Joseph Heller Essay, Research Paper

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Both ?Catch 22? and ?Closing Time?, by Joseph Heller, are off the wall, unbelievably outrageous and bitingly funny. But while they posses easy to understand humor on the surface, it is impossible not to acknowledge the underlying themes of social justice that Heller is trying to reveal, both though his characters and through his use of satire. A caparison of ?Catch 22? and ?Closing Time? lends an abundance of interesting ideas and fascinating insights into our own and societies’ perspective?s on various topics.

Heller challenges societies? authoritative figures and social institutions by satirizing war, capitalism and democracy.

Catch-22 is about the men of an imaginary B-25 squadron stationed on an imaginary island, near Elba, in the northern Mediterranean during 1944 and 1945. It contains all the elements of a great war novel; the heroics, the courage, the horror of sudden death, the tediousness of eternal waiting between impossibly dangerous missions. What Catch 22 is really about, however, is the struggle of a lone, sane man, Yossarian, in an insane society. Yossarian is Heller?s primary source of satire, making him so wonderfully simple that it makes the reader take a second look at our own views. For example, it is through Yossarian that we are first introduced to the idea of a ?Catch 22?;

?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 as soon as he did, he would no longer be crazy and would have to fly more missions…Yossarian was moved very deeply by the absolute simplicity of this clause of Catch-22 and let out a respectful whistle.?

(Catch 22, pg. 55)

This idea, of putting in a clause that voids the very agreement in which it is contained, runs throughout both novels and shows the absurdity of 1) the makers of the law and 2) the abiders of the agreement. This particular Catch 22 effectively traps the soldiers in combat.

Yossarian wants desperately to get out of the air force because he is convinced that everyone is trying to kill him. Here he is talking to a friend of his about his fear;

?Who?s they?? He wanted to know. ?Who, specifically, do you think is trying to murder you??

?Every one of them,? Yossarian told him.

?Every one of whom??

?Every one of whom do you think??

?I haven?t any idea.?

?Then how do you know they aren?t?”

(Catch 22, pg 26)

This is the kind of logic that many characters in both novels continuously use, and it always makes perfect sense. Not only are the Germans trying to kill Yossarian, but his own country is attempting to as well. His country (America) is trying to kill him by sending him into combat that just may kill him. It stands to reason that if they did not want to kill him, they would not send him into battle.

As silly as it seems, however, Yossarian?s point of view on the matter of his country trying to kill him is not an idea simply dreamt up by his imagination. One of Yossarian superiors, Colonel Cathcart, keeps on raising the number of missions that the men must fly. It started off at a reasonable 40 missions per person, but by the end of the novel, it had risen all the way up to 65 missions each. Cathcart does this because he is looking to distinguish himself from all the other Colonels and this is the only way he knows how. This, however, was not a particularly good way to distinguish himself from the others;

?…it required just some sort of dramatic gesture like making his group fly more combat missions than any other bomber group to spotlight his unique qualities of leadership. Certainly none of the Generals seemed to object to what he was doing, although as far as he could detect they weren?t particularly impressed either, which made him suspect that perhaps 60 combat missions were not nearly enough and that he ought to increase the number at once to seventy, eighty, a hundred, or even two hundred, three hundred, or six thousand!?

(Catch 22, pg. 224)

Colonel Cathcart is not the lone, insane man in the air force. This type of leadership is common among all the officers. All the Officers, Generals and Colonels are all vying to get someone to notice them and to be promoted. This type of ridiculous behavior is rampant throughout the novel and clearly exemplifies Heller?s views on the military hierarchy.

Along with the military hierarchy, another target that Heller attacks in both these novels is capitalism. Just as Heller uses Yossarian to challenge the military institution, to attack our capitalist system, he employs Milo, a mess officer in Yossarian?s squadron. Milo is truly a fascinating character to examine. He gets his jump into the world of business by buying eggs from Sicily and touting them as Maltese eggs. He then sells them to the each squadron on the condition that he is lent a plane and a pilot to import them. He eventually expands his business so greatly that he is flying all over Europe, the Mediterranean, and Africa. He in fact has such unlimited airspace, over both friendly and enemy ground, that both the German and American armies enlist him. The Germans want him to protect a critical bridge, and the Americans want him to destroy that same bridge. He, being the smart money-maker he is, takes on both jobs, planning out the American bombing run, and then flying over to Germany and coordinating the air-defense system.

?You know, a thousand dollars ain?t such a bad price for a medium bomber and crew. If I can persuade the Germans to pay me a thousand dollars for every plane they shoot down, why shouldn?t I take it??

(Catch 22, pg. 266)

Needless to say, Milo made a lot of money on that venture, both from the Americans and the Germans. What Heller is trying to show here is that all capitalist are without morals and will do anything to make a buck.

This wasn?t the worst thing that Milo has done, however bad as it may seem. He landed another contract with the Germans, this time to bomb his own base! So after a delicious meal provided by Milo, the bomber crews took off and then turned around and started unloading their bombs on their own base. America understandably was disgraced by this and started denouncing him.

?Decent people everywhere were affronted, and Milo was all washed up until he opened his books to the public and disclosed the tremendous profit he had made. He could reimburse the government for all the people and property he had destroyed…Everybody, of course, owned a share. And the sweetest part of the whole deal was that there really was no need to reimburse the government at all.

?In a democracy, the government is the people,? Milo explained. ?We?re people, aren?t we? So we might just as well keep the money and eliminate the middleman.??

(Catch 22, pg. 269)

What Milo mean?s is that he?ll keep the money and he won?t pay the government back. Milo developed a organization called the ?syndicate?, which everyone in the world was in. He claimed that, because everyone was in it, what was good for the syndicate was good for everyone. In actual fact, there was no ?syndicate? and all the money that the ?syndicate? collected went straight to Milo. This is just another example of Heller trying to present his view of the government, the private sector, and the general public.

Because ?Closing Time? is a sequel to ?Catch 22?, many of the main characters are present in both novels. However, the focus of the story has changed radically. Instead of focusing on the turmoil and craziness expected in war, this story, taking place in New York, focuses more on the social atrocities, and moral decay taking place within our own cities. The book is filled with dark images, poor, homeless people, and is contrasted with the riches of the multi-national corporations and the government.

Heller likes to aim his satire on the Government. In this book he introduces both the president and vice-president of the United States. He makes them out to be bumbling idiots who have no respect for their office or their country and who no one else has any respect for. In fact, they both have so little respect for their country that they have a big games room in the White House which has video games and toy trains. The president gets so involved in this room that when Milo, now a multi-billionaire, gives a wedding for his son, a wedding so big and so grand that the guest list contains 3500 names and has 6 bands set up on 6 different stages, the president forgets all about the wedding and keeps on playing his games in his games room.

The Vice-president is no better then the President in terms of maturity. When one of the characters, Noodles Cook, went into his office to be interviewed for an advisory job, he encountered an absolute fool, who for some reason turned the whole interview around and became the interviewee. Noodles Cook unaware, became the interviewer, as if he was interviewing the vice-president to see if he was good enough to work for. During the interview, the vice-president actually asked Noodles to stop being so formal and just to call him ?prick?!!

??…And please don?t call me sir, Noodles. You?re so much older than I am. Won?t you call me prick??

?No, sir, I won?t call you prick?

?Everyone else does. You have a right to. I have taken an oath to support that constitutional right.?

?Listen you prick-??

As you can see, Noodles is rather an ordinary man, who was being driven mad by the vice-president, as any normal, clear think man would be. This is just another example of Heller making his point that most authoritative figures are stupid and incompetent.

An even more unbelievable scene happens at the end of the novel, where the president, busy playing one of his video games, comes upon a red button. Happily occupied by his game, he was dumbfounded by this new toy, and eagerly pressed it, setting off alarms, and flashing lights:

??It works,? said the president, with a grin. ?You see? Just like the game here.?…

?You launched all our missiles!?

?You sent out our planes!?

?I did? Where??

?Everywhere! With that red button you kept pressing.??

As unbelievable as it sounds, it was true; the President had launched America?s nuclear missiles and bombers. By accident. With no clue what he was doing. Heller, right to the end of the novel, just keeps unveiling outrageous plot-twists. He drives this particular point home, about the incompetently of our government, extremely powerfully.

In fact, by using this satirical, comedic style of writing, Heller manages to drive home all of his points very well. He uses three of the biggest social areas to show his distaste for authoritative figures; War, Capitalist and Government. And he makes his points in such a fascinating way that it makes both books very, very interesting.