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No Heroes Here: How Heller Uses Absurdity to Expose War's Lie

War has often been portrayed in literature as a stage for heroism, sacrifice, and tragedy. Writers have long grappled with how to represent the violence, loss, and moral collapse that war brings, often falling into familiar modes of realism or sentimentalism. However, in the twentieth century—a century defined by two world wars, countless proxy conflicts, and the rise of modern bureaucratic warfare—some writers abandoned traditional narratives altogether. They sought new ways to capture not just the facts of war but its essential absurdity, the way it renders human logic useless and exposes the absurd structures underpinning supposedly rational societies. Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* stands out among these efforts. Published in 1961, the novel rejects conventional storytelling in favor of disjointed episodes, circular reasoning, tonal whiplash, and surreal humor. Through this chaotic form, Heller does not merely describe the madness of war; he makes the reader experience it firsthand.

From its earliest pages, *Catch-22* traps the reader in a closed system of contradictions. Yossarian, the novel's protagonist, seeks to survive a war that operates by rules designed to entangle, not protect him. Authority figures speak in riddles; missions are extended indefinitely; language itself becomes a tool of deception. It would be easy to see these absurdities as quirks of character or plot, but Heller's technique points to something more profound. The structure of the novel—its looping timeline, fragmented narrative, and refusal to provide clear moral resolutions—embeds absurdity at every level.

In *Catch-22*, Heller turns absurdity into a weapon, shattering the illusions that frame war as noble or necessary. By wrecking narrative order, twisting logic into nonsense, and stripping language of meaning, he forces the reader to live inside the same moral wasteland that his characters cannot escape.

Understanding *Catch-22* through the lens of absurdist technique reveals how deeply form and content are intertwined in Heller's vision. The novel's humor, disjointedness, and relentless contradictions are not simply aesthetic choices; they are integral to its political and philosophical critique. To engage with the novel is to be caught, like its characters, in a maddening logic with no exit—a literary experience that mirrors the existential trap of war itself. Heller's achievement lies not in offering solutions or solace but in insisting that the only honest way to write about the madness of modern warfare is to make madness felt on every page.

To fully understand how *Catch-22* weaponizes absurdity against traditional narratives of war, it's essential to turn to critical studies that examine the novel's unique structure and thematic strategies. Scholars have consistently emphasized how Heller's manipulation of narrative form and tone creates a reading experience that mirrors the irrational and chaotic world his characters inhabit. Among the many analyses, Anita Neziri, Marsela Turku, and Martina Pavlíková offer a particularly clear breakdown of the techniques Heller employs to embed absurdity into the bones of the novel itself. Their work helps sharpen the connection between Heller's narrative choices and the emotional and intellectual dislocation he inflicts on his readers.

In their article, "*Exploring the Absurdity of War: A Literary Analysis of Catch-22*," Anita Neziri, Marsela Turku, and Martina Pavlíková write, "The study reveals that Joseph Heller employs a unique set of literary techniques, including non-sequential narrative, broken chronology, and cyclical motifs, to vividly capture the chaotic and absurd nature of combat

events” (522). Heller’s use of fractured timelines and cyclical structures doesn’t simply depict chaos; it forces the reader to live inside it. The instability of the novel’s form matches the instability of its world, pulling the reader into the same disorientation and absurdity that define the soldiers’ existence.

Heller’s choice to fracture the novel’s timeline and weave in repetitive, often circular events is not an accident or a gimmick. It’s a craft which serves as a strategic act of storytelling that mirrors the collapse of meaning and morality within the world of the novel. In traditional war narratives, time usually progresses logically. Battles are fought. Victories are won or lost. Lessons are learned. *Catch-22* deliberately denies the reader this comfort. By scrambling time and revisiting events from multiple, often contradictory angles, Heller destroys the illusion that war has a coherent arc or purpose. This forces the reader into a position of permanent disorientation, reflecting the soldiers’ own experience of being trapped in a system designed to be both incomprehensible and inescapable. The chaos isn’t just depicted, it is enacted through the very form of the novel proving that absurdity, not rationality, defines the experience of modern warfare.

Throughout *Catch-22*, Heller presents rules and reasoning that seem logical on the surface but collapse into contradiction the moment they are applied. The soldiers are caught in endless loops where every attempt at survival only reinforces their entrapment. Joseph Heller writes, “Catch-22 says they have a right to do anything we can’t stop them from doing” (407). This paradox traps the characters in a system where logic becomes self-defeating, mirroring the novel’s fragmented structure and forcing the reader to grapple with the same kind of disorientation. Heller’s use of circular reasoning in both plot and prose locks both the characters and the reader inside the absurd machinery of war.

If Heller's use of absurdity traps both his characters and readers inside a self-defeating system, it is the novel's very language that does the work of that entrapment. The chaos and circular logic are not just in the plot or characters. They are rooted in the fundamental way the novel handles words, meaning, and thought itself. Gary W. Davis, in his critical study of *Catch-22*, explores how Heller deliberately fractures language to mirror the breakdown of reason and order in the world the novel portrays. He writes, "Catch-22 reveals that the men of the Air Corps must now see as arbitrary and perhaps illusory what they previously accepted as 'proper' relations between nature and artifice, things and words, or even events and interpretations" (70). This observation shows that Heller's absurdism operates not just through plot or events but through a deeper attack on the reliability of language itself. By turning basic communication and logic into tools of confusion, Heller intensifies the feeling of disorientation that traps both characters and readers inside the absurd machinery of war.

Davis's analysis shows how Heller's novel dismantles the basic trust between language and meaning. In *Catch-22*, names, rules, and facts no longer guarantee clarity or stability; instead, they confuse, mislead, and trap. This reflects the novel's fragmented structure, where cause and effect break down and actions rarely lead to logical outcomes. The Air Corps doesn't just create obstacles for the characters, it redefines reality so that navigating confusion becomes their main challenge. By undermining the reliability of language, Heller mirrors the larger collapse of reason in the world he portrays, forcing readers to confront a system where survival depends not on understanding but on adapting to disorder.

Beyond the collapse of language and logic in *Catch-22*, Heller's use of repetition deepens the novel's sense of absurdity. Patterns repeat themselves with slight variations, reflecting a world where no true progress is possible. David M. Craig, in *Tilting at Mortality: Narrative*

Strategies in Joseph Heller's Fiction, argues that Heller's use of repetition traps characters inside cycles where meaning itself collapses. He writes, "A pattern of unfolding language and plot structures repeats itself with minor variations. The sequence makes sanity and insanity mean the same thing, because each calls up and resolves into the other. This textual oscillation yields no resolution" (Craig 63). This emphasizes that Heller's repetition is not random but essential to how *Catch-22* portrays the absurdity of war.

Rather than simply repeating events, the novel traps its characters through repeated phrases, slogans, and bureaucratic language that lose all connection to reality. Sanity and insanity become interchangeable because the words that define them have been emptied of meaning by constant, mechanical use. This is especially clear when Yossarian reflects on the famous paradox: "*That's some catch, that Catch-22,*" he observed. "*It's the best there is,*" Doc Daneeka agreed (Heller 46). The repeated invocation of "Catch-22" becomes a self-reinforcing loop where the phrase substitutes for explanation, trapping both the characters and the reader inside language that no longer points to anything real. Heller's obsessive recycling of official language shows how war sustains itself not through logic or morality, but through the empty repetition of words that deny understanding or escape. This breakdown of logic and language lays the foundation for Heller's deeper critique of the myths that traditionally frame war as meaningful or noble.

Absurdity in *Catch-22* does not simply create confusion for its own sake. Heller uses absurdist language, structure, and characterization to directly attack the myths that frame war as rational, heroic, or morally necessary. By constructing a world where logic fails, authority is arbitrary, and survival depends on navigating meaningless systems, he strips away any lingering illusions about honor, duty, or noble sacrifice, creating a commentary against war. The novel shows a military structure that runs not on courage or principle, but on empty repetition,

contradiction, and bureaucratic inertia. This absurdity is not accidental; it is a strategy designed to expose how the language of heroism can mask systems that are indifferent to human life.

Olivier Couder's analysis of *Catch-22* explains how Heller's absurdist humor plays a crucial role in dismantling the moral frameworks that traditionally shape war narratives.

In his article, "*What's the Catch? The Nexus of Absurdist Humour, Incongruity, and Characterisation in Joseph Heller's Catch-22*," Olivier Couder writes, "The absurdist humour forces readers to let go of the schemata and the characterisation categories they are so used to rely on in the reading process... thus foregrounding the thematic message of the novel" (Couder 508). By forcing readers to abandon familiar narrative patterns and moral categories, Heller denies them the comfort of interpreting war through traditional lenses of honor or purpose. His absurd techniques break apart the structures that normally make violence seem meaningful, and instead, exposing war as an endless, self-justifying absurdity.

Couder's point reinforces the idea that Heller's absurdism serves a critical ethical purpose. Readers are trained to expect certain arcs in war stories; bravery leading to triumph or suffering leading to redemption. However, *Catch-22* systematically disrupts these patterns. By repeating contradictions, deflating authority figures, and collapsing distinctions between sanity and insanity, the novel strips war of its supposed moral center. There is no noble cause here, only survival within a system built on absurd rules. By breaking down the reader's expectations, Heller refuses to let war be rationalized or romanticized. The absurd form of the novel becomes a mirror to the absurd reality of twentieth-century warfare, where traditional values no longer apply.

This collapse of traditional meaning is captured when Yossarian bitterly observes, "The enemy... is anybody who's going to get you killed, no matter which side he's on" (Heller 122). In

a single line, Heller strips away all patriotic justification for the war, replacing it with a raw survival instinct that sees through the absurdity of national allegiances. There are no grand causes or righteous sides, only systems of power indifferent to human life. Through Yossarian's disillusionment, Heller breaks down the comforting narratives readers expect from war stories, setting the stage for the novel's portrayal of war not as tragedy or necessity, but as a senseless and self-perpetuating machine.

This exposure of war's absurd reality is sharpened further by Heller's use of style itself as a weapon. Through dry, repetitive, and emotionless narration, *Catch-22* portrays war not as a necessary evil or a tragic sacrifice, but as a hollow system sustained by meaningless rituals and blind obedience. In her article, "*Acquiescence in the Presence of Absurdity: On the Zero Degree Writing in Catch-22*," Jingwen Xu writes, "It is the absurdity of the omnipresent forces and the meaningless rituals that become the targets of Heller's satirical attacks" (Xu 93). Heller's absurdist style tears down the idea of war as a noble or necessary enterprise by portraying it instead as a series of empty performances carried out by powerless individuals trapped in a system that no longer even pretends to make sense.

Xu's observation sharpens the argument that Heller's absurdity is not random but pointed and political. In *Catch-22*, the endless missions, the contradictory orders, and the official jargon are not just frustrating. They are also meant to mock the entire structure of military authority. The soldiers' lives are governed by nonsensical rules that nobody questions because the rituals of war continue automatically, long after any real purpose has disappeared. Heller's style forces readers to see that what is often framed as duty, honor, or sacrifice is, in reality, a joke sustained by meaningless repetition. By hollowing out both the language and the actions of war, *Catch-22* shows that the system is fundamentally absurd.

The emptiness of wartime ritual is captured perfectly when Heller describes the soldiers' situation in cold, repetitive language: "The enemy... is anybody who's going to get you killed, no matter which side he's on, and that includes Colonel Cathcart" (Heller 122–23). In this flat, emotionless description, Heller strips war down to its raw mechanics: endless killing justified by rules that are ignored whenever convenient. There is no valor or higher purpose. Only an endless cycle of violence sustained by blind repetition and bureaucratic inertia. By presenting this reality without dramatic flair or emotional cues, Heller's style mirrors the hollow, automated cruelty of the system he satirizes, preparing readers to see the deeper moral collapse beneath the chaos.

Heller's absurdist techniques do not just reveal the chaos and confusion of war; they are calculated moves designed to expose the deeper moral failures of the systems that wage it. Through apparent disorder, Heller forces readers to recognize the emptiness and brutality of bureaucratic war structures that are otherwise masked by language, ritual, and tradition. In his article, "*The Structure and Meaning of Catch-22*," Robert Merrill writes, "What appears to be formless chaos is in fact a brilliant strategy to expose not only the worst excesses of the modern bureaucracy but also the complacent acceptance of this system on the part of everyone involved, including Heller's readers" (Merrill 140). Heller's absurd style breaks down not only the illusion of rational war-making, but also challenges the reader's willingness to accept confusion, repetition, and meaningless violence as normal features of wartime experience.

Merrill's insight clarifies that the confusion and chaos in *Catch-22* are not flaws but essential to the novel's larger critique of war. The seeming disorder of the novel mirrors the actual disorder embedded in modern warfare, where authority operates without accountability and death becomes routine. By disorienting readers, Heller mirrors the disorientation soldiers experience, stripping away any narrative that might present war as coherent, rational, or noble. In

doing so, he confronts readers with their own tendency to normalize absurdity and violence when it is packaged as patriotism or duty. The absurd form of the novel becomes a necessary tool to reveal war not as a grand or tragic adventure, but as a system of madness perpetuated by those too comfortable to question it.

This calculated exposure of systemic brutality is evident when Milo Minderbinder bombs his own squadron for profit, justifying the attack with perfect bureaucratic logic. Milo explained.

I distribute my plum tomatoes in markets all over Pianosa under an assumed name so that Colonel Cathcart and Colonel Korn can buy them up from me under their assumed names at four cents apiece and sell them back to me the next day at five cents apiece.

They make a profit of one cent apiece, I make a profit of three and a half cents apiece, and everybody comes out ahead (Heller 232).

In this absurd episode, personal and national loyalties are erased under the logic of capitalism, and violence is sanitized through emotionless, matter-of-fact language. By presenting the bombing of American soldiers as just another business transaction, Heller reveals the true moral bankruptcy hiding beneath official justifications for war. The casual brutality Milo embodies is not an exception; it is the logical extension of a system where human life is secondary to bureaucracy, profit, and meaningless ritual.

This deliberate exposure of war's absurdity finds further support in Laura Hidalgo Downing's analysis of *Catch-22*. In her article "How to Do Things with Contradiction: Exploring Humour in Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*," Downing argues that Heller's use of contradiction is not random but a calculated method to strip away the myths of order and honor surrounding warfare. Through relentless contradictions and reversals, Heller forces readers to experience a world

where logic, morality, and meaning collapse, mocking the idea that war can ever be coherent or noble.

Downing writes, “The recursion of contradictory structures manifests a systematic tendency towards the subversion of the distinction between positive and negative and towards the blurring of boundaries between opposites” (Downing 129). By destroying the stability of basic concepts of good versus evil and/or sane versus insane, Heller reveals how language and logic are twisted to serve a violent, indifferent system. Instead of offering clarity, these contradictions dismantle the illusions that traditionally give war its moral justification.

This blurring is sharply illustrated in the scene where Major Major is promoted to squadron commander entirely by accident, simply because nobody knew what else to do with him. The absurdity of promoting someone for being both successful and unsuccessful at the same time mocks the military’s obsession with appearances over competence. Promotions, leadership, and authority are shown not as earned through merit but distributed through meaningless, contradictory logic. Through this ridiculous system, Heller reveals that the military's supposed order and hierarchy are built on absurd foundations, dismantling the idea that war is a rational or honorable enterprise.

The use of absurdity not only disorients readers but also serves a deeper satirical purpose: to mock and expose the moral bankruptcy of the systems that support war. James Nagel, in his article "Catch-22 and Angry Humor: A Study of the Normative Values of Satire," argues that Heller’s humor is not random chaos but a targeted attack on the institutions and ideologies that perpetuate violence. Absurdity, for Heller, becomes a weapon of anger. It becomes a method to reveal the stupidity, cruelty, and hypocrisy hidden beneath the surface of respectable society. Through this strategy, *Catch-22* dismantles the illusions that frame war as heroic or meaningful.

Nagel explains, “Modern angry humor, which has its historical foundation in Juvenalian satire, is an attack on the basic principles and fundamental order of society” (Nagel 103). Instead of relying on old, conservative ideals of honor or patriotism, Heller uses absurdity to suggest that these traditional values themselves are rotten. His satire turns the logic of authority inside out, forcing readers to see the brutal nonsense at the heart of bureaucratic power and military tradition. Rather than reassuring readers with familiar norms, *Catch-22* leaves them questioning whether any real moral order still exists.

This brutal exposure of false ideals is especially clear in the scene where soldiers must sign endless "Loyalty Oaths" just to receive their meals: “The important thing is to keep them pledging,’ he explained to his cohorts. ‘It doesn’t matter whether they mean it or not.” (Heller 113). Captain Black’s Loyalty Oath Crusade turns patriotism into an empty, bureaucratic ritual, mocking the very idea that loyalty or nationalism has real meaning in a system built on control and fear. Heller shows that in the world of war, absurd practices like these aren't accidental; they are necessary tools used to maintain a corrupt and senseless order. Beyond mocking the rituals of authority, Heller's absurdism also operates as a targeted political attack on the very foundations of society itself.

To um things up, Joseph Heller’s absurdist techniques in *Catch-22* are not random flourishes or literary excess; they are an essential craft that enables the novel’s storytelling. The fragmentation, contradictions, and surreal humor do not simply mirror the chaos of war, they construct the very system in which the characters must survive. Without the breakdown of logic, the endless repetition of empty rituals, and the collapse of moral categories, Heller could not have fully captured the disorienting, senseless experience of modern warfare. Absurdism

in *Catch-22* is therefore not an aesthetic choice separate from the novel's content, but the only authentic method available for telling this kind of story.

In crafting a novel where disorder and irrationality rule every level of structure, Heller forces readers to experience war as his characters do: trapped, confused, and stripped of traditional frameworks of meaning. The absurd form mirrors the absurd reality it critiques. Every cycle, every contradictory rule, every bureaucratic absurdity the characters face deepens the reader's own sense of being caught inside a system without exit. This collapse of traditional narrative and moral expectations becomes the most truthful way to represent the horror and madness of modern war, which no longer fits within neat categories of heroism, honor, or sacrifice.

By weaponizing absurdity, Heller demolishes the comforting myths that have historically shaped war literature. There is no noble quest, no moral clarity, no redemptive suffering in *Catch-22*—only the mechanical continuation of meaningless violence. In stripping away traditional narrative arcs and replacing them with chaos, Heller not only critiques the systems of war but also challenges readers' expectations about what stories about war should look like. The absurdist structure does not diminish the novel's impact; it is the foundation that makes its devastating message possible.

Ultimately, *Catch-22* stands as a masterwork not just because of its content but because of its form. Heller's genius lies in recognizing that to portray the true madness of war, the novel itself had to become mad. Through absurdism, he crafts a story where content and style are inseparable, each reinforcing the other to expose the brutal, senseless machinery of modern conflict. In doing so, Heller does not merely tell a story about the absurdity of war—he makes readers live inside it, with no comforting illusions left intact.

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