

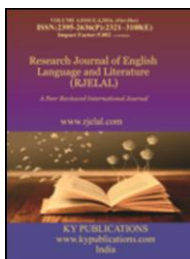


IMPRESSIONS OF IMMORALITY IN JOSEPH HELLER'S *CATCH 22* AND *SOMETHING HAPPENED*

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ABSTRACT



Immorality means not moral and it connotes evil or licentious behavior. Heller not only demonstrates the instances of immoral behaviour in *Catch 22*, even his subsequent novel, *Something Happened*, is also an example of how Americans who have become disillusioned with the reality of American life resort to depraved dealings to march ahead in their lives. In this research article, Heller uses the character of the American male who lives in modern society, who remains unhappy, dissatisfied, and is continually skeptical despite the comfortable life that he leads, living the "American dream." Characters present in these novels like Bob Slocum, Milo Minderbinder, chaplain, Yossarian, Kagle, Colonel Cathcart etc are people who lose their identity and consequently their moral values. Whereas characters like Colonel Cathcart, Cargill, Scheisskopf, Korn, General Peckem, Captain Black and Milo Minder-binder shows the inhumanity, tyranny and oppression of military bureaucracy. The military bureaucracy exploits war for personal advantages. Many characters in *Catch-22* undergo moral crises, wherein they must decide between self-interest (a concern for their own safety and wellbeing) or altruism (a concern for the wellbeing of others). Even the chaplain, initially a morally-upright and religious man, flirts with immorality by pretending to have a fake disease and asking to spend time in the hospital. Reason is, as Heller's characters are forced to live a life that leads to disillusionment and hopelessness about the meaningfulness of life, they cultivate an attitude of selfishness, insensitivity, and indifference to the suffering and plight of other people which ultimately takes toll on their moral leanings.

Keywords---Immorality, American Dream, self-interest, selfishness

Immorality is wrong or bad moral behaviour. It is living in a way that goes against the way society says life should be lived. Immorality is a prominent theme that Joseph Heller rakes up in his famous works *Catch 22* and *Something Happened*. Joseph Heller was born May 1, 1923 in Brooklyn, New York. He flew 60 combat missions as a bombardier in World War II before finishing his studies at Columbia and Oxford and working as an advertising copywriter. His satirical novel *Catch-22* (1961) and

Something Happened (1974) were one of the most significant works of postwar protest literature with obvious moral undertones and expectedly received huge critical and popular success.

Immorality in *Catch-22*--- Many characters in *Catch-22* undergo moral crises, wherein they must decide between self-interest (a concern for their own safety and wellbeing) or altruism (a concern for the wellbeing of others).

Heller discusses the immorality that reveals the worst qualities of mankind: the greed for personal benefit from war. In *Catch 22* there are several situations where the main characters have a decision to make. They struggle with their own convictions regarding if they should choose to follow the orders they have been given, the chain of command, or their own belief. One example of this is the chaplain in *Catch 22* who is convinced that the soldiers have right on their side when they are upset that Colonel Cathcart always raises the bomb missions. The chaplain is so terrified of the colonel that when he tries to make a complaint on behalf of the soldiers he feels inferior to him and fails to present his arguments properly. The chaplain considers himself as a weak man who wants to fight for his beliefs, but he is more afraid of disobeying a superior officer. He hates himself for his cowardice and his lack of courage in the face of opposition from a superior personality. The chaplain, initially a morally-upright and religious man, flirts with immorality by pretending to have a fake disease and asking to spend time in the hospital. He realizes, however, that he ought instead to follow his orders and resist military authority without actively revolting against his superiors. Many commanding officers, however, decide to serve their own interests. Korn wants Cathcart's job, Cathcart wants to become a general, and Dreedle and Picked constantly fight for control of the other's office.

In *Catch 22* there are many immoral persons. One of them is Milo Minderbinder. Milo, who started out with the good intention that he would supply the fighting men in his division with fresh fruits, gradually loses his moral values, and becomes a highly immoral man, who does everything to maintain his power. Even if it will cost lives. He excuses himself by saying that it is not his fault that people die. The author portrays in Milo as a person who does not take personal responsibility for his actions, and always has an excuse. Milo finally crosses the line to immorality when he bombs his own division as part of a deal he has made with the Germans. Many men are wounded or killed in this incident, and Milo's syndicate suddenly seems like an evil force that has expanded beyond anyone's ability to control it. But Milo's reasons for bombing

the squadron are no more arbitrary than Colonel Cathcart's ambitiously volunteering to send his men to dangerous Bologna. In fact, one could argue that Milo's actions are more rational than Cathcart's, since Milo is guaranteed a profit, whereas Cathcart does not really have a chance of becoming a general. With his M&M syndicate he acquires planes from both sides in the war and strikes a deal with the enemy. The episode starts with Milo giving the enemy information about a planned air strike where Yossarian's "dead man in his tent" dies. When Yossarian confronts Milo, he answers: -I didn't kill him! Milo does not seem to understand what he has done. When Yossarian accuses him of doing business with the enemy who they are fighting a war against, Milo's excuse is that the enemy is also an equal member in the M&M syndicate. Milo concludes that all wars should be conducted by private enterprise — so long as the governments pick up the expenses. For Milo, the chief business of the American people should be business: his business. A contract is a contract — so long as it favors Milo. Milo likes to say that everyone owns a share of M & M Enterprises, but Milo seems to take most of the profits. Heller show how people, in this case in the form of Milo, can gratify their actions in a highly immoral way.

But it is Yossarian's personal development, his progression from self-interest to altruism that defines the moral arc of *Catch-22*. For Yossarian, immorality is the loosening of morals among the soldiers regarding death—there is no longer any distinction between noble death and meaningless death. In the beginning, Yossarian is content to forge the chaplain's signature, resist his bombing runs, and otherwise either devise stratagems to avoid responsibility or "go with the flow" in his time with the Army. But as his friends—including Clevinger, Orr, Nately, and Dunbar—either die or disappear, Yossarian's attitude changes. He loses Luciana and Nurse Duckett; he learns that Aarfy has committed rape and murder; he sees scenes of total destruction in Rome, and of great human suffering. He realizes, like Dunbar, that he can no longer bomb innocent civilians for no reason, just to please his superiors. Yossarian's personal development reaches a climax in his full recollection of Snowden's death.

In a bomb-run over Avignon, a man name Snowden is hit by flak in the back of the plane, and Yossarian, caring for a smaller leg wound, misses Snowden's large chest wound. When Snowden finally shows this second wound to Yossarian, his insides spill into the cabin of the plane, horrifying Yossarian and causing him to see, firsthand, the frailty of human life.

Later, Yossarian is called on to make a moral choice. He can either accept Cathcart and Korn's deal, leaving the Army and abandoning his fellow soldiers, or continue flying missions. Yossarian accepts neither alternative. He does not choose total altruism—he does not continue to work with his fellow soldiers—and he does not take a deal that would send him home immediately. Instead, Yossarian flees Pianosa, thus recognizing the horrors and immoralities of warfare while maintaining his independence, and refusing to compromise on his decision to stop flying bombing missions. Yossarian, ultimately, takes a moral stand against war, and what it does to the individuals who are forced to fight in it. In the end, Yossarian is en route to Sweden, fittingly a neutral country, where he will wait out the war's remainder.

Heller depicts the characters like Colonel Cathcart, Cargill, Scheisskopf, Korn, General Peckem, Captain Black and Milo Minder-binder shows the inhumanity, tyranny and oppression of military bureaucracy. The military bureaucracy exploits war for personal advantages. For Doc Daneeka, the medical officer, war is "God Send" to make money, for Captain Black war helps to give vent to his sadistic impulses, for Colonel Cathcart to make his picture appear in The Saturday Evening Post, for Colonel Korn and General Peckem to get ahead, for Scheisskopf to practise his innate parading, for Milo Minder-binder, the mess officer, to become rich. The military bureaucracy concerns itself more with the exploitation of the individual for trivial.

Immorality in Something Happened--- Immorality for Bob Slocum is his blatant commitment of adultery and a disregard for the feelings of his youngest son. Heller discusses the moral question of love for ones fellow man. Is it obligatory to love and care for your closest family? In Bob's case in Something Happened it has become a moral issue.

Heller portrays Bob as having an emotional distance from his own family. The fact that Bob, as the storyteller, gives us the names of the company people he works with but not his family makes us believe that he has ambivalent feelings for them. There is one exception, that is, his son Derek. Derek, who has suffered from brain damage from birth, gives Bob nothing but guilt and immoral thoughts concerning what to do with him.

My wife and I are not able to send him away yet. He is still too little. There is no hope. He is lots of trouble. He has let us down. He needs care constantly, and no one wants to give it to him ,not his father, his mother, his sister, or brother. None of us really even wants to play with him no more. Although we take turns in making believe...(130-131)

Another person that Bob has a troubled relationship with is his wife. He is constantly unfaithful. Not because of a lack of interest in her. No, just because, as a member of the management team of the company that he works for, he thinks he is entitled to have sex with all the women they employ. Heller portrays Bob as a man who has crossed the line of immorality and has stopped looking back. Bob's relationships with his fellow workers are based on indifference.

Captain Flume's alcoholic roommate. He curses the Americans for the wrongs they have committed against his people, and he enjoys scaring Captain Flume. He forges other men's signatures to procure more alcohol, and one drunk night, he steals Captain Black's car and drives it into a ditch. Milo's cynical, bitter assistant cook. He despises all the men as being philistines who are unable to recognize good food. To prove his point, he mashes tons of GI soap into the mashed potatoes, and although it gives them diarrhea, they clamor for more. Head of the Sales Department, Kagle, according to Slocum, has ability and experience that don't count anymore. He started at the bottom and had to work his way up, a self-made man who doesn't try to hide this fact at all. Like most men in the office, Kagle has a wife and two college-aged children, and he also hates going home. He sleeps

around with prostitutes and charges them to the company as legitimate business expenses.

Gauche is what he is, and gauche is what he knows he is (although he is so gauche he doesn't even know what the word gauche means, but Green does, and so do I) ...(103).

Slocum notes that Kagle's biggest mistake is thinking that what he does is more important than who he is.

Both *Something Happened* and *Catch 22* are filled with people that have started to lose their identity and consequently their moral values. However, both Bob and Yossarian break these expectations of following the moral path in life that everyone else takes. Instead, they choose to live the life of deviants: Bob chooses to be unfaithful and selfish, while Yossarian chooses to admit his cowardice about dying, and choosing death over the life of the military. Thus, the kind of immorality Heller chooses to discuss in both his novels is the universal kind, the immorality that almost everyone in human society recognizes and adheres to. When Yossarian in *Catch 22* has the choice between being sent home safe and sound and even getting a promotion or getting a court martial for desertion from duty, he has a problem deciding what to do. The only catch is that he must speak well of the army when he returns to the United States. At first, Yossarian agrees to the condition of the deal he makes with Colonel Cathcart and Colonel Corn, but he changes his mind after being injured. When he lies in the hospital after an operation, he realizes that taking the offer would be not so much a betrayal of his friends, who all have died in the war, but more a betrayal to himself. Yossarian realizes that if he decline the offer, he will probably die in this war eventually. Heller's protagonist in *Catch 22* has evidently chosen not to die for an idea or for other people. Rather, he chooses to die simply because he wants to. This sacrifice has nothing to do with Yossarian trying to be a hero. Instead, the simple answer is that he has found a new solution to his problem. He will run away to Sweden. Yossarian makes a selfish choice where it is more important to save his life than take part in the present war and defend his country. His approach to life is that

everyone lives for himself/herself alone, everyone has his/her own island, and should live on it alone. Heller gives his readers a glimpse of American society in modern times, which is primarily individualistic rather than collectivist. In addition to this feeling of selfishness, another major reason for his desire to live his life and prefer death based on personal choice is his belief that there is no other person who would die for him or for the ideology that he believes in. Yossarian also knows that other people subscribe to the same principal as well. In effect, every individual in *Catch 22* lives according to their own preference. Regard for other people or respect for an ideology no longer prevails; instead, practicality drives Yossarian's life. Heller is not attempting to apologize for the selfishness and disillusionment of his characters. The objective behind these depictions of Bob and Yossarian in *Something Happened* and *Catch 22*, respectively, is to reflect the real social situation Heller finds himself in as American society embarks toward yet another century of materialistic development and moral degeneration. There are no right or wrong principles, only relative rights and wrongs, which are dependent on us, Heller's readers. Thus, according to the universal moral standards of society, Heller's Bob and Yossarian have become part of the (prevalent) immoral society of the modern times.

This discussion of Heller's novels *Catch-22* and *Something Happened* demonstrate that modernity gave birth to the prevalence of concept of immorality as American society sought power, superiority, and survival. The devious behavior of the characters in Heller's two books, *Catch 22* and *Something Happened* make the reader, somewhat uneasy. Actually, Immorality in *Catch 22* and *Something Happened* lies in the eyes of the beholder. If we think that the individual is of more worth than the collective in society we will disagree with Joseph Heller. One of the themes throughout the novels is his exposure of the moral vacuum in American society. In *Catch 22* several officers are described as power-hungry men who seek more power and personal benefits, no matter what the cost will be. In their search for more power, they lose common moral values and the ability to feel compassion toward others. They are more afraid to

lose authority than actually do their duty and help their subordinates. In *Something Happened* Heller's criticism is directed towards the moral standard in the corporate world in America. He describes the executive burnout in the upper ranks, the incompetence, and the fear of being fired. This leads to the moral degeneration of the employees as they work in a high pressured atmosphere with office party flirtation and sexual company conventions. The pressure in the company climate drives them to lose their identity and moral values. A nervous breakdown or in the worst scenario suicide, is not uncommon. Because Heller's characters are forced to live a life that leads to disillusionment and hopelessness about the meaningfulness of life, they cultivate an attitude of selfishness, insensitivity, and indifference to the suffering and plight of other people.

Despite the negative connotation that selfishness, insensitivity, and indifference have, these attitudes are in fact Heller's characters' coping mechanisms in order to immunize themselves from the hurt and suffering that other people experience. Heller's characters are created in order to mirror and entice readers to contemplate the path in which American society is going which is that, in spite of material wealth and prosperity, people experience emotional and psychological poverty.

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