

# Trauma, Symptoms and Healing: Trauma Writing in *Catch-22*

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**Abstract:** *Catch-22* is a masterpiece of American writer Joseph Heller's "black humor" literature. By portraying Yossarian as an "anti-hero" and describing his struggle to heal the trauma of war, Heller exposes the fact that war is the greatest human tragedy. The "death" throughout the novel is Heller's memory of brutal war, which also highlights the theme of war trauma. Based on the theories of trauma research, this paper analyzes the trauma manifestation and healing of the hero Yossarian and the author Joseph Heller, reflecting the horrors of war and its great trauma to human mental state.

**Keywords:** *Catch-22*; Yossarian; Trauma of War; the Healing of Trauma

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## Introduction

Joseph Heller is one of the famous novelists in the post-modern period of America. His famous novel *Catch-22* focuses on Heller's personal experience as a lieutenant in the air Force during World War II. This paper intends to take Yossarian, the main character of *Catch-22*, as an example, to analyze his seemingly absurd behaviors, explore the symptoms of his pain and struggle, and reveal the spiritual trauma that war has caused to human beings that is difficult to heal.

## 1. The Formation of War Trauma

The word "trauma" derives from Greek, which originally refers to physical damage caused by external factors. At the end of the 19th century, Western psychology began to use "trauma" to indicate psychological and spiritual trauma. Freud pointed out that "We call an experience a trauma if, for a very short period of time, it causes the mind to be stimulated to the highest degree, so that it cannot be adapted by normal methods, so that the distribution of the effective capacity of the mind is permanently disturbed". In 1980s, American Psychiatric Manual officially named the mental and behavioral disorders caused by traumatic experiences "post-traumatic stress disorder" (PTSD). Its symptoms can be grouped into three main categories: "intrusion" refers to the haunting memory of the traumatic moment, which often reappears in the victim's consciousness without warning in the form of "flash-back"; "hyperarousal" is the constant anticipation of imminent danger, that is, the victim is extremely sensitive to threatening information in the environment, and will excessively search for or even imagine various threats; "constriction" reflects that the injured person is often in a state of numb reaction and emotional retardation after giving up, and is easy to feel alienated from others and the surrounding environment.

Research shows that war is an important cause of psychological trauma. In modern warfare with conventional weapons, psychological trauma accounts for 20 to 25 percent of all troop losses. The incidence of psychological trauma is positively correlated with the duration of war. If the combat lasts for 30 days, the number of casualties caused by psychological trauma will exceed that caused by physical combat injuries. After 60 days of combat, 98% of soldiers will suffer from various types of psychological trauma.

Joseph Heller drew on his experience in World War II when he wrote the novel. In his autobiography, *Now and Then: From Coney Island to Here*, Heller wrote of the moment: "The tail of the plane seemed to split: we were descending, and I was so convinced that my life was going to end that I could do nothing but fear. After I regained my balance and was able to move, I heard the most unnatural and harmonious sound in my headphones: silence". These horrific images made Heller have a more thorough understanding of the war, and also made the war trauma leave a deeper imprint in Heller's heart. He puts his own experience of the war trauma on the hero of the novel, Yossarian. Through a series of absurd actions by Yossarian, Heller reveals the huge psychological trauma caused by the war to human beings.

## 2. Yossarian's Trauma Symptoms

### 2.1 Intrusion

Traumatic memory is different from normal memory in that the person may remember a strong emotional response but not the event clearly, or may remember details of the event but not the emotion at the time. As a result, Yossarian's recollection of Snowden's dying moments in the preceding chapters has been scattered, episodic, and uncontrolled. For Yossarian, Snowden's death is a traumatic event that became fixed in his mind as stress trauma symptoms.

Alberto Casicedo notes that the central event in *Catch-22* is a "past too traumatic to recall, but too important to forget". Throughout the whole work, the tragic scene of Snowden being bombed in the air and the cruel scene of his death run through the whole book, which makes Yossarian experience traumatic events many times. However, the impression of Heller's description of Snowden's death in Yossarian's mind gradually turned from vague to clear, until finally, the scene of Snowden's tragic death in the air clearly showed in front of Yossarian. Through this narrative technique, the author consciously shows the readers the change of Yossarian's consciousness. Yossarian's memories of Snowden's death are fragmentary and blurred by the memory invasion, and it is this inability to clearly recall and completely forget the scenes of war that has caused great trauma to him.

### 2.2 Hyperarousal

"Hyperarousal" is another classic symptom of PTSD. Because the psychological anxiety reaction and physiological preparation reaction used by the injured to deal with the emergency are not stimulated when needed, they maintain a high susceptibility to the threatening information in the environment, and often overreact to the stimulus. For Yossarian, the death of Snowden left him with a feeling of extreme fear and helplessness, which led to his hyperarousal. Near the end of the book, Yossarian recalls the whole process before Snowden's death: noting only the wound on Snowden's leg, Yossarian is confident and optimistic, "You'll be all right soon, young man, everything is under control". But Snowden said he was cold, and Yossarian was "increasingly suspicious and alarmed." Finally, seeing Snowden's guts dripping all over the floor, Yossarian felt "exhausted and powerless, and his heart was full of pain and despair", and his voice of comfort became "too small to be heard". Psychological trauma is a kind of pain caused by a sense of powerlessness. When traumatized, the victim is rendered helpless by overwhelming force. In the face of Snowden's football-sized wound, Yossarian, despite his fear and nausea, was able to help. But the visual impact of the fatal wound on the inside of Snowden's body left Yossarian trembling and helpless.

There was nothing Yossarian could do about Snowden's death. Fear and helplessness took over his heart, and Yossarian was like a frightened bird, and he was in constant fear of death. Covered in Snowden's blood, Yossarian climbed a tree branch naked, attended Snowden's funeral, and attended the Medal of Honor ceremony naked. Meanwhile, when Yossarian returned to his squadron from the hospital, he saw everyone alert. As if suffering from persecution paranoia, he "sees everyone around him as crazy for no reason, feels the urge to machine-gun strangers, retroactively distorts past experiences, and suspects that others hate him and are conspiring to kill him". The increase in adrenaline in the face of danger caused Yossarian to enter a state of alertness, which triggered a violent reaction of fear and anger, which caused Yossarian to overreact when he was threatened with death. This high cannot be resolved, which causes Yossarian to have a traumatic reaction.

### 2.3 Constriction

Constriction is the core symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder. When an individual faces a threat and feels that no resistance is effective, he is likely to enter a state of shrinking and giving up.

Under the shadow of the fear of death, Yossarian gradually turned into a mental state of "confinement and cringing". In order to avoid flying missions, he faked illness many times and hid in the hospital. Even when he was forced to fly, he flew around and dropped the bomb, with survival as his only goal. Research has shown that trauma patients are always anxious and mixed with specific fears, "they do not have a normal, relaxed attentional alertness baseline, instead, they have an elevated arousal baseline: their body is always alert". Yossarian is always

full of fear and madness, leaving readers with the impression of cowardly and rebellious “anti-hero”, all of which originated from Yossarian’s war trauma. “The contradictory extremes of memory invasion and confinement cringe alternate, creating a pendulum-like effect” and the sufferer often oscillates between intense pain and total numbness. Yossarian, too, was in a daze, running away from the war, and at the same time agonized by the memories of the trauma that were brought up from time to time. Finally, in a time of mental torture, he recognized the cruel nature of war, and tried to seek liberation and freedom.

### 3. Healing of Trauma

Dominic Carapra, reflecting on the Holocaust in the second world war, said: “The trauma and the urge to repeat the trauma of such a historical event may never be completely overcome, but by telling it, it may be to some extent calms down”. In his opinion, the retelling of traumatic events will play a positive role in the treatment of trauma victims. If trauma victims can clearly recall or tell about past traumatic events, they can truly resist the psychological damage brought by trauma.

In *Catch-22*, the author does not directly recount Yossarian’s recovery from trauma, but reflects it through the process of describing Yossarian’s psychological changes. Yossarian’s memory approach the truth step by step, and finally recreate the whole event and all the details, including his true feelings at that time, thus completing the most crucial step in his recovery from trauma.

Heller took part in World War II and flew 60 missions. From the initial fight for the motherland to the final escape from the war, Heller’s psychology has undergone a great change, and the main factors causing this huge psychological change are the psychological trauma caused to Heller by the war and Heller’s clear understanding of the nature of war. Freud believed that the treatment of trauma was to force the victim to recall and try to avoid repetition. In writing *Catch-22*, every memory of the war is Heller’s effort to self-heal from trauma. The creation finally made him remember the war clearly, let him really overcome the fear of war in spirit.

### 4. Conclusion

Based on his own war experience, Joseph Heller successfully created Yossarian as an “anti-hero” by using a series of postmodernist techniques such as black humor. Heller completes his own war healing by depicting Yossarian’s difficult journey to healing. With the help of trauma theory, we can excavate the trauma experience implied in *Catch-22* under the guidance of Heller, reinterpret the details that have been ignored by readers, analyze the mental state of the injured, and then reflect on the great trauma brought to mankind by war. The interpretation of the individual war trauma in the text can make us face the scars in the development process of human history and help us move forward in reflection.

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