

# Interpretation of Yossarian's Ethical Choices in *Catch-22* from the Perspective of Literary Ethics

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## Abstract

*Catch 22* is a novel by American writer Joseph Heller. This work is full of black humor, satirizing bureaucracy and social reality, and exposing the dark side of indifference to life, money supremacy, and rampant bureaucracy. *Catch 22* is a paradox: a pilot can only stop performing a flight mission if he is crazy. At the same time, the pilot himself can only apply for approval. Once the pilot can apply for it himself, it means that he is not crazy, which means that he cannot be approved. The research on *Catch 22* has affirmed its literary value, but there are few studies on it from the perspective of literary ethics. Based on literary ethics, this paper analyzes the ethical identity transformation of the protagonist Yossarian from an officer to a rebel, discusses the ethical choices he made and the reasons for his choices, and explores the reference significance and ethical teachings that this work can give to modern people to solve ethical problems. Through the analysis of Yossarian's choices, this paper focuses on the choices and rebellious spirit of the protagonist Yossarian under the different identities.

## Keywords

Black humor; Ethical choice; Satire.

## 1. Introduction

Joseph Heller is one of the most famous contemporary American novelists. His work *Catch-22* is praised as a representative work of black humor in American literature. *Catch-22* is full of black humor, satirizing bureaucracy and social reality, and exposing the dark side of indifference to life, money supremacy, and rampant bureaucracy. *Catch-22* tells the story of a pilot, Yossarian, who saw through the scam in the army, made an ethical choice in the predicament, and resisted the trap and authority. The academic research on *Catch-22* mainly starts from the perspectives of existentialism, postmodernism, and narrative techniques. These studies affirm its literary value, but there are few studies on it from the perspective of literary ethics. Based on literary ethics as a theoretical basis, this paper analyzes Yossarian's transformation from a soldier to a rebel, discusses the ethical choices he made, and explores the reference significance and ethical teachings that this work can give to modern people.

## 2. Organization of the Text

### 2.1. The ethical choice between self-awareness and military duty

As a soldier, Yossarian's identity requires him to unconditionally obey the military's rules and regulations and the orders of his superiors. However, in the dangerous flight missions day after day, the awakening of self-awareness made Yossarian doubt his identity and responsibility. Nie Zhenzhao believes that ethical choice is to solve the problem of human identity from an ethical perspective. It is not only necessary to distinguish humans from animals in essence, but also to confirm human identity from the perspective of responsibility, obligation and morality. Yossarian questioned the *Catch-22* to the military doctor. Yossarian believed that *Catch-22* was

a trap: only when a pilot is crazy can he stop performing the flight mission. At the same time, the pilot himself can apply for approval. Once the pilot can apply for it himself, it means that he is not crazy, which means that he cannot be approved. But the military doctor rejected him and hinted that the superiors are using traps to make soldiers work hard. The army requires soldiers to regard *Catch-22* as a creed, but their superiors use it as a tool, sending young soldiers to the cruel battlefield and killing them without mercy. "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." [2] Yossarian is in an ethical dilemma. Under the ethical identity of a soldier, Yossarian is constantly constrained by military regulations and environment. The awakening of self-awareness gradually makes him a rebel and try to evade the mission in various ways. Between self-awareness and the duty of a soldier, Yossarian chooses to violate the duty of a soldier, but this is more like a rebellion against the seemingly authority that is actually a scam.

## 2.2. The Ethical Choice between Life and Honor

The atmosphere of the army encourages soldiers to put life and death aside and regard the sacrifice of life as the highest honor. Yossarian has a strong desire to survive. As a person with a strong sense of self-life, every time he performs a mission, all he wants is to return to the ground alive. Snowden was Yossarian's teammate and died in front of Yossarian while performing a bombing mission with him. The fear of death and the respect for life make Yossarian constantly think of Snowden's death. Yossarian was also the best bomber, but he gave up this honor because he regarded survival as the biggest consideration in the subsequent operations. Yossarian received the Medal of Honor after Snowden's death, but at the award ceremony he disdained this honor and even chose to go to receive the award naked, which was more like a silent resistance and mourning. Between life and honor, Yossarian chose life without hesitation.

## 2.3. Ethical Choices between Fame and Conscience

In order to return home and escape from this life of fear, Yossarian chose to reach an agreement with his superiors. The superiors proposed to package Yossarian as a war hero and send him back home, but Yossarian needed to call on more people to join the army. Even though this agreement was something he hated. In essence, this is a natural selection. People are eager to live, so Yossarian chooses a short-term compromise in order to survive. However, after thinking in the ward and learning about Orr's deeds, Yossarian is unwilling to violate his conscience and go along with his superiors. In the end, the human factor defeated the animal factor, and Yossarian decided to escape at the risk of his life. Between fame and conscience, Yossarian chose the latter. Even if he might be hunted down forever and face the consequences of a difficult life, Yossarian made the choice he wanted. In such an ethical choice, he gained moral growth and inner freedom.

## 3. Conclusion

The interpretation of *Catch-22* allows us to draw a conclusion. That is, even in the face of ethical dilemmas, people can make the right ethical choices instead of letting the animal factor suppress the human factor. Yossarian regards survival as his greatest goal, but in the face of the temptation to return home with honor, he still chooses to stick to his inner choice. Yossarian's escape also brings beautiful hope to readers. I believe that the author ends with Yossarian's

escape to encourage people to make the right ethical choices and tell people that there is still hope for the future.

## Acknowledgements

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