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WAR AS A FOCAL METAPHOR IN *THE SUN ALSO RISES* AND  
*CATCH-22*

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Ernest Hemingway and Joseph Heller are linked to one another in fascinating ways, for both authors achieved their greatest acclaim upon publication of their first major novel, works written during and about the respective postwar eras each author found himself in after directly participating in the war effort years earlier. One of the more interesting aspects of the abundant literary criticism devoted to Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* and Heller's *Catch-22*, concerns critical opinion regarding the authors' treatments of war in their most celebrated novels. While it is generally agreed that neither novel is "about war" per se (a critic might one day take the task of explaining how any great novel could be), much of the criticism glosses over the seismic importance the subject holds for both authors.

If Hemingway and Heller are up to more than the telling of simple war stories, as is most certainly the case, one interpretive issue surrounding the texts involves why and how these authors use their wars to raise the larger questions with which their novels are similarly concerned. Michael Scoggins, for example, feels that the combat scenes in *Catch-22* are integral to understanding both the character of Yossarian as well as the intent behind the entire novel, a position that refutes any claim that Heller's work is only concerned with World War II on a functionally convenient level. He writes, "Many of the characters and incidents in *Catch-22* were in fact drawn directly from Heller's tour of duty, and were simply modified or exaggerated for comic effect" (213). Just as Heller used his experience as a bombardier in Italy circa 1944 to inform his novel's most visceral scenes, Hemingway's references to war in *The Sun Also Rises* are reminiscent of his own service as an ambulance driver on the Italian front in World War I a quarter of a century earlier.

A more crucial parallel between the two authors is their use of war as the focal metaphor to power each novel's characters, settings, and thematic content. This metaphor also helps to reveal the novels' most startling similarity: that beneath the modernist veneer of both works beats a steady moral pulse which offers potential answers to the problems raised in the novels without thrusting moral dictums upon the reader. While *The Sun Also Rises* and *Catch-22* have been alternate-

ly revered and condemned by critics who see only the bleakness that is an essential feature of both works, these readers mistakenly view the novels' surface nihilism as the authors' proffered solution to the moral crises with which their characters struggle. Ultimately, the presence of the war metaphor will prove that these novels are not, as critic Matts Djos asserts of *The Sun Also Rises*, a "portrait of degeneracy without solutions" (77).

Though *The Sun Also Rises* and *Catch-22* may appear at first to be radically divergent in terms of style and tone, closer inspection proves the novels to be more alike than different. Outwardly, both novels' styles are appropriate reflections of the tone its characters and situations attempt to convey. Hemingway's terse prose is a perfect complement to the subdued, emotionally clipped speech patterns of the novel's narrator, Jake Barnes. Jake is a hard-eyed realist due to his war experience, and the blunt style Hemingway employs is a jarring narrative extension of the psychic trauma Jake perpetually endures but never discusses at length. Meanwhile, the absurd black comedy of *Catch-22* is a kind of extended joke, narrated in a way that dares readers to laugh in spite of themselves. By telling the story in this manner, Heller requires the reader to see the world through the same lens as Yossarian, the novel's protagonist. We see Yossarian not as a paranoid crackpot in an otherwise logical world, but as one of the last bastions of sanity in a world that has gone crazy around him. If Hemingway's style is one of emotional negation, then Heller's might be described as jubilant nihilism. Therefore, by using narrative techniques that mirror the psyches of their main characters, Heller and Hemingway have produced styles that influence how we interpret both works – in essence, we are given two disparate but equally disturbing representations of postwar trauma.

Connotations of war abound in the novels' settings, especially in the cities of Paris and Pamplona in *The Sun Also Rises* and Rome in *Catch-22*. Arthur Waldhorn compares the actions and experiences contained in the early Paris chapters of Hemingway's novel to the weary psychological strain of warfare, claiming, "The boredom, hysteria, and agony mirror the chaotic past of the war experience and the cynical or hedonistic masks that later disguise disfigured or mutilated dreams and illusions," (96). Specifically, Waldhorn finds parallels between the battlefield and the bar that expose the characters' spiritual conditions on a symbolic level. On a similar note, William Adair contends that Hemingway's café scenes in Pamplona make prominent allusions to the Great War. The café where Jake sits for the fiesta is "like a battleship stripped for action," the smoke from the rocket announcing the fiesta hangs in the air "like a shrapnel burst," and soon people are "coming into the square from all sides" (157). Adair

notes that the “war associations demonstrate that what has ‘already happened’ to Barnes and his generation is, by implication, an important subject in this story,” (133). This discussion highlights a crucial feature of Hemingway’s novel: the ominous feeling that everything that happens is somehow anticlimactic in the expatriates’ postwar world. The chapter entitled “The Eternal City” (415) in *Catch-22* is similarly evocative for Minna Doskow, who sees shades of the underworld or Dante’s City of Dis in Heller’s description of Rome. She explains,

The striking atmosphere of misery and pain leads to the inevitable comparison with hell which becomes more relevant and forceful as Yossarian travels further along the streets encountering sickness, hunger, poverty, sadistic cruelty and coercion and viewing an entire gallery of mutilated bodies and warped souls. (13)

In Rome, humanity is portrayed as sinking to its lowest possible depths while perverse military authority is exercised. The streets of Rome are “tilted” and its buildings “are slanted in a weird, surrealist perspective” (422), emphasizing its otherworldly, inhuman nature. Yossarian witnesses a soldier having convulsions on the ground (423), women about to be raped by gangs of soldiers (424), and a man beating a dog to death for no apparent reason (424). Ultimately, military policemen with “icy eyes and firm, sinewy, unsmiling jaws” (429) arrest Yossarian for being in Rome without a pass while Aarfy goes unpunished after raping and killing a prostitute (428). In all of these events, there is the obvious connection to the chaos and lawlessness of war as well as the hellish, apocalyptic vision of mankind at its absolute moral nadir.

Characters in both novels are indelibly tied to their respective wars and can be evaluated in terms of their individual responses to their experiences. Jake and Yossarian are chiefly linked through traumatic war injuries in the past that have shaped their present attitudes. Jake’s wound is implicitly suggested to be a missing phallus, the “old grievance” (38) which informs almost every scene in the novel with an almost omnipresent sense of futility. Some readers see a comparison between Jake and the bull in Book II, but this comparison carries a cruel irony – the bull is a symbol of male virility, while Jake is unable to act on his sexual impulses. Jake’s love for Brett Ashley, and his inability to fully express that love while enduring her sexual activity, is the kind of twisted punishment even the aforementioned Dante might spare his characters.

While Yossarian's experience with traumatic war injury is less direct, it bears an equally profound effect on his character. On a mission over Avignon, Yossarian has witnessed firsthand the horror of war while trying to save a fellow soldier's life. Epitomizing Hemingway's "iceberg principle," which maintains that ninety percent of a work's meaning should remain submerged, Snowden's "secret" remains oblique until Heller elaborates on its full meaning late in the novel: "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" (450). The witnessing of Snowden's mortal wound is used as a symbol of disillusionment for Yossarian in much the same way that Jake Barnes' own injury is employed in Hemingway's novel, and as such it is important in understanding Yossarian's subsequent actions. His public nudity (270-76), the contemplative "Snowdens of yesteryear" remark (44), and his refusal to fly more missions (415) are not mere instances of absurdism or cowardice but denunciations of both the war and the mentality that allows the atrocity of war to thrive. These actions are, of course, direct results of the epiphany Yossarian experiences after he watches Snowden dying in his arms.

It is instructive to note that neither Jake nor Yossarian have any grand illusions about fixing the dysfunctional worlds they live in, for their realist visions contribute to the ultimately faulty perception that neither novel has "heroes." Instead, they are more concerned with, as Jake puts it, "how to live in it" (152). For these characters, one answer lies in physical and/or spiritual diversions – Jake through fishing, Yossarian through sexual trifles. Jake enjoys a kind of tranquility in the Burguete scenes he is hard-pressed to find anywhere else in the novel, and his relatively peaceful temperament during his excursion there is markedly different from the tortured psyche he more openly exhibits in Paris and Pamplona. And while Yossarian's sexual dalliances can be passed off as simple comic relief, it is much more useful to view his obsession with sex as a way to sublimate his fear of death. These activities are valuable for both characters in their fleeting ability to blot out their war experiences and to instill a kind of meaning into what has become, for them, a largely meaningless existence.

Other characters in the novels are similarly affected by war; for instance, Brett Ashley in *The Sun Also Rises* and Nately's whore in *Catch-22* share many of the same tragic circumstances. Unlike Jake and Yossarian, however, these characters are not directly associated

with war and have even less power to resist its effects. Brett worked as a nurse in the same hospital Jake recuperated in and certainly saw the devastating consequences of modern warfare firsthand. She is irreparably altered after, in Jake's words, "her own true love [...] kicked off with the dysentery" (46), a common wartime disease. If this were not enough, she cares deeply for Jake, a man whose wartime injury separates them physically and emotionally. It seems as though Brett is forever consigned to the ranks of the walking wounded, and she has spent her postwar years floundering from marriage to marriage in an ill-considered attempt to escape the memory of war.

Nately's whore mirrors Brett in considerable ways, for she too is ravaged by forces beyond her control. It is unlikely that she was a prostitute before the war disrupted the course of civilian life in Italy, but its presence forces women like her to subsist through methods they might otherwise abhor. Furthermore, her lashing out at Yossarian over Nately's death (403) constitutes a spontaneous release of the repressed rage she feels over the presence of war in her life, something she is completely powerless to control. Yossarian excuses her attempt on his life by thinking, "Why the hell shouldn't she? It was a man's world, and she and everyone younger had every right to blame him and everyone older for every unnatural tragedy that befell them" (415). Consequently, the treatment of female characters in these novels can be read in part as a disdainful appraisal of the effect war has on its spectators as well as its participants.

Interesting parallels can also be drawn between the characters of Robert Cohn and Nately as well as Bill Gorton and Orr, for the latter characters offer insightful alternatives to the outdated traditions espoused by the former. Cohn is clearly an anachronistic figure, a "case of arrested development" (51), in comparison to the other expatriates in *The Sun Also Rises*. The naïve romanticism he champions is roundly denounced by Jake, who sees this behavior as distinctly unviable in the postwar world. Waldhorn asserts that Jake and Cohn are more alike than many would like to believe but that their important difference lies in the fact that "Cohn irritatingly persists in rationalizing reality into an ideal" (103). Jake has abandoned his idealism in light of his recent past and seemingly bleak future, but at least part of his distaste for Cohn must arise from the resemblance he sees between Cohn and his younger self; it is reasonable to assume that the younger Jake, like most of his peers, envisioned war as a romantic contest full of valorous heroes until he witnessed harsh reality in the charnel house of the battlefield. The final rejection of Cohn's character occurs during their final encounter, when Jake notices, "He had on a white polo shirt, the kind he'd wore at Princeton" (198). The polo

shirt is symbolic of a man who is stuck in an untenable past in the aftermath of the Great War.

Jake would surely harbor no more sympathy for Nately in *Catch-22*, who like Cohn persists in blindly following the romantic ideals of patriotism. "Love had transmogrified him into a romantic idiot" (369), the text attests, and as such Nately is ill-suited to the world around him. Most damning is Nately's conversation with the old man in Rome about the merits of patriotism (252-58). While Nately unquestioningly backs his country's war effort, the old man sagely refutes him, suggesting that survival is preferable to any principle and that no country is worth dying for. Nately's bland aphorism, "Anything worth living for is worth dying for," is quickly answered by the old man's reply: "And anything worth dying for [...] is certainly worth living for" (257). The effectiveness of the old man's pragmatism appears to be confirmed once Nately dies in during the war effort (387) well before he reaches the old man's age. Clearly, Nately represents a dangerous naïveté in a world that is not nearly so simple or innocent.

Bill Gorton and Orr offer useful alternatives to the feckless romanticism of Nately and Cohn. If Jake yearns to know "how to live in it" (152), Scott Donaldson posits that "Gorton seems to have discovered how: without Jake's bitter sarcasm, without Mike's and Brett's disingenuous self-pity, with the best will in the world" (37). While it is doubtful that everyone is temperamentally capable of making the best of life in the same manner as Gorton, he at least offers a more outwardly positive stance through the use of incessant humor. Orr, meanwhile, echoes the old man's ethos of survival while maintaining a jolly nature reminiscent of Gorton's. The absurdity inherent in *Catch-22* reaches its peak once Orr is discovered to have practiced crash landings for months in preparation for escaping the Army (459). Fantastic as this revelation seems, it is essential to understand this action as a more practical alternative to Yossarian's paranoid rants and escapist desires. As Sanford Pinsker notes, "Orr does not merely want to make the best of a bad situation, nor is he especially interested in gestures of protest. Rather, what he wants is the same thing that ostensibly energizes Yossarian – namely, survival" (160). This is in marked contrast to Yossarian, who continually hopes for deliverance from war but obtusely refuses to take a more proactive approach. Despite consistent objections and intermittent acts of subterfuge, Yossarian continues to fly his ever-escalating missions, thereby perpetuating the very system he hates. Orr's plan, then, is a more utilitarian means of escape from war than Yossarian's brief respites in hospitals and escapes to Rome.

The authors also use their preoccupation with war and its reper-

cussions to show their collective disdain for many of the established values they found in their respective postwar cultures. Central to any discussion of these texts is the issue of morality – what, if any, moral comfort do these books offer? Some critics see only the abject nihilism of these works and mistakenly view it as the proffered cure for the disease of war, not as symptoms of that disease. For instance, Djos interprets *The Sun Also Rises* as “a novel about spiritual bankruptcy, codependence, and people who [...] become emotionally impotent” (77). To better approach this issue, one might view Hemingway and Heller as physicians performing moral examinations on their postwar Americas – and if one doesn’t like the results, the doctors aren’t necessarily to blame. Frederick R. Karl, for example, believes that a strong sense of morality courses throughout *Catch-22*. For Karl, “The fact that many outraged readers saw Yossarian as immoral, cowardly, or anti-American simply indicates what falsely patriotic hearts beat sturdily beneath seemingly sophisticated exteriors” (5). The issue at hand, then, is to show that just as the shadow of war affects the characters of these novels, it also serves as the primary catalyst for the shifting sets of values the books describe.

Michael Reynolds aptly describes the moral barometer of Hemingway’s novel in his book, *The Sun Also Rises: A Novel of the Twenties*: “Home, family, church, and country gave this war-wounded generation no moral support. The old values – love, honor, duty, truth – were bankrupted by a war that systematically killed [...] and permanently scarred Americans like Jake” (63). The war also lends shades of meaning to certain activities in these novels that would otherwise seem pointlessly destructive or heretical. For example, the excessive consumption of alcohol galls many readers of the novel, but it is more productive to question why these characters drink so much – in short, Jake uses alcohol to blunt the pain of thinking about his war wound. Sex is also treated rather flippantly in both novels, but again this says as much about the reader as it does the texts. Just as Yossarian sublimates his fear of death through sex, Brett deflects the pain of her traumatic past by engaging in meaningless sexual relationships, and the fact that she doesn’t seem to enjoy herself doesn’t register for critics who prefer to see her as a sex-crazed nymphomaniac. Meanwhile, Jake, by admission a “rotten Catholic,” finds his way to a cathedral only to pray irreverently for good bullfights and wearily profess, “I only wished I felt religious and maybe I would the next time” (103). The chaplain in *Catch-22* finds himself in a very comparable state of doubt. The narrator says of the chaplain, “It was already some time since the chaplain had first begun wondering what everything was all about. Was there a God? How could he be sure?” (277).

Yossarian's doubt, meanwhile, is somewhat more direct: "Don't tell me God works in mysterious ways [...]. He's not working at all. He's playing. Or else He's forgotten all about us" (189). In both works, there is a profound lack of religious zeal or even faith, almost certainly due in part to the moral atrocities these characters have witnessed in times of war.

Though both novels systematically scorn many of the accepted values of early twentieth-century America, the most scathing indictments are reserved for American capitalism. As Jake says in a voice dripping with sarcasm, "The bill always came. That was one of the swell things you could count on" (152). Jake finds money to be, regrettably, the sole operative value in his postwar world: "Enjoying living was learning to get your money's worth" (152). This is easier said than done, however, for while Jake and his friends burn through money, hardly any of them seem to take much happiness in it. Milo Minderbinder in *Catch-22*, however, takes Bill Gorton's "simple exchange of values" line (78) to its most heartless extremes. Milo's business syndicate begins innocently enough only to culminate in a tremendously profitable – and highly immoral – deal with the enemy to bomb his own base (267). For Milo and men like him, the ends always justify the means, and his character is despicable not only for his actions but for the unctuous way he inevitably manages to rationalize and defend them. In Leon F. Seltzer's opinion, "This satire can best be seen as a blistering attack on our capitalistic system, a system that has perverted universally accepted ethical norms by unwittingly encouraging the unscrupulous pursuit of wealth and power" (102). Of course, Heller is also contemptuous of the military bureaucracy that helps to enable and sustain Milo's greedy machinations.

Though both works read, in certain ways, like litanies of invective against their respective postwar cultures, many readers miss the essential fact that both authors advance positive alternatives to the eroded moral values they see. As Reynolds attests of Jake Barnes, "There is nothing wrong with his values: Work, duty, sympathy, brotherhood, professional pride, and financial responsibility once sustained middle-class America. It is not Jake who fails, but America who fails him" ("The Sun in Its Time" 49). Jake wants simply to "get his money's worth," or to get out of life what he puts into it. The *toreo*, meanwhile, serves as a microcosm of the better world Jake yearns for, one in which honor and bravery still exist as exemplary qualities.

John McCormick writes, "We know this [...] through the symbolical burden placed upon *toreo*. The *fiesta* at Pamplona occupies the center of the novel, just as the characters' response to *toreo* is a measure of their human value in the eyes of Jake Barnes [...]" (238). The bullring is established as an idyllic version of the world while the bullfighter becomes a heroic paradigm. Along these lines, Donald Daiker sees an affirmative conclusion in *The Sun Also Rises* that can be appreciated only if one realizes that "In Book III Jake metaphorically becomes a bullfighter" (86) to Brett's steer. Daiker contends, "Jake can still be gored if he succumbs to her attempt to revive their romantic love" (85), but Jake's response at the end of the novel, "Isn't it pretty to think so?" (251), is the metaphorical death blow for their relationship. In this sense, Jake has achieved victory by emulating the bullfighter and living life, in his words, "all the way up" (18).

Yossarian offers a more direct solution in his simple insistence that his life does matter. Though some may see only cowardice or selfishness in his actions, Yossarian is making a decisive statement about the sanctity of all human life by placing his first. Karl interprets Yossarian's choice this way: "Life must not be taken lightly, either by others (military men, business manipulators, world leaders) or by oneself. Yossarian is a hero by virtue of his sacred appraisal of his future" (5). Yossarian, like Jake, seeks a meaningful life out of the chaos of war, but Yossarian places his faith in the fantasy of Sweden, not the *toreo*. In all of this, there is no trace of the nihilistic stance supporting the idea of a meaningless universe; instead, we see the more benevolent existential view that life has whatever meaning these characters instill into it. As Karl notes, "The true hero of our era is the man who can accept absolute responsibility. He must act alone, and his faith – not in God, but in himself – must be good, honest, pure" (6).

The metaphors of war in *The Sun Also Rises* and *Catch-22* influence not only the characters and settings of the works but the moral tone as well. It is therefore apparent that war is an indispensable objective correlative in these novels. *Catch-22*'s scathing satire on immoral bureaucracies could never have the same scope or impact without the life-and-death consequences enabled by its wartime setting, while *The Sun Also Rises* amounts to little more than a drunken travelogue without the specter of the Great War looming in the background. As Charles J. Nolan, Jr. writes, "Both books transcend the subgenre of war fiction to become insightful expressions of what it is

like to live in our time; both, that is, use war as a metaphor to document the modern existential condition” (77). Neither Jake Barnes nor Yossarian are heroes in the traditional sense, but this fact is part of what makes both novels so enduringly modern. Neither character is a revolutionary figure bent on avenging social ills and righting the world’s wrongs; instead, they want only personal salvation and the opportunity to learn, as Jake says, “how to live in it” (152). If their positions seem less than heroic, that is largely because they have seen what happens to heroes in the scourge of war. Still, their seemingly nihilistic convictions are only disguises for the eminently moral sensibilities that allow them to carve out their own meanings in worlds where meaning is elusive at best. Thus, their moral victories are ultimately rooted in the attainment of what might be called “grace under pressure” – for, as Brett Ashley says, “It’s sort of what we have instead of God” (249).

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