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Cathcart and the Magazine

While writing *Catch-22*, Joseph Heller was working in New York City in advertising, serving three large publications from 1952 to 1961. In 1952, he began working for *Time*, until 1956 when he became the advertising manager for *Look*. In 1958, he was hired as the promotion manager at *McCall's*, a position he held until the release of the novel in 1961. He had an insider's view of the magazine business and was familiar with the coverage, the advertisements, and the layout. The copywriter turned novelist had also published five stories in the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Story*, and *Esquire* by the time he began working in the industry.¹ While writing the novel, Heller would spend two hours every night working on the manuscript after working a full day at the office.² His employment at *Time*, *Look*, and *McCall's* appeared to be simply the backdrop for the writing of his first book. However, because he formulated the initial plans for the book during his employment at three magazines, the inclusion of a periodical in the novel was significant.

Joseph Heller's incorporation of a magazine was designed to display the ambitiousness of Colonel Cathcart and likewise the aspiration of American society. For Heller, ambition was the defining characteristic of Yossarian's superior. According to James Nagel in "The *Catch-22* Note Cards," when the author first planned the section on the colonel his notes began with item one, "Cathcart's background and ambition." The colonel was obsessed with aspiring and achieving the rank of general, the highest level of command in the military.³ Nagel also explained that a fourth item on the same card of notations, "Tries to have Chaplain say prayer at briefing," related "logically to Cathcart's ambition."⁴ In the book, the novelist connected his idea to have the chaplain say prayers before briefings to coverage of such an event that Cathcart discovered in *The Saturday Evening Post*. After reading "an editorial spread" in the *Post* "dealing with an American bomber group in England whose chaplain said prayers in the briefing room before each mission," the colonel's obsession with the periodical began.⁵ The publication served as one

of Cathcart's modes of promotion and he hoped that published recognition would further his campaign to become a general. However, the author also used the magazine, a subject very familiar to him, to make a specific comment on achievement in American society and the morality of success.

By World War II, self-made prosperity characterized America, a nation where all people could rise above their circumstances to pursue the American dream. The country had survived the Great Depression and had won the war in Europe, reinforcing the American ideals of perseverance, significance, and influence. At the time of the novel's publication, the United States had become a system obsessed with success and driven by business, a result of the country's worldwide leadership and impact. However, the opportunities for advancement and affluence provided by the society were often built upon the sacrifice of people's lives and principles, which were often overlooked or supplanted in the name of personal desire. In *Catch-22*, Colonel Cathcart and his methods of aspiring represented, as Vance Ramsay described, one such "version and perversion of the American dream."⁶ Rather than reinforcing the aspects of American idealism, the colonel and the other military officers used the men and ideals that had built the nation to attain their own recognition and accomplishments. Thus, as the author stated, the novel was "concerned with physical survival against exterior forces or institutions that want to destroy life or moral self."⁷ Those institutions and forces, namely the officers of the Air Forces, had given in to the desire for achievement, forfeiting beliefs, decorum and their own men in order to advance their own position.

The corruption of the nation's principles was not apparent to Joseph Heller while he served in World War II but became evident as he witnessed America's involvement in Korea. In fact, in a 1974 interview he explained that it was during the Korean War that he first became aware of the "morality of deception practiced by the executive in dealing with the American people and other nations." He added that the morality of deception "often involves lying and distortion" and "perversion of all codes of honor," definite characteristics of the United States military in *Catch-22*.⁸ Cathcart, Korn, Dreedle, and others were obsessed with reaching the highest position in the armed forces and they were willing to forfeit honor, morality, or human life to attain that position. Using the war as a metaphor for a culture which placed more worth on financial and personal success, the novelist "diagnosed a society's illness" and described "the dehumanized creature that man [had] become" in the wake of what the novelist himself defined as "the contemporary, regiment-

ed business society.”⁹ The main theme of the novel, Yossarian’s struggle to survive and live, was a battle primarily against the system of a military committed to structure and precision but also affected by the need for accomplishment and promotion. Heller used the colonel’s absurd obsession with *The Saturday Evening Post* to illustrate the military’s and American society’s tendency to seek notoriety and achievement while sacrificing human life, disregarding sanity, and ignoring propriety.

The use of a periodical for humor and satire reflected Joseph Heller’s close association with the magazine industry; however, the author did not use a publication for which he had worked. Many details of *Catch-22* were allusions to real life objects or places in the novelist’s life, but he refrained from using the same names as that of the real life location or article. He used *The Saturday Evening Post*, the most recognized magazine of the day, to keep readers and critics from assuming that the periodical at the center of the satire on ambition was specifically one for which he had worked. The distance created allowed him to parody the war coverage done by magazines during World War II as it related to the nation’s obsession with achievement. For Heller, the type of periodical was very important in order for the parody to work. Many publications, like the *Post*, glamorized war by publishing pictures of smiling soldiers and articles with interviews of accomplished officers and enlisted men. Like the author’s use of a magazine in the novel, the actual features often dealt with real people and uplifting events in the midst of the tragedy actually experienced in war. Also included in such magazines were serialized stories about courageous grunts fighting the Germans for the glory of the country, as well as advertisements which deified the American armed forces and demonized Germany, Japan, and Italy. There was little mention of the sacrifice of lives and the horrifying details of the battle in the trenches which newsmagazines covered. It was necessary for the author to use a publication covering human-interest articles that reinforced the nationalistic ideals of ambition and achievement in order to satirize the military and the country’s tendency to sacrifice decency and reason in the name of success.

Heller would have been aware of the war coverage during World War II in periodicals such as *The Saturday Evening Post*. During World War II, the *Post* had extensive coverage, including stories about training, weaponry, and America’s part in the war in Europe and Asia. Also, the magazine contained stories of specific soldiers and officers preparing for battle in the States or already fighting against Germany. The March 28, 1942 volume included an article on the newly created United States Air Forces, the division of

American military in which both the author and Yossarian served. The feature, entitled “Heroes–Wholesale,” contained a picture of the bombardier and navigator-gunner in the nose of a Flying Fortress, as well as a description of an actual bombing raid over Aparri, in the Philippines:

The flight engineer, from his post in the top blister, saw them first. “Six fighters coming at us astern!” The big ship wheeled on its side and dropped away in a twisting dive. . . . The fourth caught No. 4 engine. There was a burst of smoke, and red banners of flame streamed out behind. . . . The pilot gave the order, and the living left, one by one, reluctantly but without hesitation.

The recounting of the incident over the Philippines read like a story, including the suspense of the men parachuting from the airplane with no sense of concern for their lives. The article mentioned the names of two casualties, Capt. Colin Kelly and Staff Sgt. William D. Delehanty, “two heroes” who died on the mission, “without counting the cost.”¹⁰ The coverage contained numerous pages explaining the preparation of the U.S. Army Air Forces with descriptions of the facilities and personalities. The feature ended with the notice that “it’s going to take a lot of heroes to make” the Air Forces successful.¹¹ The piece involved the death of two soldiers, but the magazine focused mainly on the extensive training for pilots and bombardiers, mentioning Kelly and Delehanty quickly as two heroes who were lost defending the country. The emphasis was the seemingly exciting world of the United States Air Forces, glorifying the heroes who would serve America in the battle for democracy and supremacy in the air, glossing over the loss of life and the dread of the real war.

Other features on the war were included in *The Saturday Evening Post*, such as “What you don’t know about the Infantry,” which explored the changing face of America’s “doughboys.”¹² The coverage included pictures and interviews with smiling privates training in the States before transfer overseas. The grunts in America were explaining the rigors of preparation, while the real war was being fought in Europe and the Pacific. The reporter described the soldiers as “glamorous” and as boys talking about the things they knew, “home and women.”¹³ There was little mention of the tragedy they were about to encounter. Instead, the doughboys were depicted as determined men, ready to protect America, defending the principles and glory of the

nation. The magazine presented an encouraging story, personalizing the enlisted men and attempting to depict a positive situation when, in actuality, the “doughboys” were training to enter unglamorous and brutal warfare. The danger and death of war was overlooked in order to reinforce ideas of success and achievement for readers and recruits.

It was not just during World War II that magazines covered American conflicts. Working in the magazine industry during the decade of the fifties, Joseph Heller would have had exposure to similar reporting during the Korean War.¹⁴ *The Saturday Evening Post* reported on the conflict in Korea with articles that dealt more with human-interest issues, removing the death and tragedy of war covered in a newsmagazine. One particular article, “The Ordeal of Marine Squad 2” included pictures of an entire squad and described their story of courage near the end of the war. The coverage contained the names of the men and a detailed history of their experiences during the conflict. All but four of the original thirteen members survived the war and the article was a testament to their sacrifice and a recounting of the squad’s involvement in the eventual American victory in the Battle of Seoul. The article deified the squad, declaring, “thirteen ordinary Americans went to war together, battled, bled—and died—in comradeship.”¹⁵ The statement, which served as the introduction to the article, lauded the actions of the nine living men and the memory of the four who died. While the tone of the article was honoring, the accounts still reinforced the American ideals of ambition and achievement.

The same edition of the *Post* recounted the victory in Seoul in an article comprised of battle specifics, pictures, and the names of the officers who organized the attack.¹⁶ The articles focused on the successes of the war and recognized the officers who brought about the eventual victory without subjecting their readers to the horrors and realities of war. The specific magazine was not at all central to Heller’s comment on the subject of ambition; however, the use of a periodical that included human-interest and the glamorizing aspects of war played an important role in the parody. A publication like the *Post* was filled with stories about real people, personal profiles, encouraging reports of successful conquests, and a positive perspective about tragic events. Heller used that type of reporting as the central element of his satire of America’s fixation with achievement, utilizing Colonel Cathcart as the object of his parody.

The potential for coverage in a publication was the central motive that revealed the selfishness and ambition of Colonel Cathcart, a man who sought

only recognition, distinction, and promotion at any cost. The chapter bearing his name began, “Colonel Cathcart was a slick, successful, slipshod, unhappy man of thirty-six who lumbered when he walked and wanted to be a general.”¹⁷ Though he had acquired the military’s second-highest rank, he was unsatisfied because he had not reached the foremost position. As Stephen Potts said in *Catch-22: Antiheroic Antinovel*, Cathcart’s “sole desire in life is to become a general, simply because, as Korn says at one point, ‘Everyone teaches us to aspire to higher things,’ and ‘A general is higher than a colonel.’” As Potts pointed out, “all of Cathcart’s actions come down to this one motive.”¹⁸ Ironically, as Jean Kennard related, the colonel’s aspirations for achieving the rank of general only led him to institute “a variety of plans to make himself popular with his superiors, but each of them leaves him less popular than before.”¹⁹ His methods varied greatly in magnitude and reasoning, from his dilapidated, Italian country home that he felt prone to visit periodically to the creation of the officer’s shooting range. Most significantly, Cathcart became a pathetic person seeking success in the pages of *The Saturday Evening Post*, a specific publication that he thought would praise his actions and create the attention needed for his advancement. Ultimately, his career aspirations resulted in more than the loss of life. The events in the novel surrounding the *Post* exposed Cathcart’s rejection of the value of life, the relinquishment of his own self-respect and the compromise of his standard of decency to achieve his aspirations.

His obsession first led him to sacrifice the lives of the men he led and who were at his mercy, resulting in a devaluation of life. His desire to be a general, which distinguishes him from all other characters in the novel, eventually resulted in making him the enemy of his own men.²⁰ As Yossarian told Clevinger very early in the novel, “the enemy . . . is anybody who’s going to get you killed, no matter *which* side he’s on, and that includes Colonel Cathcart.”²¹ For the colonel, aspiring meant being willing to risk the lives of the men in his command in order to promote his own career. His willingness surfaced after the Ferrara mission, when Yossarian circled around twice in order to hit a bridge he was ordered to destroy. Cathcart, while reproaching Yossarian for his insubordination, said that he did not “give a damn about the men or the airplane” but only about the report which was to be filed with his superiors.²² It was not Yossarian or his crew that the colonel worried about but the record of an irregular mission that the generals would read. The colonel also continued to increase the number of required missions in order to gain notice of those could promote him, again compromising the lives of

those under his command. He even suggested volunteering his flight group for Avignon a second time, after the first mission had resulted in the death of Snowden. When the chaplain questioned his Avignon plan the colonel responded that “the sooner we get some casualties, the sooner we can make some progress” on attracting the editors of *The Saturday Evening Post*. His hope was that volunteering his men would lead him to the pages of the magazine, the Christmas issue preferably, because “the circulation is higher then.”²³ It was through the tool of the *Post* that he hoped to gain attention, achieve the rank of general, and reach the top of the military, all without regard for the lives of his airmen.

Just as Cathcart was willing to sacrifice Yossarian and the others, he was also ready to risk his own self-respect and beliefs in order to fulfill his ambitions. He “wanted to be a general so desperately he was willing to try anything, even religion” in order to increase his recognition.²⁴ He attempted to mask his underlying motivation behind concern for his men and an interest in their spiritual comfort. He showed the chaplain “how much good” the prayers have done for the soldiers, and specifically the American colonel, and asked Tappman to share his thoughts about the practice. When Chaplain Tappman responded that it was a “very moral and highly laudatory procedure,” Cathcart’s only question was if “they’ll work here.” The true reasoning eventually surfaced, pointed directly at selfish motives.

“Here’s a picture of a colonel in *The Saturday Evening Post* whose chaplain conducts prayers before each mission. If the prayers work for him, they should work for us. Maybe if we say prayers, they’ll put *my* picture in *The Saturday Evening Post*.”²⁵

It was not for the good of the men that the colonel sought Tappman’s assistance. He hoped to have his picture in the magazine, even if it included instigating prayers before each mission, a practice which made him uncomfortable. The plan was preposterous, which the chaplain recognized immediately. As Colonel Korn was to say later, “the editors of *The Saturday Evening Post* were not likely to run the same story twice just to give some publicity to some obscure colonel.”²⁶ Cathcart failed to realize the obvious problem with his plans, none more prevalent than his aversion to religion. Thus, the colonel became upset when the chaplain informed him that the officers and enlisted men prayed to the same God and that women were serving alongside men in

the armed forces. These realizations created some consternation within the colonel and he began to rethink the idea to have the chaplain pray before each mission. Such a practice would suggest that the officers and enlisted men were equal, an idea that he would not accept. By the end of the conversation he had decided that the “prayer meetings” could “make things *worse* than they are,” creating a loose bomb pattern, unsuccessful missions and negative attention from the generals.²⁷ However, he had not given up on his idea to get into *The Saturday Evening Post*. He told the chaplain to “let me know if you can think of anything for getting our names into *The Saturday Evening Post*, won’t you?”²⁸ He was willing to give up his self-respect, advocating prayers of which he did not approve, with the hope that the *Post* would publicize his actions and give him the notoriety he felt he needed to get promoted.

The final compromise, the colonel’s standard of decency, again involved the chaplain as well as his assistant, Corporal Whitcomb. Whitcomb was obsessed with the idea of letters which the families of war casualties would receive from the military. Tappman did not like the idea and the two argued about the topic repeatedly. However, when Corporal Whitcomb shared the idea with the colonel, Cathcart “thinks it’s one of the greatest ideas he’s ever heard.”²⁹ He believed that the letters “might even get me [Cathcart] into *The Saturday Evening Post*.”³⁰ He chastised the chaplain for not thinking of the idea himself and then made plans to contact the editors of the *Post* upon the issuance of “about a dozen of those letters.”³¹ His motivation was not to ease the sorrow of families of dead soldiers but rather to get the recognition he needed. By the end of the novel there was only one recorded delivery of such a letter, to Doc Daneeka’s wife, delivering news of her husband’s death which was in fact a technical mistake. The absurdity was that Doc was still very much alive, but Cathcart was willing to overlook the fact in order to file the correct reports and begin sending the first of many letters of sympathy. The letter that was sent was a form letter, addressed “Dear Mrs., Mr., Miss, or Mr. and Mrs. Daneeka,” making a further mockery of death.³² The colonel was not concerned with the welfare of his men, or the comfort of the families who had lost a loved one. His motivation was still coverage in the magazine in order to get attention from his superiors. He was willing to sacrifice his sense of decency to see his goal fulfilled.

Joseph Heller’s use of Colonel Cathcart in *Catch-22* was a parody of America’s tendency to accept death, indecency, and indecorum as mere byproducts of success and accomplishment. The colonel was willing to risk the lives of others and make a mockery of death in order to gain some atten-

tion and achieve distinction in the eyes of his superiors. Colonel Korn explained to Yossarian that each officer only wanted to achieve the next level in command. Korn asked, "what else have we got to do? Everyone teaches us to aspire to higher things. . . . So we're both aspiring."³³ For the American military leadership in the novel, allowances made to fulfill such aspirations were inconsequential. As Vance Ramsay contended, "aspiration within the system with no examination of ends has become an end in itself; it has become a substitute for meaningful life. Colonel Cathcart and Colonel Korn exist only in their attempts to use an irrational system for their own irrational ends."³⁴ For Colonel Cathcart, *The Saturday Evening Post* seemed the reasonable key to his promotion and the fulfillment of his aspirations; however, his irrational attempts to be included in the periodical led only to violations of propriety, responsibility, and his own beliefs. The actual coverage in the publication supported the author's ideas about the instinct of Americans to ignore death and principles in order to attain the next level, all in the name of ambition. Heller was exposing the idea that coverage in a magazine was more important than human life, decency, and self-respect. The fact that magazines, such as the *Post*, covered wars with human-interest and personal stories of success and achievement rather than the sacrifices of the war only reinforced the idea of American accomplishment. The writer, once an advertiser and copywriter for periodicals, pointed out that recognition was not a worthy goal if the sacrifice was human life and a disavowing of decency and personal belief. Cathcart was willing to risk his own men, their families, his own personal standards, and the principles of decorum to achieve the recognition that he so sorely wanted. Like America, the colonel was willing to sacrifice human life and ignore the horrible reality all in order "to aspire to higher things."³⁵ The absurd use of *The Saturday Evening Post* as Cathcart's ultimate objective evidenced the unequal motives within him and parodied a country which had compromised its morals and honor in the name of ambition.

Notes

1. Robert Merrill, *Joseph Heller* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987) 2.
2. See Adam Sorkin, *Conversations with Joseph Heller* (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1993) for numerous discussions about this topic including some by Heller himself.
3. James Nagel, "The Catch-22 Note Cards," *Studies in the Novel* 8 (1976): 394, also showed that Heller's second note about Cathcart was "Hasn't a chance of becoming a general."
4. Nagel 395.
5. Joseph Heller, *Catch-22* (New York, Scribner, 1955) 199.

6. Vance Ramsay, "Heller's Catch-22," *Seven Contemporary Authors*, ed. Thomas B. Whitbread (Austin: U of Texas P, 1966) 112.
7. George Plimpton, "The Art of Fiction—Joseph Heller," *Paris Review* 15.60 (1974): 141.
8. Sorkin 119.
9. Thomas Blues, "The Moral Structure of Catch-22," *Studies in the Novel* 3.1 (1971): 64. The quote from Heller within the article, according to Blues' notes, comes from "Joseph Heller Replies," *The Realist* 50 (1964): 30.
10. Richard Thruelsen, "Heroes—Wholesale," *The Saturday Evening Post* 28 Mar. 1942: 12.
11. Thruelsen 56.
12. James Street, "What you don't know about the Infantry," *The Saturday Evening Post* 30 May 1942: 9.
13. Street 69.
14. During the Korea War, Heller was working at *Time* as a copywriter. The coverage in *Time* was more news-related and included stories of plane crashes, death, and pictures of injured soldiers and civilians. See "The Sunday Punch." *Time* 24 Nov. 1952: 24-28 for specific examples.
15. Harold H. Martin, "The Ordeal of Marine Squad 2," *The Saturday Evening Post* 11 Nov. 1950: 24.
16. William L. Wouden, "The Trick That Won Seoul," *The Saturday Evening Post* 11 Nov. 1950: 29.
17. Heller 197.
18. Stephen Potts, *Catch-22: Antiheroic Antinovel* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1989) 72-73.
19. Jean Kennard, "Joseph Heller: At War With Absurdity," *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 4.3 (1971): 83.
20. Kennard maintained that "most of the characters in *Catch-22* are, however, caricatures, cardboard figures who are distinguished for the reader by their particular obsessions."
21. Heller 134.
22. Heller 148.
23. Heller 292-293.
24. Heller 199.
25. Heller 200.
26. Heller 210.
27. Heller 206.
28. Heller 207.
29. Heller 290.
30. Heller 290.
31. Heller 292.
32. Heller 355.
33. Heller 435-436.
34. Ramsay 112.
35. Heller 436.

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