CHAPTER V

JOSEPH HELLER'S CATCH-22 AS A QUEST
FOR FREEDOM
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As Heller wrote Catch-22, Donleavy, The Ginger Man and Vonnegut, Cat's Cradle. Whatever forces were at work shaping a trend in art it affected not just Heller, but all of them. The feelings of helplessness and persecution in Catch-22 are very strong in Pynchon and in Cat's Cradle.

Catch-22 is more political than psychological. In the book opposition to the war against Hitler is taken for granted. The book deals instead with conflicts existing between a man and his own superiors; between him and his own institutions. The really difficult struggle happens when one does not even know who it is that is threatening him, grinding him down and yet one does not know that there is a tension, an antagonist, a conflict with no conceivable end to it.

Catch-22 came to the attention of college students at about the same time when the moral corruption of the Vietnam war became evident. The treatment of the military as corrupt, ridiculous and asinine could be applied literally to war. Vietnam was a lucky coincidence—lucky for Heller, not for the
people. Between the mid and late sixties, *Catch-22* went into many prints, which speaks of its success.

There was a change in spirit, a new spirit of healthy irreverence. There was a general feeling that the platitudes of Americanism were horseshit. Number one— they did not work. Number two they were not true. Number three people giving voice to them did not believe them either. The phrase "Catch-22" began appearing more and more frequently in a wide range of contexts. Heller began hearing from people who believed that he had named the book after the phrase.

One way or other, everybody is at the mercy of some context in the novel. Heller moves from situations in which the individual is against his own society, to those in which society itself is the product of something impenetrable.

Heller dramatizes the idea of freedom in the lives of his protagonists. His protagonists move from bondage to freedom. Initially his protagonists find themselves caught in one system or the other. In *Catch-22* Yossarian is helpless in the military. Slocum is lost in "the company" in *Something Happened*. Gold feels trapped in "his family" in *Good as Gold*. Their realisation of being trapped prompts them to desire freedom. They struggle to achieve it at any cost. The freedom achieved by
Yossarian and Gold contributes to the growth of their personalities. But what Slocum achieves is a kind of pseudo freedom. These protagonists are capable of exercising their freewill and also accepting self-responsibility, which are the essential components of freedom. At the heart of the action of these novels is the American socio-political-military setup, that either has no design or has a design which escapes the boundaries of reason.

There is a dialogue early in the book between Lieutenant Dunbar and Yossarian. They are discussing the chaplain, and Yossarian says,

"Wasn't he sweet? May be they should give him three votes." Dunbar says, "Who's they?" And a page or two later, Yossarian tells Clevinger, "They are trying to kill me," and Clevinger wants to know who's they?"¹

"It is the anonymous 'they', the enigmatic 'they' who are in charge. Who is "they?" Heller does not know. Nobody knows. Not even 'they' themselves."²

Most of the events in the novel as Milo Minderbinder entering into a contract with the Germans to bombard his own Squadron on Pianosa for cost plus six per cent, Mately's
whore chasing Yossarian with her ubiquitous presence, Yossarian accepting the medal from General Dreedle stark naked are incredible and absurd. But the reader does not question their credibility. Heller's gift for caricature has made it possible for him to achieve a very credible description of the incredible reality around us.

The world we live in is a kind of embarrassment to our meagre imagination. The actuality is out doing our meagre talent of imagination. Any one who follows the newspapers or T.V. daily will think we are inhabiting a gigantic asylum which stupefies, sickens and infuriates by constantly throwing up personalities like Eisenhower, Roy Cohn and David Schine.

Catch-22 is successful because it attempts to describe and make credible the incredible reality of American life in the middle of 20th century. To describe and make credible and not to understand. Heller's success is in his discovery that any effort to understand the incredible is bound to frustrate the attempt to describe it for what it really is. The way to portray insanity in other words, is to show what insanity looks like, not to explain how it came about.
Freedom has many overlapping meanings. It is used mainly in two senses: the negative and the positive. In the negative sense it is the absence of constraint, which means one is not forced to do something against one's will. In the positive sense it means ability. One is free to do those things one can if he chooses to do them. In either of these two senses none is completely free. The degree of freedom varies from person to person and from place to place.

In certain situations freedom amounts to licence manifesting man's animal instincts. Paradoxically the idea of freedom includes the idea of restraint. Milton champions individual freedom in *Paradise Lost*. Satan, argued to embody Milton's sense of liberty, says "The Mind is its own place, and in itself Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven." Like John Milton, Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill are in favour of individual freedom rather than of socio-political organisations.

J.S. Mill's theory of individual freedom in his treatise *On Liberty* is summarised by George H. Sabine and Thomas L. Thorson as follows:

Mill is affirming that freedom of Judgement, the right to be convinced rather than coerced, is an inherent quality
of a morally mature personality and that a liberal society is one which both acknowledges that right and shapes its institutions in such a way that the right is realised.  

Moral issues are involved in the principle of freedom. Freedom is something positive or constructive and it is also one's capacity or power of doing something that is linked with the concept of will. The exercise of free will is conditioned by something that is worth doing, which raises the question of a thing's being good or bad. If one does anything by exercising his free-will, ultimately he is responsible for the consequences of his action. Leonard E. Read aptly remarks: "Freedom and self-responsibility are interchangeable terms. Self-responsibility is impossible unless one be free and one cannot be free if not self-responsible." In this sense freedom is not absolute, but a relative concept reconciling the claims of both the individual and the society to which he belongs.

Sometimes this reconciliation is not possible. While exercising freedom the individual may be overpowered by the environment with which he comes into conflict, which forces him to conform to the social needs, thereby losing his freedom. But his effort becomes a metaphysical quest for freedom if
he tries to transcend social norms to find the meaning and significance of his self.

The protagonist in *Catch-22* is a leading bombardier Yossarian who operates on the Mediterranean island of Pianosa. All the characters belong to the 256th Squadron of the American Air Force. Every action of these characters springs from their fight against the Germans. Yossarian tries to fly the required number of missions in order to be released from the military Junta. Colonel Cathcart the Commanding officer of the Squadron arbitrarily raises the number of missions from time to time since he wants his picture printed in the "Saturday Evening Post" like that of the colonel of an American bomber group in England who had the habit of conducting prayers before each mission. Colonel Cathcart subordinates the interests of others to the realisation of his egoistic dream of becoming a general and to his being immortalised in news media. "Catch-22" is a sinister code which determines every official move in the squadron and eliminates every chance of individual freedom. In such a situation Yossarian has two options: either to conform to the pattern implied by "catch-22" or register his protest. Yossarian examines his relationship with "war" and questions
the motives of his superior officers as he discovers his torturers are none other than his fellow Americans. After undergoing a lot of mental and physical suffering, Yossarian decides to desert the squadron.

In *Catch-22*, Heller deals with the idea of metaphysical freedom, Yossarian is caught in the absurdity of the military which he tries to escape. Before he makes this resolution he demands his freedom politically on the grounds of the service he has rendered in the military. He demands freedom as a matter of right, since he has completed flying the required number of missions. In his struggle for metaphysical freedom he also tries to achieve social freedom. Whenever he thinks of the possibility of freedom, he dreams of Sweden, where people are nice, intelligent and free. He hopes for such a society where there is no restriction whatsoever. In the course of the novel's action Yossarian emerges as the figure of "everyman" and his struggle for freedom becomes man's quest for freedom. At last, when he deserts the squadron, he transcends the absurdity that is human existence.

Yossarian, in *Catch-22*, initially tries to adjust himself with the codes of the military organisation. As he begins to realise his situation, he protests against the system. However his protest is not sudden by disobeying the
authorities. Such a protest would have made him liable for courtmartial. His protest, initially, is in the form of various simple tricks. At the end he protests vehemently by refusing to perform his duties.

First he adapts the trick of illness, which enables him to be admitted to hospital. The complaint, with which every time he goes to the hospital is liver disorder. In the hospital he is assigned the job of censoring letters which gradually gets on his nerves. He does this monotonous job to keep himself away from war. Unfortunately for him, he cannot be in the hospital for long. Still he returns to it. When it is not possible for him to be hospitalised, he takes leave and visits brothels in Rome. But he has to report for duty as soon as the leave is over.

Since admitting in the hospital and visiting brothels are not a permanent solution, he decides to fly the missions fixed by colonel Cathcart. Every time on returning from the hospital he is disappointed since the colonel raises the number of missions. Yossarian is so much disgusted with the increase in missions that he flies six missions in six days. Eventually, Yossarian realises that he has been trapped in the complex military system from which official escape is impossible.
The twenty seventh Air Force which regulates the 256th squadron wants only forty missions from every bomber-dier. Yossarian flies fifty one and approaches Major Major for relief. Major Major "had been made Squadron Commander but had no idea what he was supposed to do as squadron commander."

Therefore Major Major is helpless to help Yossarian. And Yossarian is no longer prepared to compromise with Squadron regulations. Major Major tries to console Yossarian by saying the colonel may not further raise the missions. Yossarian is not consoled and he gets an insight into colonel Cathcart's nature. He realises the colonel will not grant him freedom. So he decides to struggle for it.

Major Major suggests Yossarian to do some "milk runs" Yossarian protests. "I don't want to fly milk runs. I don't want to be in the war any more." "Would you like to see your country lose?" Major Major asked. "We don't lose. We've got more men, more money and more material. There are ten million men in uniform who could replace me. Some people are getting killed and a lot more are making money and having fun."(p.115) Yossarian's knowledge of the inhuman destruction of human lives and the business ethics of the war mongers justifies his struggle for freedom.
Next Yossarian seeks the help of Doc Daneeka who is his friend that would do just about nothing in his power to help him. The doctor says there is a provision in "Catch-22" to ground any one who is crazy. Yossarian claims to be taken off his duty by deliberately putting on craziness. Then he is made aware of the immense complexity of the clause of "Catch-22". When the question of Orr's craziness arises:

There was only one catch and that was Catch-22, which specified that a concern for one's own safety in the face of dangers that were real and immediate was the process of a rational mind. Orr was crazy and could be grounded. All he had to do was ask, and could be grounded. All he had to do was ask; and as soon as he did, he would no longer be crazy and would have to fly more missions. Orr would be crazy to fly more missions and sane if he didn't, but if he was sane he had to fly them. If he flew them he was crazy and didn't have to; but if he didn't want to he was sane and had to" (p.54).

Doc Daneeka's interpretation that anyone who wants to get out of combat duty is not really crazy, makes Yossarian hope. Yossarian realises there is no escape for him, but he does not give up hope.
Col. Cathcart has an ambition to see his picture in *The Saturday Evening Post* like that of a colonel of an American bomber group in England as conducting prayers before missions. The colonel gives it up being told by the chaplain that both the officers and the enlisted men pray to the same God and that He is likely to listen to all. Colonel then hits upon the idea of doing the unusual, forcing his bombers to fly more dangerous missions, to draw the attention of the press. Yossarian sees through this. He refuses to fly these missions as he knows that would only help Colonel Cathcart making his photograph appear in the prestigious paper.

Yossarian does not fly these missions, nor does he escape the meshes of "catch-22. Captains Pilchard and Wren assign him the duty of going on a mission to Bologna. All his tricks to avoid this mission fail. He steals into the tent and alters the bombing line to deceive the officers into believing that Bologna has already been captured. He puts laundry soap in food to make the enlisted men sick which can delay the mission. When he is forced to go on mission, he tears loose the intercom wires, thereby disconnects the communication between the gunner and the pilot. He prevents the air craft from safe landing. Then he orders his pilot,
Kid Sampson, to turn back on the plea that there may be an air crash if they fly ahead. Emulating the example of the soldier who sees "everything twice" he baffles the doctors and gets his discharge from the hospital delayed. He also changes his bed to conceal his identity and stay longer in the hospital. "In the face of the threats to his existence, Yossarian has only one overriding principle to stay alive - and to that end, as Vance Ramsey says, he resorts to all those tricks. All of Yossarian's tricks fail because Captains Piltchard and Wren reassign to him the duty of flying to Bologna with McWatt as his pilot.

Yossarian's struggle can have meaning only when he escapes the world of "Catch-22" which is absurd. The absurd logic of "Catch-22" characterises life on Pianosa. The absurdity is acutely felt by Yossarian when he witnesses the death of his friends and other soldiers. According to "Catch-22" if the official records show a man is dead, though he is alive, he is granted for dead in the squadron. Doc Daneeka's name has been included in the register along with McWatt's who goes on a suicidal flight after killing Kid Sampson. Later on doctor moves about the squadron, but he is officially declared dead. He feels helpless, since everybody takes him
for dead. Gus and Was the enlisted men in the medical tent, on that score, refuse to take his temperature and paint his tonsils with gentian violet. "The deadman in Yossarian's tent" Mudd is not officially recognised dead, since he has not reported before going on the mission in which he is killed.

"The soldier in white" is plastered from head to foot, in the hospital. He is a mere shape devoid of spirit. Nurses Cramer and Dukett take extreme care of him dusting the cast and polishing the metal pipes through which the same fluid is poured and repoured. Their reverential attention is devotion to the absence of spirit. It aptly symbolises hospital's attitude toward the living patients. As soon as Dunbar discovers there is no soldier in the cast, the authorities "disappear" him from the hospital for ever. Cleveinger dies because of his idealistic nature and extreme devotion to duty.

Mately, the most intimate friend of Yossarian dies on the La Spesia mission. His death shocks Yossarian, who immediately protests refusing to fly missions. Snowden, who goes with Yossarian on the mission to Avingnon, dies obsessing the latter with death. Noticing Snowden's wound Yossarian opens the First Aid Kit for morphine to make the former sleep. He finds there a chit signed by Milo Minder-binder, "What is good
for M & M Enterprises is good for the country. Milo Minderbinder" (p. 460). Thus Yossarian discovers the morphine syrettes have been stolen by Milo, the officer-in-charge of the mess. Snowden spills his guts, when Yossarian opens his flak suit which denotes, "spirit gone, man is matter." Peyton Glass aptly remarks, "If Snowden represents man as flesh, M & M Enterprises regards man literally as a commodity, to be traded, bargained for, and eventually disposed of in the market of war."

Snowden's death imparts knowledge to Yossarian that "Man matters," even if man is nothing but matter. So he wants to save his life rather than laying it down for the good of M & M Enterprises.

Milo manipulates "catch-22" to make profit. He signs a contract with Germans and accordingly bombards and destroys his own squadron. When asked to give reasons he shows in the accounts tremendous profit for syndicate he has made by his action. In the syndicate every one has a share. He is prepared even to reimburse orally the lives and the property destroyed in his raid. Milo's story built around "the syndicate," "the share," "the profit," and "the reimbursement" keeps the mouths of men in the 256th squadron shut despite all the deaths and destruction caused by him. Milo's raid intensifies
Yossarian's desire to remain alive.

Witnessing the deaths of his friends Yossarian thinks of following their footsteps who have laid down their lives in the name of patriotism. But he cannot conform to the pattern of catch-22, as he thinks: Catch-22 did not exist, he was positive of that, but it made no difference what did matter was that everyone thought it existed, and that was much worse, for there was no object or text to ridicule or refute, to accuse, criticise, attack, amend, hate, revile, spit at, rip to shreds, trample upon or burn up (p.432).

Robert Brustein sums up the functions of the clause "catch-22" as follows: "Catch-22 is the unwritten loophole in every written law which empowers the authorities to revoke your rights whenever it suits their cruel whims; it is, in short, the principle of absolute evil in a malevolent mechanical, and incompetent world."

When Yossarian is convinced of the existence of the reality of evil, he tries to protest against the military organisation by the very absurdities that characterise catch-22. He begins his protest when General Scheisskopf makes it compulsory for everybody to join the regular parades. He marches backward
by resting the gun on his hip. When he reads "Snowden's secret" in the spilled guts that "man is matter," he discards the uniform and moves about naked. For going over Ferrara twice, Colonels Korn and Cathcart decide to give him a medal. Yossarian embarrasses the colonels by receiving the medal from General Dreedle stark naked.

Yossarian's struggle for freedom is evident from the fact that he finishes seventy one missions and refuses to fly any more, being resolute to fight against the tyranny of Colonels Cathcart and Korn. The Colonels feel highly insecure as Yossarian refuses to do his duty. They are afraid others may take the cue for freedom from Yossarian. They are helpless, because they cannot punish him soon after honouring him with a medal. If they punish him it shall go on record as administrative failure. So they offer him a "deal." According to it he can return to the States as a hero, if he speaks there nice things about them. Yossarian is now in a fix: If he does not accept the deal he will be court-martialled. If he does not accept the deal, Darby says, it will be the patriotic duty of the colonels to find him guilty, even if he is innocent.

Yossarian is not concerned with the good or bad of his actions but with his own survival and by implication with that of others. He accepts the "odious deal."
Hately's whore holds Yossarian responsible for Nately's death. She attacks him with a knife when she knows about the deal. Yossarian's subsequent conversation with Danby reveals the former being conscious of his moral responsibility.

"Goddammit, Danby! I've got friends who were killed in this war. I can't make a deal now. Getting stabbed by that bitch was the best thing that ever happened to me" (p.471). By turning down the Colonel's offer, he wants to flee from the squadron. Meanwhile the report of Orr's successful escape to Sweden, comes as an "objective Correlative" to Yossarian's desire to escape the military establishment. But before going to Sweden he must rescue Nately's whore's kid sister in Rome, where she is victimised like others by "catch-22." He has to rescue the girl to make up for his guilt in Nately's death and the rescue is symbolic of his concern for the protection and survival of humanity at large.

When Yossarian deserts the squadron to go to Sweden he has achieved political freedom. He has also achieved social freedom from the mad world of the men of the 256th squadron. This moral sense prompts him to desert the war that is fought for the benefit of a few war crazy and business minded people.
like Colonel Cathcart, Colonel Korn and Milo Minderbinder. Yossarian recognises his responsibility by rejecting his obligations to the Colonels.

The absurdity of the situation from which Yossarian is released is the same as suggested by Albert Camus's concept of the absurd.

"Man stands face to face with the irrational. He feels within him his longing for happiness and for reason. The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world."

Yossarian rejects "catch-22" and "the unreasonable silence" of the squadron authorities and the M & M Enterprises. It is an existential choice which enables him to transcend his own absurd situation and also the absurdity that characterises the existence of every man. Thus it is metaphysical freedom.

Heller is concerned with the idea of man's imprisonment in self and social institutions. Systems like family, military, and society operate as images of bondage. His Yossarians attempt to assert their selves by continually struggling against these systems. In dramatising the idea of freedom, Heller shows that human freedom and dignity can be preserved even in the worst situations provided the individual accepts his self responsibility.
REFERENCES


