

THE THEME OF DEATH AND HOPE IN JOSEPH HELLER'S NOVEL CATCH 22 – A PSYCHOLOGICAL OVERVIEW

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ABSTRACT: *Joseph Heller (May 1, 1923 – December 12, 1999) was an [American satirical](#) novelist, [short story](#) writer and playwright. He wrote the influential novel [Catch-22](#) about American servicemen during [World War II](#). The title of this work entered the English lexicon to refer to absurd, no-win choices, particularly in situations in which the desired outcome of the choice is impossibility, and regardless of choice, the same negative outcome is a certainty. Heller is widely regarded as one of the best post-World War II satirists. Heller's principle emphasis is on the internal struggle with conflicting values and the characters' evolution.*

There are many ways for a man to die, but there is no way to bring him back after he has entered the world of dead. Catch-22 is a novel satirizing war, and because of this, it inevitably has a strong underlying theme of death. But unlike many war novels, Catch-22 doesn't use violent depictions of fighting or bloody death scenes to denounce the evils of war; it utilizes humor and irony to make an arguably more effective point. And even more importantly, Catch-22 is ultimately a novel about hope, not death.

This paper discusses and explains in detail both the themes hope and death prevalent in the novel with a psychological overview taking into consideration Viktor. K. Frankl's "Logotherapy", and Sigmund Freud's "Pleasure principle".

Joseph Heller was an American novelist and dramatist who was best remembered as a satirist who characterized through his satire the military-industrial complex and those organized institutions which seem to manipulate people's lives in the name of reason or morality. His famous novel underscored with dark humor "Catch-22," influenced, among others, Robert Altman's comedy "MASH" and the subsequent long-running TV series set in the Korean War. After publishing this book, the phrase "Catch-22" was entered in the dictionary as an expression then signifies a no-win situation, particularly one created by a law, regulation or circumstance.

Catch-22 is a satirical, historical novel by the American author Joseph Heller, first published in 1961. The novel, set during the later stages of World War II from 1944 onwards, is frequently cited as one of the great literary works of the twentieth century. Catch 22 concerns a

World War II bombardier named Yossarian who believes his foolish, ambitious, mean-spirited commanding officers are more dangerous than the enemy. In order to avoid flying more missions, Yossarian retreats to a hospital with a mysterious liver complaint, sabotages his plane, and tries to get himself declared insane. Heller is widely regarded as one of the best post-World War II satirists. Heller's principle emphasis is on the internal struggle with conflicting values and the characters' evolution. **Catch-22** is a general critique of bureaucratic operation and reasoning. Resulting from its specific use in the book, the phrase "Catch-22" is common idiomatic usage meaning "a no-win situation" or "a double bind" of any type. Within the book, "Catch-22" is a military rule, the self-contradictory circular logic that, for example, prevents anyone from avoiding combat missions.

There are many ways for a man to die, but there is no way to bring him back after he has entered the world of dead. Catch-22 is a novel satirizing war, and because of this, it inevitably has a strong underlying theme of death. But unlike many war novels, Catch-22 doesn't use violent depictions of fighting or bloody death scenes to denounce the evils of war; it utilizes humor and irony to make an arguably more effective point. And even more importantly, Catch-22 is ultimately a novel about hope, not death. Although the inevitability of death is still a prominent motif, it ultimately leads the main character, Yossarian, to become conscious that the desire to live is imperative and also he can't simply live; he must live free of hypocrisy and oppression.

Life is uncertain and death is certain and inevitable. A man born on earth must also leave the same in some point of time. The most significant of death is how one attains the end of life (the nature of death and the reason for one's death). , Yossarian, the protagonist of the novel Catch 22 is always visualizing and contemplating his own death and is absolutely flabbergasted by the total number of ways in which it is possible for a human being to die. The specter of death haunts Yossarian constantly, in forms ranging from the dead man in his tent to his memories of Snowden.

The anxiety of death is the outcome of mere hopelessness of the situation. The hopelessness caused due to Catch 22. "Catch-22" is a military rule, the self-contradictory circular logic. phrase "Catch-22" is common idiomatic usage meaning "a no-win situation" or "a double bind" of any type.

'Sure there's a catch,' Doc Daneeka replied. 'Catch-22. Anyone who wants to get out of combat duty isn't really crazy.' There was only one catch and that was Catch-22.....

(Heller, Joseph pg. 52)

'Catch-22?' Yossarian was stunned. 'What the hell has Catch-22 got to do with it?'

'Catch-22,' Doc Daneeka answered patiently, when Hungry Joe had flown Yossarian back to Pianosa, 'says you've always got to do what your commanding officer tells you to.'

'But Twenty-seventh Air Force says I can go home with forty missions.'
'But they don't say you have to go home. And regulations do say you

*have to obey every order. That's the catch.
(Heller, Joseph pg.67)*

Yossarian being emotionally constrained and congested by the tyranny of catch 22 rule, slipped into a state of 'Hopelessness' and eventually into a condition called 'anticipatory anxiety' as mentioned by Viktor.E.Frankl.

Anticipatory anxiety. It is characteristic of this fear that it produces precisely that of which the patient is afraid. An individual, for example, who is afraid of blushing when he enters a large room and faces many people will actually be more prone to blush under these circumstances. In this context, one might amend the saying "The wish is father to the thought" to "The fear is mother of the event."

(Viktor.E.Frankl, .125)

Such anticipatory anxiety leads to any kind of fear. Yossarian here in the novel experiences the fear of death – which made him constantly anticipate death which hasn't reached the maturation point in the life of Yossarian. This anticipation is prevalent in the following statement made by the Yossarian :

*'They're trying to kill me,' Yossarian told him calmly.
'No one's trying to kill you,' Clevinger cried.
'Then why are they shooting at me?' Yossarian asked.*

'Whoever's trying to poison me,' Yossarian told him. 'Nobody's trying to poison you.'

'They poisoned my food twice, didn't they? Didn't they put poison in my food during Ferrara and during the Great Big Siege of Bologna?'

*'They put poison in everybody's food,' Clevinger explained.
'And what difference does that make?'*

'And it wasn't even poison!' Clevinger cried heatedly, growing more emphatic as he grew more confused.

As far back as Yossarian could recall, he explained to Clevinger with a patient smile, somebody was always hatching a plot to kill him. There were people who cared for him and people who didn't, and those who didn't hated him and were out to get him.

(Heller, Joseph pg.19,22)

The above quoted lines clearly bring out the state in which Yossarian finds himself. He wants to live and not to make his life prey to anybody's mischievous want. So Heller in his novel to portray how people are scared of the ills and the outcome of the war, he has successfully done it by creating a kind of reverberation in the mind of the protagonist towards the certainty of death likely

to be caused unmindfully by the voluntary or involuntary forces. The protagonist is unable to trust any of his acquaintances because he always believes that somebody was hatching a plot to kill him.

Nately's whore plays a crucial role in conveying the message about life and death in *Catch 22*, even she doesn't become an important character until the novel nears its climax. Although Yossarian is only the messenger bearing the bad news of Nately's death, Nately's whore holds him responsible and follows him back to Pianoso in an attempt to murder him. Yossarian somehow manages repeatedly to escape from her as long as he continues to disobey the illegal and immoral rules of the military. When he agrees to meet with Colonel Cathcart and Colonel Korn, she catches him and seriously injures him. This may imply that by submitting to the oppression of the bureaucratic military system, Yossarian is only headed towards death and disaster. And in the midst of Yossarian's final revelation and his decision to desert the military, Nately's whore was hiding behind the door, ready to stab him. But

"...the knife came down, missing him by inches, and he took off".

(Heller, Joseph pg.463)

Nately's whore was never able to kill because Yossarian doesn't want to lay down his life for a meaningless and hypocritical cause.

"Logotherapy sees in responsibility the very essence of human existence.

(Viktor.E.Frankl, Pg. 114)

The 'responsibility' in any man makes him conscious about life and death and makes him aware of the fact that life has got a meaning in all circumstances and that meaning should only be identified, addressed and accepted and must not be simply shattered by sacrificing life for any insignificance. This kind of responsibility enabled Yossarian to survive the most critical point of time in his life.

Yossarian's most startling glimpse into terrors of war and death reaches its peak when he spends a night alone on the streets of Rome. He sees homeless children; he witnesses men beating children and dogs, a rape and a convulsing soldier; he walks over a littered street with broken human teeth. Such a kind of a devastating scenario is seriously portrayed in order to bring out the cruelty and inhumanity of the world which is the outcome of death of true spirit of humanism. Cruelty and inhumanity becomes common when the God-given conscience is deliberately murdered. The scene comes to climax when Yossarian returns to his apartment and discovers that Aarfy has raped an innocent maid and then has thrown her out his window. Here comes in Sigmund Freud's 'Pleasure Principle'.

"In Freudian psychology, the pleasure principle is the psychoanalytic concept describing people seeking pleasure and avoiding suffering (pain) in order to satisfy their biological and psychological needs. Specifically, pleasure principle is a driven force of id".
(Wikipedia)

The soldiers in order to ease or avoid suffering or pain or to rescue themselves from the mental blow created due to the bureaucratic pressure, they indulge in seeking solace through satisfying their biological and psychological needs. They seek pleasure by playing havoc on moral uprightness. The subject (women) to whom due respect and honour has to attributed is being treated as object signifies death in morality. A maid raped by Aarfy and was thrown out of the window, shows how mean men turn to be when once their brutal instincts are satisfied.

Yossarian is arrested for being in Rome without a pass and Aarfy is given apology for the disturbance, his hideous crime going unpunished. Yossarian begins to really recognize the true face of the military and the meaning of Catch 22; when he goes to a brothel and the old woman tells him that the girls have all been kicked out of their home by soldiers.

She explains to him that,

“Catch-22 says they have right to do anything we can't stop them from doing”.

(Heller, Joseph Pg.417)

The horrors that the military generates will never stop and Yossarian begins to become conscious that he cannot fight and die for a system that causes so much meaningless death.

Yossarian's transition from rebelliousness to hope is Snowden's death. It functions as the climax of the novel. After Yossarian notices the disgusting, massive hole in Snowden's ribs and watches helplessly as Snowden dies on the floor of the plane, he comprehends that Snowden's death exposed a secret:

“It was easy to read the message in his entrails. Man was matter, that was Snowden's secret. Drop him out 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”.

(Heller, Joseph Pg.450)

The final atrocity reveals to Yossarian that man is only made of matter, but the aspiration to live is the most important inclination a man can have.

According to Frankl's Logotherapy,

“We can discover this meaning in life in three different ways:

- (1) by creating a work or doing a deed;*
- (2) by experiencing something or encountering someone; and*
- (3) by the attitude we take toward unavoidable suffering”*

(Viktor.E.Frankl, Pg.115)

If a man discovers meaning in his existence then automatically he would desire to live in any unfavourable situations or condition. Yossarian wants to live but he feels strongly that he cannot

live a life of hypocrisy or oppression under the military; and this is what finally pushes him to desert. The awareness that Orr finally paddled all the way to Sweden gives him hope. Even that Orr finally paddled all the way to Sweden gives him hope. Even though he knows it will be difficult, but there is no other options left.

Although *Catch 22* is a novel about War, it is not only about death. The message it ultimately conveys is one of hope. *Catch-22* may allow the military to do whatever the people can't stop it from doing, but it can't destroy hope. So this paper is a part of the research work done and it is open for further research.

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