratify post modernists of every persuasion. Heller imagines war to be a function of international – borderless, ubiquitous, absconded – capitalism, to which there could be

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15 Ibid, Pg. 185
16 Limon, John – Writing After War (Oxford University Press, 1994) Pg. 152
no dialectical response. At other moments power seems to be deeper structured than money, and modern power takes the form of an internalised surveillance.

The post modern hope is not exile, it is absence. In Catch 22, “to disappear” is reclassified as a transitive verb, as in “did they disappear him? ....What will you do if they decide to disappear you?” Yossarian disappears himself, pre-emptively.

As Limon comments, in post modern theory, the self appears in the middle of a web in the massive network – side effect of a textual aporia, epiphenomenon of an economic or penal system. Take away the system and you eliminate the subject. Post modern fiction sufficiently believes this that it does not try to find the self a trans systematic, trans alpine refuge. But it converts war into literature to shadow the system, as if the texts final obscurity were a Zion into which the delinquent self, from its terrorised diaspora might disappear.

But post modernism was not even a glimmer in the critics’ eye when Catch 22 reached the British best seller lists in it’s first year of publication. And the novel’s American readership was probably hooked as much on the book’s message as on its method. In this, Heller was helped along by national events. By the middle of the decade, the ‘police action’ in Vietnam was heating up to a full-scale war under President Johnson, and both progressive intellectuals and college students began to show an increasing annoyance with the liberal regime that had come in with the late President Kennedy. By 1965 Berkely’s free Speech movement had caught the attention of other campus activities, and increasingly the idealism that had earlier

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17 Heller, Joseph – Catch 22 (New York, 1961) Pg. 410
18 Limon, John – Writing After War (Oxford University Press, 1994) Pg. 132
been channeled into civil rights and the Peace Corps began to mobilize against the
growing war and America’s cold war foreign policy in general, and from there against
every aspect of American life as represented by the “Establishment”.

Of all the innovative books of radical style and social criticism, Catch-22 is
probably the most encyclopedic in the number of issues it touches on; in so capturing
the frustration of the individual up against powerful and faceless bureaucracies. Its
publication in 1961 was immediately embraced by the American public - particularly
its youth - as a book whose time had come. Ostensibly the darkly comic tale of an
American bombardier caught up in the absurdity of World War II, the novel was also
recognised in the nation’s restless intellectual circles as a commentary on the smug
soporific conservatism of the fifties and the cynical economic motives that fuelled the
military-industrial complex in the cold war era. Testimony to the novel’s effect was
the rapid establishment of its title in the American lexicon to describe the absurd no-
win situation in which individuals find themselves trapped by their institutions.

But it was not only in its theme that Catch-22 reflected a mounting desire to
change the social course, in its very structure, which features an unmetred disjointed
chronology and frequent repetition of events, Heller was responding to a growing
need for a uniquely American departure from realistic literary tradition. As one of the
first and most original creations of post modernism, and as an artifact of the social and
political culture of the sixties, it is still regarded by many as the best novel of the
decade. It is somewhat surprising, then, that there is so little agreement as to what
makes Catch-22 a modern classic.

This is not to say that Heller’s novel has bee grievously misunderstood. Those
who like the book have properly identified its distinguishing features: its wild and
truly hilarious humour, its broadly satiric portrait of the military, and its savage
characterisation of the modern social order. Almost all of Heller’s critics have got much of the novel’s peculiar flavour, its unique blend of laughter and horror and its thematic intensity. However, one feels that no one has explained both the method and the message of Catch-22. It remains to be seen how the method makes the message possible.

To attempt such an analysis, one must first grasp the generic nature of Heller’s book. As James Nagel has said “the importance of genre classification for a study of the novel, is of course, a matter of attempting to come to it on its own terms without imposing irrelevant standards and obscuring fundamental themes”. There is the inevitable mistake in reading Catch-22 as a traditional novel. We see such errors in Allen Cheuse’s complaint that Heller’s protagonist Yossarian “is an empty paste-up figure”, who has “no past, no family, no vocation”. To explain the inadequacy of such responses requires that we approach Catch-22 on its own terms. To do this, however, has proved quite difficult, for Catch-22 incorporates features from a variety of literary genres.

The most obvious generic label for Catch-22 is that of war novel. The book is often characterised as such and is treated as a major text in several recent critical studies of American war fiction. Yet, Heller himself has dissuaded us from reading his book as a war novel “about” World War II. He has said the book has more meaning in regard to the Korean War and the Cold War than with the Second World War. Heller clearly regards war fiction – even anti-war fiction – as an inherently limited form.

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20 Cheuse, Alan – “Laughing on the Outside” in Casebook, ed, Kiley and McDonald (New York, 1973) Pg. 87
21 Bernard, Ken – Interview with Joseph Heller in Ibid, Pg. 296
What exactly is a “war novel”? Peter Aichinger identifies a war novel as “any long work of prose fiction in which the lives and actions of the characters are principally affected by warfare or the military establishment.”

Joseph Waldmeir defines a World War II novel as “one in which the war – on land or sea or in the air, in any branch of the services in any theatre of operations or on the home front – plays an integral, motivational, decisive role.”

These definitions perhaps best refer to Hemingway’s A Farewell to Arms and Mailer’s The Naked and the Dead.

These books do not try to explain war in general but they do explore how people deal with the extraordinary circumstances that attend modern warfare. Hemingway once called A Farewell to Arms his Romeo and Juliet but the problem his lovers faced are those peculiarly associated with World War I. Mailer was no doubt interested in the relationship between the army and the American social order, but his story focuses on the unique, almost unimaginable pressures brought about by the nature of modern combat. The military background is absolutely necessary to each of these classic war novels.

Far from wishing to “explain” the war, Heller deliberately set his book at its end, when Germany was no longer a military threat, to avoid having to treat the military and ideological conflict between Germany and the US. Moreover, Heller conceived of his book as contemporaneous with the 1950s not the early 1940s and therefore included subjects connected with the Cold War.

I deliberately seeded the book with anachronisms like loyalty oaths, helicopters, IBM machines and agricultural subsidies to create the feeling of American society from the McCarthy period on.24

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22 Aichinger, Peter – The American Soldier in Fiction. (Iowa 1975) Pg. 10
23 Waldmeir, Joseph – American Novels. (New York, 1990) Pg.73
24 Merril, Sam – An Impolite Interview, Playboy. June 1975, Pg.60
The military realities of World War II rarely intrude in the novel. Yet, Heller’s characters are certainly affected – if not harassed or destroyed – by the military establishment, and the war decisively motivated their action. The entire novel takes place during World War II and principally during the summer and fall of 1947 and its theatre of operations is the Mediterranean island of Pianosa occupied by the US Air Corps and commanded by such military models as Generals Dreedle and Peckem, Col. Cathcart, and Lt/Col/Gen. Scheisskopf.

Superficially at least, Catch-22 fits the quoted definitions of the war novel as neatly as does A Farewell to Arms or The Naked and the Dead. But Heller’s classic is a very different kind of book. The military context is far more crucial in the earlier novels, for Hemingway and Mailer relate stories in which the fates of their protagonists are realistically related to the special circumstances of war. Heller makes occasional use of realistic devices, but ultimately his formal intentions are well outside the realistic tradition.

Heller once said that he had put off writing his own war novel because of the proliferation of such novels immediately after World War II. This not only suggests that he wanted to do something different from the average war novelist, but also that he was quite familiar with their works. This is confirmed by the text of Catch-22 which is filled with figures and techniques from war novels classic or otherwise.

Heller’s book is linked with traditional war fiction in at least two other ways. Heller adopts what has often been called the most consistent theme of the modern war novel, that of initiation or education. In fact, Yossarian’s ‘education’ is the most crucial – and misunderstood – feature of Heller’s fictional argument. As this education differs radically from that of the traditional hero, a young man who “matures” under fire, Heller has again inverted or drastically altered the convention in
question. Heller’s second link with traditional war fiction involves perpetuating a tradition rather than inventing it. This refers to Catch-22 as a “protesting war novel”, the kind of novel we usually associate with World War I. There is a marked formal difference between Catch-22 and A Farewell to Arms, but one understands Heller’s intentions much better if one sees that these books share a common spirit.

It is of course difficult to generalise about the many novels inspired by the two world wars. Yet the novels of World War I are commonly thought to embody a bitter protest against the war. Stanley Cooperman finds a spiritual emptiness in most World War II novelists.25 Students of war literature seem to agree about two basic generalisations. They invariably see World War I as a shocking disillusioning turning point. They find that the better novelists were moved to a protest that ultimately derived from social idealism. As Wayne C. Miller points out the novelists wanted to expose “the man-of-war world in all its barbarity in the hope that the possibility of social change might exist”.26 Paradoxically, their embittered novels conveyed a strong sense of purpose, hope, action and zeal, for literary protest implied a belief, (however faint) in the possibility of reform. To be a rebel implies faith in one’s ability to do things better than those in power.

Almost certainly, however, the World War II novels are comparatively less concerned with protesting the events they depict, informed as they are by the war’s necessity with no illusions as to its nobility. These novels may criticise the military system or war in general, but they are not vehicles for social protest, in the manner of the best World War I novels.

These generalisations are attempted to point out the spiritual affinities between Catch-22 and the major novels of World War I. Cooperman’s summary of the “historical realities” exposed in World War I novels applies to Heller’s novel as well:

The substitution of violence for thwarted a-otic impulse; the insistence upon authoritarian patterns of loyalty and action; the lemming morality taking its strength only from group identity; the definition of patriotism as religious belief or political conservatism; the giving up of self to the monolith of organisation.27

Indeed the fictional world of Catch-22 includes most of the absurdities first remarked by Hemingway and Dos Passos and their contemporaries. Heller’s response is also very similar. In this sense Eric Solomon is right in saying that in Catch-22 “culminates a tradition of bitterly ironic war fiction”,28 though Heller differs from his predecessors in not identifying the objects of his attack with a particular war.

Oddly enough, then, Catch-22 is closer in spirit to the war novels of the 1920s than to the novels of World War II, the war it ostensibly describes. Heller simply did not share the common predilection of World War II novelists for describing their combat experiences in vivid, highly knowledgeable detail, thus producing fiction designed to register “the way it was”.

Heller’s Catch-22 refuses both in spirit and in form to be trapped under only one generic label of the conventional war novel for it incorporates within its sphere aspects of satire as well. It is conventional for Americans to criticise their officers, but Heller takes this tendency far beyond the traditional in war fiction. Heller’s method in treating the higher-ranking officers is invariably that of scornful caricature, where no exaggeration is too extreme. The satiric thrust against Dreedle’s arrogance, Korn’s

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corruption and Cathcart’s childish self-deception pale in comparison beside Scheisskopf’s ideas on how to get his men marching without swinging their hands:

Lt. Scheisskopf’s first thought had been to have a friend in the sheet metal shop, sink pegs of nickel alloy into each man’s thigh bones and link them to the wrists by strands of copper wire with exactly three inches of play.29

Black, the intelligence officer is another caricature who conducts classes where “the only people permitted to ask questions were those who never did”.30 Black is a dunce, but he is also a captain in the US Air Corp with authority over hundreds of men. Heller’s portrait is a vicious caricature but also a caricature of viciousness when Black rejoices at the news of the men being sent to Bologna - the most feared mission site. Such viciousness is all too typical of Heller’s senior officers.

Heller’s satire is no less biting when he turns to the professions and businesses. Whereas Col. Korn is the book’s sole lawyer, a sufficiently despicable representative, there are a remarkable number of incompetent doctors in Catch-22. Doc. Daneeka himself is a mildly endearing character who found World War II a ‘godsend’ because so many of his competitors were drafted. Heller’s treatment of American business representatives is very much in the same key. Col. Cargill is a marketing executive who is so incompetent he cannot help but succeed. “Col. Cargill was so awful a marketing executive that his services were much sought after by firms eager to establish losses for tax purposes.”31 No less revealing is the story of Major Major’s father, the rugged individualist who works without rest at not growing alfalfa, one of the government subsidised crops. He justifies his doubtful financial practices by invoking divine sanction. “The Lord gave us good farmers two strong hands so that we could take as much as we could grab with both of them.”32

29 Catch-22, Pg. 72
30 Ibid, Pg. 35
31 Ibid, Pg. 27
32 Ibid, Pg. 83
Heller confronts the symbol of American business and western world capitalism in the character of Milo Mindenbinder. Milo's relentless pursuit of profit makes him one of the most memorable characters in the novel, a consummate entrepreneur who builds an international business empire over the course of the books action. When he first appears in operation in Chapter 7, dealing in figs and torn bedsheets, he seems a comical, harmless hustler. Milo remains more or less in the background of the novel up to the middle of Chapter 22. From then onwards he leads Yossarian and Orr on a whirlwind tour of the Mediterranean wheeling and dealing with various international networks. Profit is what motivates his arrangements — at Orvieto, where he contracts with the Americans to bomb the highway bridge and with the Germans to defend it. Profit is the motive which drives him to bomb his own squadron. When Yossarian says that it is a shade unpatriotic to deal with the Germans, Milo replies that they pay their bills a lot more promptly than the allies.

Heller's satire is no doubt directed at the Milos of this world but more significantly it is directed at the larger population that accepts this inhuman logic and makes Milo, the Vice Shah of Oran, the Caliph of Baghdad, a corn god, a rain god and even a rice god deep inside the jungles of Africa. Heller's satiric thrust here transcends American capitalism for Milo's popularity is obviously an international phenomenon.

The butt of Heller's satiric thrust is perhaps most benign when directed at the modern bureaucracy. The excessive reliance on machines and forms and its consequences makes his satire almost hilarious. Major Major Major is promoted to Major "by an IBM machine with a sense of humour."\textsuperscript{33} Yossarian convinces everyone that Bologna has been captured simply by moving the bomb line on the

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid, Pg. 85
map. The classic example of the official condolence letter takes form through Corporal Whitcomb who persuades Cathcart to send it to the family members of the pilots:

Dear Mrs., Mr., Miss, or Mr. and Mrs.: Words cannot express the deep personal grief I experienced when your husband, son, father or brother was killed wounded or reported missing in action.34

We wonder at a system that permits such absurdities. Other examples of bureaucratic blunders are, however, far less amusing, revealing within the satire, the vicious inhumanity of such a system.

A replacement pilot called Mudd is killed in action but remains officially alive because he had not technically reported for duty. On the other hand, Doc. Daneeka was officially supposed to be on the plane which crashed and killed McWatt, that leads to the official declaration of his death, in spite of his protestations. Even Mrs. Daneeka’s grief is assuaged when she begins to receive the financial benefits of her husband’s death. Heller’s satire here is of course directed at the absurd practice of giving the written word, formal and official, precedence over reality. But beneath the bureaucratic bungling is a terrible reality the system seeks to conceal.

Yossarian, on the other hand, knew exactly who Mudd was. Mudd was the unknown soldier who never had a chance, for that was the only thing anyone did know about all the unknown soldiers – they never had a chance. The bureaucratic truism contained herein is reality, is whatever the system says it is – records are all that matters. This becomes blatantly and cruelly revealed when Cathcart and Korn admit that they do not care about a roadblock they have ordered their pilots to create by bombing a small undefended village. Their real concern is that the mission produce the neat aerial photographs supposedly favoured by their General. The village is to be

34 Ibid, Pg. 275
destroyed and people killed and the pilot’s major assignment is to keep a tight bomb pattern. The concern here, once again, is with appearance not reality, though it might be said that appearance is reality for the officers.

Heller adopts the technique of traditional satire in order to call the assumptions underlying this form into question. Early in the novel he invites us to accept a satiric point of view; then, by the end of the book, he reveals the inadequacy of this attitude presenting what he sees as a better approach to the manifest evils of the world. In effect, Heller has it both ways. He uses the traditional methods of satire to expose such faults as the arrogance and stupidity of our leaders, our excessive reverence for profit and our passive acceptance of a bungling bureaucracy. Then he shows that Catch-22 does not really depict a satiric world in which good and bad are clearly distinguishable. The book’s more obvious satiric targets, Scheisskopf, Black, Cathcart and Milo – are by no means wholly responsible for the absurd bureaucratic nightmare that Yossarian and his friends must endure. Indeed, in a sense, Yossarian seems to be responsible for his own plight. To show this Heller uses a fictional form more flexible than traditional satire. Catch-22 is in essence a form of social protest, but then again social protest is not so much a generic label as a literary stance embodied in a variety of forms.

Protest literature in this country dates back to the late nineteenth century to the naturalists of the 1890s, Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, Jack London, Upton Sinclair and especially Theodore Dreiser whose works were crucial in influencing and shaping the fiction of Dos Passos and Steinbeck among others. These men were influenced by the political views of the left, liberal, socialist or radical, for they shared a powerful desire to protest the social conditions of their time.
It may seem odd to think of *Catch-22* as closely related to the novels of Steinbeck and Sinclair. Heller’s book hardly seems an act of literary propaganda, as so many of these earlier books do nor is its dramatic action in the tradition of Crane and Dreiser. Yet *Catch-22* continues the tradition of social protest in its distinctive way. Like the books cited above, Heller’s novel too is militantly liberal in its point of view. What Heller does is address traditional social problems from the usual point of view but by, means of quite modern – even modernist – literary techniques.

Heller took from the realists the device of treating his more sympathetic characters – his victims – in abundant circumstantial detail, with special emphasis on their inner lives. This technique accounts for the sympathy we feel for such figures as Crane’s Henry Fleming, Dreiser’s Sister Carrie and Steinbeck’s Joad. In *Catch-22* almost all the characters are caricatures except Yossarian, the Chaplain and Major Major Major. Their characterisations bear witness to the intense loneliness of each man, especially the Chaplain whose devotion to his wife is also evidence of his humanity. The Chaplain and Major Major (chapters 10, 20 and 25) are not the imposing central figures of naturalistic tragedy, but they are endowed with enough depth to set off the truly inhuman flatness of Heller’s Scheiskopfs, Cathcarts and Blacks.

In form, Heller is more closely related to writers such as Dos Passos who showed that the fiction of ideas could be profoundly affecting as well as thematically serious. Heller explicitly stated his intentions here that he “tried to avoid, first of all the conventional structure of the novel” and that he liked the ending because it squared “with the moral viewpoint of the book”.^35^ He denied that he intended the

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^35^ Merrill, Robert – *Joseph Heller* (Boston, 1987) Pg. 31
novel as a "sociological treatise on anything". We can only conclude here that Heller did not wish to write propaganda (a sociological treatise) but wanted to structure his book around a moral viewpoint. Heller's point of view involves social issues relevant to all writers in the protest tradition but it is offered in a rhetorical form we have only recently begun to understand.

Critics have commented on Catch-22 as a radical protest novel driven by social indignation no less than the novels of Steinbeck, Dos Passos and Dreiser. C.Wright Mills' famous discussion on the military industrial complex has been often cited as the context against which to place Heller's social criticism. While Mills fears the military elite's effects on policy making, he respects their capabilities as much as Mailer respects General Cummings.

Whatever the case may be with individuals, as a coherent group of men, the military is probably the most competent body now concerned with national policy; no other group has had the continuous experience in the making of decisions; no other group has had such steady access to world-wide information.\(^\text{37}\)

Unfortunately, critics taking this line of approach have taken to a most misunderstood reading of the novel. Howard J. Stark insists that the theme of Catch-22 is the absurdity, irrationality and nightmare of a disordered universe, a universe in which fantasy and the grotesque are indistinguishable.\(^\text{38}\) Brian Way, who first made the crucial connection between Heller and the naturalists nonetheless sees Heller as departing from his predecessors by embracing the absurdist themes of contemporary drama, the so called Theatre of the Absurd. He points out the concept of Catch-22 contained in "the infinite capacity of the absurd to mask itself in reason and to

\(^{36}\) Ibid
\(^{37}\) Mills, C.Wright – The Power Elite (New York, 1956) Pg. 199
institutionalise itself in bureaucracy, so as to play one macabre joke after another on
the ordinary humans as represented by Yossarian.\textsuperscript{39}

To speak of the absurd in this way is to suggest that the follies depicted in
\textit{Catch-22} are the inevitable consequences of a chaotic universe, not the avoidable
human creations that the earlier American novelists wished to protest. But in fact,
Heller’s affinity with the American social protest tradition is stronger than the
absurdist theory would suggest. In essence, Heller uses the techniques of a Samuel
Beckett to present a point of view of a Steinbeck.

In \textit{Catch-22} we have a curious mixture of the conventions of the humorous
war novel, traditional satire and social protest. Ultimately Heller absorbs all these
literary traditions into his own design transcending the generic boundaries of the war
novel, satire and even social protest. But to understand the complexity of the novel
one must inevitably delve into its structure which is its meaning.

It is difficult to approach any study of \textit{Catch-22} without first coming to terms
with its structure. Anyone who has read beyond the novel’s first chapter quickly
becomes aware of its lack of a traditional chronological plot. Indeed one of the most
frequent complaints made by early reviewers was that the novel was formless and
chaotic and many blamed Heller for not exercising adequate artistic control over his
material. Norman Mailer speaks for those who share this view: “Like yarn goods, one
could cut it anywhere. One could take a hundred pages from the middle of \textit{Catch-22}
and not even the author could be certain they were gone”\textsuperscript{40}. For the \textit{New York Times}
Book Review, the novel gasps for want of craft and sensibility; the \textit{New Yorker}
agreed that the book was not even a novel and argued: “it doesn’t even seem to have

\textsuperscript{39} Way, Brian – Formal Experiment and Social Discontent: Joseph Heller’s \textit{Catch-22}, \textit{Journal of
\textsuperscript{40} Mailer, Norman – Cannibals and Christians, \textit{Dial} (New York, 1966) Pg. 177
been written; instead it gives the impression of having been shouted onto paper.”

Even sympathetic reviewers gave in on this point, although defending the novel’s formlessness on the grounds that it is consistent with the chaotic cosmos and the lunatic logic of the story.

Heller, however, has contradicted all such accusations of formlessness. He has said that *Catch-22* was not to his mind a formless novel. If anything, it was constructed almost meticulously and with a meticulous concern to give the appearance of a formless novel. A close examination of the novel confirms that the book really is as meticulously structured as Heller claims. Indeed the book’s more puzzling features – its bewildering chronology, its repetitiveness, its protagonists belated change of heart – all fit together to support Heller’s radical protest against the modern social order. What appears as chaotic and formless is really a stroke of artistic strategy not only to expose the worst excesses of the bureaucracy but the unprotesting acceptance of this system on the part of everyone involved – including the reader.

The structure in reality, is the key to unravel the meaning of the novel. However, on the one hand we have Heller making serious claims about the meticulous structure of the novel, and on the other we have readers wondering whether the novel has any structure at all. This radical divergence in opinion seems thoroughly justified when one takes into account Heller’s own claims that *Catch-22* was crafted meticulously to *appear chaotic*. Heller and his readers have disagreed on this point because the book’s structure has been so artfully concealed.

This act of camouflaging implies, of course, that Heller’s intentions were not those of the traditional novelists. Yet, readers continue to read this novel not on its

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41 Quoted in *Catch-22: Anti Heroic Anti Novel* by Stephen W. Potts (Boston, 1989) Pg. 19
own terms but in those of the Great Tradition of the novel – although at the same time seeing it as a very poor example of that tradition.

Robert Scholes was the first to notice that Catch-22 was the work of a contemporary fabulist who takes "an extraordinary delight in design" while devising modern forms of "ethically controlled fantasy". To see this is to begin to understand why Heller devotes so much of the book to characters other than Yossarian; why Yossarian’s ambitions, ideas and even his past are hardly revealed, if at all; why so much of the book seems improbable. It is within this context that we begin to understand Heller’s intentions in writing the novel, couched as it is in such abstract language. “Catch-22 is concerned with physical survival against exterior forces or institutions that want to destroy life or moral self.” Such understandings enable us to explain why Heller embedded his fictional argument in a narrative of such dizzying complexity.

Any consideration of the novel’s structure should obviously begin with the confusing chronology. The story is presented in such a way that most of the time the reader is unable to determine the order of events. Even the most determined efforts by critics to establish the real chronology have simply failed. Clinton Burhans, for example, offers a near accurate chronology of the novel’s important events, yet he too commits several curious errors. Douglas Gaukroger, the other reliable authority on the chronology identifies several of Heller’s own mistakes, yet many of his dates

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43 Ibid, Pg. 16
and several of his arguments are based on the assumption that Yossarian has flown thirty eight missions when he goes into hospital in Chapter 1. Yossarian in reality has flown forty-four missions before the novel opens. The confusion here confirms the fact that Heller’s chronology is indeed twisted.

But it becomes obvious that Heller wanted to begin his book after Yossarian had flown forty-four missions, not thirty-eight. In effect, it seems that if Yossarian had flown only thirty-eight missions at the time of Chapter 1, a disproportionate number of the novels major events occur just prior to Yossarian entering the hospital; for example, the missions to Orvieto, Bologna and Avignon (where Snowden is killed). Gaukroger’s claim of just thirty-eight missions would have far less weight if Yossarian had in reality flown forty-four missions.

We thus face a variety of problems in establishing the novel’s chronology. Occasionally – only occasionally, as Burhans rightly argues, Heller’s own mistakes confuse the matter. Our own problem in establishing any sequence to the events is compounded by the fact that Heller begins his novel in medias res – in the middle. Whether Yossarian has flown thirty-eight or forty-four missions at the time of Chapter 1, all the important missions have already been flown – Ferrara, Orvieto, Bologna and Avignon. This means that Yossarian has already flown over the bridge at Ferrara twice, that Milo has already established M & M Enterprises, that Yossarian has already moved the bomb line in the map to cover Bologna, thus making Major – de Coverly a casualty of war; that Snowden has already died over Avignon and subsequently been buried; that Yossarian has stood naked in formation to receive a medal for his “heroism” at Ferrara.

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As most of the events have already occurred at the time the novel opens, Heller uses a series of flashbacks to introduce these events to us. Flashback, in itself, is a useful technique, but as used here it makes it very difficult to establish something as basic as the novel's chronology. There are several reasons for this, each of which points to what is distinctive about the novel's structure.

The first aspect which draws our attention to the novel's structure is the peculiar nature of Heller's flashbacks. In fact, it is often misleading to refer to them as flashbacks, because the term usually implies an event rendered in dramatic detail; Heller's references on the other hand are oblique, truncated and mentioned in passing remarks in the dialogue. In this context, the various descriptions of Snowden's death are of prime significance. The reader first becomes aware of Snowden's existence in a casual reference (one is not even sure he has died); then as the occasion for grief, inconclusive scenes; finally the truth about Snowden spills out in the most powerfully dramatised scene in Chapter 41. The early references are sketchy and confusing because they allude to a scene not yet fully rendered. These various references do not help in establishing any chronological link between the various episodes. Secondly, there are far too many allusions to Snowden which prevent us from piecing together the chronological puzzle. In fact the novel may very well be described as a pastiche of such flashbacks, which helps support Heller's claim that Catch-22 was meticulously crafted to give the appearance of a formless novel. Lastly, these flashbacks hardly contain any time references, and the few that do are far too obscure for the common reader to derive any meaning from them. The chronology if at all is perhaps only available to serious academic pursuit.

This last point is very crucial to any understanding of Heller's intentions. The real point about the chronology is that the author chose not to unravel it. Heller
seriously wished to create the impression of chaos and formlessness. The question remains why he wanted to do so.

The inevitable answer to this question has been that Heller wanted to match form with content. As Gaukroger points out, "It is only fitting that a novel which deals with an apparently absurd and confused world should be written in an apparently absurd and confused style." This answer has been supported by many including Tony Tanner. Yet, this does not really account for Heller’s technique. For one thing Heller’s theme is not absurdist in an ontological sense. Besides Gaukroger’s theory would still be inadequate even if we read Catch-22 as a novel about the inherent absurdity of life. This theory would involve the fallacy of imitative form; consequently the full expression of Gaukroger’s theory of an absurd theme would be a book literally unreadable. A reading of Kafka and Camus definitely does nothing to support such a theory.

If the formlessness of the novel is not a reflection of Yossarian’s state of mind or even of the author’s belief in the comic absurd, how is it accounted for? Perhaps the answer lies in the often commented upon repetitions. In creating the unsequential world of Catch-22 where temporal relationships seem irrelevant, Heller creates a fictional world in which he can introduce numerous repetitions without undue awkwardness. Most other narratives could perhaps absorb such repetitions as the soldier-in-white scene and be easily defined, temporarily speaking, against the central sequence of events. But then what would happen to the central plot line in a book like A Farewell to Arms or even the later The Naked and the Dead if there were forty such motifs? Heller in reality facilitates our acceptance of such repetitions by destroying

46 Ibid, Pg. 144
any traditional sense of time within his novel. He creates a temporal world sufficiently hospitable to repetitions, so effectively that we do not seek to place them within a conventional sequence.

But why should Heller want to structure his novel around a series of apparently random repetitions. In this context, David Richter’s analysis seems invaluable. Richter like other contemporary critics notes that Heller’s tone darkens drastically towards the end of the novel. Richter explains the progressive darkening and the unusual method employed:

Instead of going from incident to new incident, with each successive event darker in tone than the last, incidents and situations are repeated, frequently with few factual changes but with detail added to bring out the grotesque horror that underlies their absurd comedy.  

Heller wants the reader to re-evaluate the repeated episodes and situations, and a closer look at several such examples illustrates what his techniques accomplish.

The first of Heller’s repetitions and perhaps the most disturbing figure in the novel is the appearance of the soldier in white. He is the reality behind the unknown soldier of patriotic rhetoric. Initially, in Chapter 1, however, his appearance does not create more than a sense of slightly bizarre humour. Surrounding his brief appearance are other frothy details of humour, for example, Yossarian’s infatuation with the chaplain and the episode of the fire in the kitchen. The soldier in white takes on the comical coloration of his context and no emphasis is at all placed on his predicament. In Chapter 17, the soldier in white dies again when we return to the same scene. This time his death is contextualised by Yossarian’s grim memory of Snowden. It now occurs to Yossarian and Dunbar that in reality there may be no one at all inside the bandaged plaster and gauge at which the Texan had directed his pleasant monologue.

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48 Richter, David H. – Fables End: Completeness and Closure in Rhetorical Fiction (University of Chicago press, 1974) Pg. 141
in Chapter 1. At this point, the death of the soldier in white is followed by a discussion on why the men have gone to war - significantly there is no frothy comic interplay here. However, it is not until Chapter 34 and the reappearance of the soldier in white that we understand the full implications of the real horror he represents. All comic possibilities seem frozen at this stage, and Dunbar with sudden intuition realises that “there is no one inside”. He creates a situation where he is “disappeared” by the military authorities and we never see Dunbar again.

The appearance of the soldier in white in Chapter 1, 17 and 34 are strictly not repetitions, yet the three scenes seem to be one. In the chaotic world of Catch-22, the reader inevitably has to orient himself by means of place and circumstance. As the two key conditions are almost identical in all three chapters, they strike us as repetitions. But, Heller creates a sense of constant repetition without duplicating all events and characters at all points. In each case the episode’s darker implication finally reveals what too many would like to ignore.

Heller’s treatment of a minor character like Clevinger seems to illustrate this point. One of the novel’s sympathetic characters, he is counted by Yossarian as one of his missing “pals”. Although by the end of the book Clevinger’s disappearance in a cloud is taken quite seriously, any early references to him do not at all point to his death. The first of such references occurs when Heller describes the tent surrounding Yossarian’s. “On the other side of Havermayer stood the tent McWatt no longer shared with Clevinger who had still not returned when Yossarian came out of the hospital.” A few pages later Yossarian asks Doc. Daneeka “Then why don’t you ground me? I’m crazy. Ask Clevinger”. Doc. Daneeka replies, “Clevinger? Where is

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49 Catch-22, Pg. 18
Clevinger? You find Clevinger and I'll ask him.⁵⁰ Both references allude to the mission in which Clevinger disappeared – a mission not yet described in the book, and lacking the background, the reader fails to respond. Chapter 10 opens with one of Heller’s many bizarre jokes. “Clevinger was dead. That was the basic flaw in his philosophy.” At this point most of Yossarian’s “pals” are dead and the others like Snowden are dying through the novel but the reader is not encouraged to reflect upon the grim implications of this fact. At the end of the novel when Yossarian finally grasps the full implications of Clevinger’s disappearance, the reader realises that for most of the novel he too has evaded what really happened to Clevinger.

Heller’s technique should not be understood strictly as a form of “literary *déjà vu*”. *Déjà vu* implies only repetitions *per se*, but here the repetitions force us to revalue our initial sense of character or event. The representation of Rome is one such example. Throughout most of the book this city is a refuge, a recreation where the officers’ apartments “radiated with enormous, engulfing waves of fun and warmth”.⁵¹ But at the end, Rome is the eternal city of Chapter 39, a scene of such terrible horrors that the critic Minna Doskow has rightly invoked Dante as a parallel.⁵² The humour that had both energised and sustained Heller’s vision until this point gives way to passages as grim and as stark as unrelievedly violent as any one can find in contemporary American literature.

At the next corner a man was beating a small boy brutally in the midst of an immobile crowd of adult spectators who made no effort to intervene. Yossarian recoiled with sickening recognition. He was certain he had witnessed that same horrible scene sometime before. *Déjà vu*? The sinister coincidence shook him and filled him with doubt and dread. It was the same scene he had witnessed a block before although everything in it seemed quite different. What in the world was happening? ……The boy was emaciated and needed a haircut. Bright red blood was streaming from both ears. Yossarian crossed quickly to the other side of the immense avenue to escape the nauseating sight and found himself walking on human teeth.

⁵⁰ Ibid, Pg. 45
⁵¹ Ibid, Pg. 153
lying on the drenched glistening pavement near splotches of blood kept sticky by the pelting raindrops poking each one like sharp fingernails. Molars and broken incisors lay scattered everywhere.\textsuperscript{53}

Consequently Heller's repetitions can mislead the reader into taking the relevant place, character or event as harmlessly amusing. The added details piled up in layers in subsequent references bring out the grotesque horror underlying what at first seems whimsical comedy. Heller uses the same technique when it comes to characterisation. For much of the book, he represents Aarfy and Milo, the novel's true villains as passive characters. But Heller introduces a new note to Aarfy's nature when he reminisces about forcing two high school girls to "put out" in his fraternity. ("We even smacked their faces a little when they started to complain") and suggests that the Roman prostitute could be handled in the same way. ("We can even threaten to push them out of the window").\textsuperscript{54} We realise that our earlier responses to Aarfy have been inadequate when he actually pushes out a woman from a window. For Aarfy there is no difference between the threat and the actual execution of it. Aarfy's "amusing" passivity is exposed as nothing but an intolerable indifference to human life.

Milo Mindenbinder, the other character relevant here appears as an engaging example of the American capitalist entrepreneur. Earlier Heller had cut jokes that Milo would drop anything if he hears about profit. But this profiteering takes on ominous and inhuman overtones later on in the novel. When Orr is knocked down during his second mission to Avignon, his life jackets fail to inflate because Milo has removed the twin carbon dioxide cylinders from the inflating chambers to make strawberry and crushed pineapple ice cream sodas for the officers. Milo had replaced

\textsuperscript{53} Catch-22, Pg. 424
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid, Pg. 246
the cylinders with mimeographed notes reading “What’s good for M & M Enterprises is good for the country”. This episode is treated as a hilarious joke and related with roars of laughter. Later Heller retraces Yossarian’s efforts to save Snowden. Yossarian finds no morphine in the first aid kit because this has been replaced by the note about what’s good for the country – thus effectively labeling Milo’s theft the shocking inhuman act it is. It is rather hard to continue laughing at Milo at this stage and this in reality is the thrust of Heller’s technique.

The intriguing title of the novel *Catch-22* added to the lexicon a synonym for a no-win situation. But here within it is contained another series of repetitions. Early in the book we are told that there was only one catch and that was catch-22 (page 46). But this very catch is given various meanings as the novel progresses. Catch-22 required that each censored letter bear the censoring officer’s name (Page 8). This seems rational and harmless enough. “Catch-22 specifies that a concern for one’s safety in the face of dangers that were real and immediate was the process of a rational mind.”(Page 46) Catch-22 says that “you’ve always got to do what your commanding officer tells you”(Page 58). Catch-22 insists that group approve the actions of its subordinates (Page 173). But obviously the rationality of these variants is only on the surface. Because although concern for one’s safety in the face of danger is the process of a rational mind, yet Orr must continue flying the missions forever till he dies. Obedience to one’s commanding officer is demanded implicitly – even if that officer happens to be a Lieutenant/Colonel/General Scheisskopf. The irrationality of these regulations can quite easily be seen through early in the novel, but we do not feel the ultimate horror until much later in the novel. These insensate regulations reveal themselves when the old woman comments after the savage raid on the men’s
favourite whore-house. “Catch-22 says that they have a right to do anything we
can’t stop them from doing.” The
reasoning is both simple – and terrible. “Catch-22” means whatever they want it to
mean. It has no real content and Yossarian even doubts its existence. These variants
on the theme of Catch-22 illustrate the inexact repetition which is so much an
essential part of the structure of the book – for each definition is occasioned by a
different context.

The death of Snowden too takes different colourations as the novel unfolds.
He is introduced on the same comic note as the other scenes when Yossarian shouts
out at an “educational session”: “Where are the Snowdens of yesteryears?” The
much-hinted at, long-postponed, absolutely crucial confrontation with Snowden is
made explicit when we finally come to share with Yossarian, the real meaning of
Snowden’s secret. “I’m cold … I’m cold”, Snowden keeps repeating and finally
Yossarian discovers a truth truer than the justification for war outlined on recruiting
posters, truer than the powerful absurdist grip of Catch-22 itself.

Yossarian bent forward to peer and saw a strangely coloured stain seeping
through the coveralls just above the armpit of Snowden’s flak suit … (He) ripped
open the snaps of Snowden’s flak suit and heard himself scream wildly as
Snowden’s insides slithered down to the floor in a soggy pile and just kept dripping
out. A chunk of flak more than three inches big had shot into his other side just
underneath the arm and blasted all the way through, drawing whole mottled quarts of
Snowden along with it to the gigantic hole in his ribs it made as it blasted out …

He felt goose pimples clacking all over him as he gazed down despondently
at the grim secret Snowden had spilled all over the messy floor. It was easy to read
the message in his entrails. Man was matter, that was Snowden’s secret. Drop him
out of a window and he’ll fall. Set fire to him and he’ll burn. Bury him and he’ll rot
like other kinds of garbage. The spirit gone, man is garbage. That was Snowden’s
secret. Ripeness was all.

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55 Ibid, Pg.398
56 Ibid, Pg. 35
57 Ibid, Pg. 449-450.
The effect here is cumulative; this passage climaxes Heller's many references to the event – Snowden truly dies throughout *Catch-22* as Heller himself once said – and therefore seems to sum up what the novel is about.\(^{58}\)

I tried consciously for a comic effect juxtaposed with the catastrophic. I wanted people to laugh and then look back with horror at what they were laughing at.\(^{59}\)

This statement suggests that the novel's repetitive structure is as calculated as the effect of chaotic formlessness. Indeed the very meaning of the novel depends on this peculiar strategy which requires that the later episodes be the same as the earlier ones. Heller's repetitions, however, are of a piece, despite their differing degrees of exactness, yet one must consider whether the many repetitions have been woven into a coherent narrative.

Heller has in reality divided the novel into three parts. In the first part of the book comprising Chapters 1 to 16, we are introduced to most of the important events of the book. Most of these events are treated in a humorous way. In the second part of the novel, Chapters 17 to 33, beginning with the return of the soldier in white, the action hardly seems to move at all. No major events occur in these pages, although in reality time passes. Heller here, instead takes us back over the episodes already revealed in the first part of the novel. This second section, however, modulates into a more serious tone. Milo appears still quite comical, but as a far more disturbing element, and the senior officers are made to seem more brutal, but above all Snowden's death is described in much more gruesome and vivid detail. Taken individually perhaps, these references are relatively minor, but they collectively create a gradual darkening of tone. They explain why we have begun to revalue the novel's major events before the soldier in white returns for the last time.

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\(^{58}\) Merrill, Robert – *Joseph Heller* (Twayne United States Author Series, Boston 1987) Pg. 46

\(^{59}\) Ibid
The third and final section takes its tone from the reappearance of the soldier in white in Chapter 34, although it may really begin with the bombing of the undefended village. In this section, as readers and critics have noticed, time does move forward and new events are introduced, with almost no flashbacks. It is here that we are introduced to the way Kid Sampson met his gruesome death, the search for Nately’s whore’s kid sister, the disappearance of Orr and Yossarian’s insurrection. But the one flashback that does occur is of the final rendition of Snowden’s death in minute and grizzly detail. The new events, harder to brush aside as comical, but deeply related to what has come before, trigger Yossarian’s reconsideration of his experiences on Pianosa. The result is the novel’s climactic event, Yossarian’s desertion.

If one speaks of the novel’s climactic event it is to assert that the meaning of Catch-22 artfully emerges out of what appears to be structural chaos. By suppressing a normal chronological narrative, Heller creates a way to form a pattern of the numerous repetitions necessary to his art. These repetitions invariably move from the comic to the terrible – from an amused acceptance of life’s ironies to the realisation that these are in fact human creations and thus unacceptable. The repetitions crucial to Heller’s arguments are organised into three narrative cycles that allow the book as a whole to move from events that first seem harmlessly comic, then cause for some moral concern and culminate as a basis for genuine moral protest.

Consequently, Yossarian’s decision to desert is climactic because it represents an effective moral response to the injustices of the modern social order. His act affirms the possibility of genuine moral protest, however hopeless such a protest may seem. Although Yossarian’s desertion is the novel’s climactic act, its controversial nature has obscured its structural connection with the repetitions preceding it.
Yossarian’s decision to desert has been variously praised and condemned and invariably for the wrong reasons. It has been praised as the act of someone who understands that one’s own substance is far more precious than any cause, and it has been condemned as an irresponsible act of someone whose ultimate horror is of physical pain. Both views agree on Yossarian’s essential cynicism towards spiritual values or causes and that he acts at the end on the same perceptions he has insisted upon throughout the book. However, Yossarian changes towards the end of Catch-22. In fact, Yossarian deserts because he finally realises that there are greater horrors than physical pain and death.

Yossarian’s viewpoint leads him to discard the illusions that he had held through the greater part of the novel. The first is that he can afford to tolerate the evils done by such “delightful” characters as Milo, “the theme of insanity accepted without any eye-blinking”. Yossarian does question Milo’s actions, yet he does not act on what he knows about Milo until the very end. Through this is exposed his second related illusion: that there is nothing he can do about the system and its representatives.

For most of the book, Yossarian is an intelligent but seriously mistaken guide concerning the nature of his world. From the time he flies over Ferrara twice, he knows the terrible truth about the war – that it can be fatal to anyone at anytime. He knows also that the military is unconcerned with everything else except the appearance of efficiency and success as when Col. Scheisskopf has metal pegs sunk into each man’s thighs so they would march in stiff uniformity. Yet, Yossarian draws the wrong conclusions and keeps protesting against the system’s injustices as when he stands naked to get his medal. But all his protests are merely symbolic acts – he

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60 Merril, Sam – An Impolite Interview, Playboy (June, 1975) Pg. 290
continues to be part of the system and keeps flying on Cathcart’s missions. Yossarian seems to accept this as a hero’s fate in an absurd universe. He continues to act as if he had no choice, but to suffer the injustices of the system. But when he deserts he finally does something that will affect the system: he ceases to serve it. The implication here is that effective action is possible if we are prepared to accept responsibility for our acts.

Some critics have pointed out that Yossarian’s act of desertion is questionable as a responsible act, but Heller’s own words prove his stance. “In making the decision to desert, Yossarian accepts the responsibility he now knows he has to other men. As he says, he is not running away from his responsibilities, but to them.”

At the end, Yossarian finally acts to help prevent the death of all his fellow-men, for if he had accepted Cathcart’s deal everyone else would have continued to fly more missions without protest. Yossarian’s protest on behalf of himself as well as the others lies behind Heller’s description of Catch-22 as “a liberal book” and an “optimistic novel with a great deal of pessimism in it”.

Yossarian’s ultimate values are not “purely physical”. Although he does pursue physical pleasures throughout the novel, his primary concern is not survival at any price. If this had been the case, he would have surely accepted Cathcart’s deal to return to the United States as a war hero. Instead, he chooses to risk his own life and deserts, offering the other men the right kind of moral example. Yossarian is not motivated by any selfish instinct for survival but by his final understanding of Snowden’s secret – that man is matter – if he is set on fire he will burn, if he is dropped out of a window he will fall, if he is buried he will rot. In fact, Heller adds

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61 Kiley and McDonald (ed.) – Catch-22, Casebook (New York, 1973) Pg. 333
62 Quoted in Merill, Robert – Joseph Heller (Twayne United States Author Series, Boston, 1987) Pg. 51
another aspect to it when he says, “The spirit gone, man is garbage”. It is the spirit that counts, not “matter”. To capitulate to Cathcart would be to kill the spirit. He has finally learned the secret embedded in all the bloody entrails of all the Snowdens: if we do not protest against the forces that would render us garbage, we are indeed nothing more than matter whether burned, dropped or buried.

Thus the ending of Catch-22 has a certain amount of integrity with the moral viewpoint of the book. Although it has been variously questioned because Heller seems unwilling to face up to the Nazi menace, the critic Robert Protherough has rightly replied that “those who demand to know whether Heller opposed resistance to Hitler are refusing to read the book on its own terms”.63 Heller has, of course, made it clear that he staunchly supported World War II. But this particular novel is not so much about the issues emanating from this conflict as about the general threat of the modern bureaucratic society. Yossarian is endangered not so much by Hitler, as by the military-economic complex, and Heller took great pains to make this clear. It is on these terms that the novel must be read.

However, the real problem with Heller’s ending, as critics have often pointed out is that Yossarian’s volte-face seems too abrupt. This problem is real but virtually unavoidable, for it emerges out of Heller’s basic rhetorical strategy. Yossarian’s “belated” conversion within the book reinforces our own experience in reading it. We feel something similar to shame for our amused tolerance of characters such as Aarfy and Milo. The sudden shift in perspective at the end of Catch-22 emerges from the author’s desire to shock us into recognition of the unhealthy beliefs we, the reader, have shared so far with the protagonist.

63 Protherough, Robert – The Sanity of Catch-22, Human World (May, 1971) Pg. 59-70
This desire unites both the structure and the meaning of the novel. Heller's intention was to expose the contemporary regimented business society and this he has done admirably through his brilliant caricatures of senior officers and through such remarkable examples of the capitalist spirit as Milo Mindenbinder. These caricatures, however, did not necessarily need the elaborate system of repetitions that the novelist used. What Heller essentially wanted his reader to do was to laugh and then look back in horror at what he was laughing at. We are made to recoil from the same events we first laughed at because otherwise we might be tempted to trace the novel's darkening tone to changing circumstances within the action. Heller was not willing to permit this, because the world of *Catch-22* has always been what we only belatedly perceive it to be. This is why one of the funniest of all novels, is finally not very funny at all, for Heller arrests our laughter and turns his satiric thrust back upon ourselves.

The greatness of *Catch-22* lies in Heller's ability to convert the beliefs of conventional liberalism into the ideas of a powerfully moving fable. Like novelists such as Steinbeck and Dreiser, Heller focuses on the crippling effects of our social system on the sensitive individual. But he takes a step beyond his predecessors when he shows that the enemy is not just the corporations and their authorities (the military in this case). They, who are the enemy, only have the power that we allow them to have.

In a sense, *Catch-22* sums up a tradition. It is the clearing in the woods, the meeting ground, for almost all the themes and ideas developed along the various paths followed by novelists dealing with Americans at war and Americans within the military structure. Like Melville, the first in the tradition to use the military world as a microcosm of a larger social order, Heller uses the base at Pianosa as a mirror of the
culture of the United States. Like Melville and Stephen Crane, he presents his hero in danger of being emasculated in the totalitarian system: without recourse to justice and unable to assert his individuality within the corporate or command structure. Like most of the World War I novelists, he uses his work as a vehicle for criticism of an entire culture. But while he may condemn the concepts of honour, glory and patriotism just as much as Hemingway and Dos Passos, he does not go along the path established by them. In fact, at several points, Heller satirises the element of sentimentality in the war novels that precede his. Particularly noteworthy is his presentation of the relationship between Yossarian and Luciana, the beautiful Italian girl permanently scarred by an American bombing raid. In a situation in which Hemingway might have had the lovers attempt an escape to an idyllic life in the mountains, Heller merely debunks the concept of romantic love (Page 152-163).

Heller introduces a new element into a major novel in the tradition – the element of satire. He directs its thrust at everything in the culture that is death dealing, destructive or authoritarian – those things that the rational mind regards as irrational. In another context, just as Mark Twain provided an escape for his most representative hero, Huck Finn from an American society he satirises in Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, so too, Heller provides escape for his hero from a culture which would destroy him. For Huck there was still the territory, the vast virgin land of hope that the continent provided. For Yossarian there is no territory of freedom in an already established America. For him there is Sweden and the hope of a more rational life. As a highly individualistic hero, he must flee an increasingly rigid and corporately structured America in order to pursue that individuality.

Interestingly, the America he flees closely resembles the America Gen. Cummings predicts in The Naked and the Dead. There Cummings had warned Lt.
Hearn that the totalitarianism of the military system was a prelude to future life in the United States. As discussed in Chapter III, the General views World War II as the event that will transform the nation's potential energy and power into fearsome reality, and he foresees the American people marching out of the war with an acceptance of organisation and authority.

Samuel P. Huntingdon in The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations, presents an analysis of trends in American culture which confirms Cummings' predictions. Also very much like Mailer's fictional General, he sees World War II as the critical event in the emergence of military institutions and a military definition of reality in the United States – a definition that Heller's hero, Yossarian, in the context of the nineteen sixties must reject. No ritualistic militarism cloaking death and destruction for him. In fact, the rage for corporate order and collective will, which he witnesses at Pianosa is death dealing, cruel and above all insane. Unable to subject himself to the structure which Cummings regards as the predecessor of life in the United States, and which the social scientist Huntingdon identifies as necessary for national security, he is the anti-thesis of the organisation man. Intensely individualistic, he is a rationalist, a sceptic, a non-believer. As a member of a long line of perceptive, intuitive and lonely heroes, "he shouts a howl of protest at being ordained a priest in a religion of destructiveness". With humour, sensitivity and the disarming ability to admit his own lack of traditionalist ideals, Yossarian for most of the novel is the perfect hero for the purposes of satire. Simple and intuitive, he cuts through cant and ritual to dissect the reality of his own experience and the world that surrounds him.

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64 Miller, Charles Wayne – An Armed America: Its face in Fiction (New York, 1970) Pg. 214
Heller despite the bitterness of his view of the culture, holds out hope in the transcendent figure of Yossarian. It remains an open question whether this affirmation, involving as it does a complete shift of tone in the novel, is merely a device enabling Heller to avoid an ultimate blackness which is totally destructive. Although he may recognise that Sweden represents only another illusion, his final statement in the novel may be the insistence that such illusions and such ideals are the means by which men and cultures survive.

If A Farewell to Arms 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 formula of a novel such a 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 – symbolised 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 organised life in corporate America than it does about World War II. In the twentieth century, war has become more pervasively a normal adjunct of life, so that writing about war is a way to write about life.

Catch-22 is one of those rare books: a first novel that secured its author’s reputation. Even rarer is the work of fiction that can add a brand new term to the language. Throughout the sixties early critics of Heller’s anti-novel were fond of lifting events from the real world – or from the fiction we held to be real – and putting
them in the context of the novel. Catch-22 reared its head in the frequent reports of Vietnamese villages that American troops burned to save and of people who were killed to protect them from the enemy. Later as the Vietnam War wound down, students of Catch-22 had the events of Watergate to keep them busy with comparisons. We saw language tortured by White House spokesmen to explain away lies as “inoperative statements”.

The 1980s have provided no fewer examples of the sort of twisted logic and language characteristic of Heller’s novel when CIA-supported terrorists in Nicaragua and Angola were called “freedom fighters”. And now at the very turn of this century we see a President who distorts language to such an extent that all meaning becomes lost in the maze of evasions.

Heller predicted more than once that Catch-22 would decline somewhat in status as the war issue of the Vietnam era died away. But he underestimated the durability of the Cold War environment that spawned his first book. We still live in the world of Catch-22.

Yet Heller’s novel serves to remind man of his need to dream of the possibilities of the future and to be critical of the inadequacies of the present. More important, his novel suggests that the traditional American optimism has not been overwhelmed by the fears and anxieties of the Cold War. And Heller has told his tale in ways that forever changed the way we think of “war novels” and the comic magic they can spin.

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