

## **Chapter 1. Theoretical background**

### **1.1 Philosophical insight into the Absurd**

The late nineteenth century brought considerable changes to the way in which people viewed life. In the face of the changing world and the crisis of traditional values, solutions offered by classical philosophies were no longer valid. This entailed the emergence of new philosophical currents, which provided new perspectives on life, that is, existentialism and nihilism.

Existentialism opposed classical philosophies which believed in some universal laws to which all individuals are subjected. Existentialists, on the contrary, stated that each person is unique, being an active agent of their own lives (Guignon 2000: 265). Jean-Paul Sartre defined existentialism as “a doctrine which makes a human life possible and, in addition, declares that every truth and every action implies a human setting and a human subjectivity.” Sartre also adds that “not only is man what he conceives himself to be, but he is also what he wills himself to be after his thrust towards existence. (...) Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself. Such is the first principle of existentialism” (quoted in Logarta 2009: 34). This principle entails the following assumptions:

- “existence belongs only to human beings, and not to animals or inanimate objects;” a person is not a subject of circumstances, but rather a manner of his own existence,
- people live their lives in different ways, hence there is no standard course of life’s development or stages that everyone has to go through; human beings are in the constant process of becoming,
- therefore, the essence of human being is determined by a person’s choices and actions, or, in the words of Sartre, “existence precedes essence,”
- people tend to fall into the “herd” mentality rather than define their existence on their own (Tyndall...: 121).

In other words, existentialism assumed the lack of structure to reality, which gives every individual freedom to structure their own lives. What is more, there is no universal truth that people should search for, instead everyone is free to establish their own truth and ideals. As Kierkegaard put it, “What matters is to find my purpose (...), the crucial thing is to find a truth that is truth for me, to find the idea for which I am willing to live and die” (2013: 7). As a consequence, the only basic fact in life is existence, on which people create their essence.

Existentialists thus believed that people should look for the meaning of their lives on their own rather than use the readily available explanations, offered, for instance, by religion. However, the fact that there is no universal answer to the question of life's meaning makes life absurd (Wartenberg 2008). The problem of life's absurdity was elaborated upon by another philosophical current, that is, absurdism, closely related to existentialism and nihilism. The most prominent figure of absurdism was Albert Camus, who expressed his outlook on life in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1953). Camus maintained that although the human being and the world are not absurd, the combination of the two is absurd. In other words, the lack of fit between the human being and the world they inhabit results in the absurdity of their life. "What is absurd," Camus continued, "is the confrontation of the irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart" (1953: 24). The world is neither rational nor irrational, existing in itself, however, people have a tendency to personify it and attributing some deeper meaning to it. As a result, human beings attempt to find rationality in the world so that it makes sense to them, but the world does not suit our "expectation of receiving satisfying answers to our questions and our demand that it meet that very expectation. Life is absurd because we find ourselves in a world that is not suited to our need for it to make sense to us" (Wartenberg 2008). This results in dissatisfaction, disillusionment, and lack of fulfilment.

What is more, Camus did not believe that life has a meaning: "I don't know whether this world has a meaning that transcends it. But I know I do not know that meaning and that it is impossible for me just now to know it. What can a meaning outside my condition mean to me?" (1954: 54). Although the search for meaning is doomed to failure, the feeling of absurd can be overcome by accepting it and living a sober and creative life (Golomb 1995: 123). The absurd, however, is necessary for authentic living, which means that meaning and happiness are to be found within the absurdity of life (Marmysz 2003: 47).

Nagel (2010: 7) summarized the assumptions of absurdism in the following way:

- each meaningful existence has some fundamental values and goals, considered as valuable by an individual,
- however, they lack in final value nonetheless,
- hence the gap between aspirations and reality that cannot be bridged,
- ergo life is absurd, and thus meaningless.

What links absurdism and existentialism is the belief in the lack of inherent meaning of life and fixed, universal truths, despite people's attempts to ascribe some meaning to it.

## 1.2 War and Absurd: General Views.

As absurdism largely developed as a response to the horrors of two world wars, it is unsurprising that many absurdist texts touched upon the absurdity of war in general. However, the very idea that wars are absurd was by no means new. For example, in 1846 Dick wrote about the moral absurdity of war, pointing out that it can never determine who is right or has a right to certain territory, but who is stronger in terms of physical force. He also mentioned another paradox:

“It is absurd and preposterous in a pecuniary and commercial point of view; for, after millions of pounds or dollars are wasted, and hundreds of thousands of human beings sacrificed to the demon of war, every thing generally returns, when the war has ceased, to nearly the same state as when it commenced, with this dismal exception, that thousands of immortal beings have been wickedly slaughtered (...) and millions of money spent.” (1846: 12)

As Aichinger (1975: 81) remarks, the relationship between the absurdist literature and the war originated after the horrors World War I, in which “the ennobling aspect of combat” was lost, and was further reinforced after World War II, as well as, in the United States, after the Vietnam war, which was considered by many as pointless, as none of the nations involved in the conflict achieved their goals. As a consequence, literature started to villainize war, military institutions, political leaders who supported war, etc., aiming at dispelling myths that glorified war (Aichinger 1975 85).

Novels of war were thus either scenically absurd, situationally absurd, or absurd in a sense described by Aichinger. Dalton Trumbo’s *Johnny Got His Gun*, for instance, belongs to the second category. The novel is a story of Joe Bonham, who was extremely wounded during the war, losing his limbs, eyes, ears, tongue, nose, having become merely a scientific curiosity for doctors who do not treat him as a human being anymore. However, the absurdity of his situation lies in the fact that Bonham’s brain works properly, thus he is aware of his dramatic situation, but he cannot even kill himself, although it is the only thing he wishes for. As Sanborn (2012: 212) notes, the novel implies that Joe is just one of thousands of people like him, “men so wounded they cannot die, no matter how much they desire to; men savaged by the violence of combat and saved by the science of modern medicine.” On the one hand, Bonham is lucky to have been saved by doctors, but, ironically, his life in this condition is a

course (Heyman 2002: 88-89). The war was a source of many other absurdities, depicted by authors writing about the war.

### **1.3 Literature of the Absurd – the overview.**

Literature of the absurd, in short, is concerned with the absurdity of human life. The antecedent of the genre was Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* (1896), as well as Franz Kafka's *The Trial* and *Metamorphosis*; the genre also had its roots in surrealism and expressionism. The proper literature of the absurd, however, was born after World War II in France, as a "rebellion against basic beliefs and values in traditional culture and literature" (Abrams and Harpham 2011: 1), being a part of an "anti-literary" movement. Absurdism, as it has been mentioned in Chapter 1.1., refused to accept the traditional views of the rational world and the meaningful existence of an individual. This rebellion thus came to be expressed in literature, and especially in drama, which was called "Theatre of the Absurd." The growing popularity of the genre in the 1950s can be attributed to the spread of Camus's and Sartre's ideas. Martin Esslin, who coined the phrase "Theatre of the Absurd," wrote that its underlying attitude is:

"sense that the certitudes and unshakable basic assumptions of former ages have been swept away, that they have been tested and found wanting, that they have been discredited as cheap and somewhat childish illusions. The decline of religious faith was masked until the end of the Second World War by the substitute religions of faith in progress, nationalism, and various totalitarian fallacies. All this was shattered by the war." (1961: 23)

Absurdist literature is thus preoccupied with the meaninglessness and absurdity of the human life. However, it does not aim at arguing whether the world is absurd or not, but rather presents the absurdity as such. This could only be expressed by means of equally senseless and absurd literary forms, abandoning "rational devices and discursive thought" (Bennett 2011: 3). As Eugene Ionesco, the author of *The Bald Soprano* (1949) and *The Lesson* (1951), put it, "People drowning in meaninglessness can only be grotesque, their sufferings can only appear tragic by derision." Summing up, what forms the conventions of the Theatre of the Absurd is "the concept of incongruity," manifested in "not matching what happens on stage with what is being said" (Bennett 2011: 6). What is more, absurdist plays abandon classical

conventions of the theatre, such as the unity of space, time, and action, the logic of cause and effect, psychological motivations of the protagonists, or morals (Morrison 2010: 1).

Pavis (1998: 2) enumerates three strategies of the absurd:

- the nihilistic absurd, in which drawing conclusions about the world or philosophical implications is virtually impossible; typical of Eugene Ionesco's and Wolfgang Hildesheimer's plays,
- the absurd as a "structural principle used to reflect the universal chaos," present in the plays of Samuel Beckett and Arthur Adamov,
- the satirical absurd, which gives a rather realistic account of the represented reality (Friedrich Durrenmatt, Max Frisch, Gunter Grass, Vaclav Havel).

As Pavis (1998: 1) notes, the birth of the Theatre of the Absurd was Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano* (1950) and Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1953). The former text, subtitled as "the tragedy of language," was one of the first dramas in which new dramatic techniques were a response to the absurdity of human existence. In Ionesco's 1952 play *The Chairs* the protagonists, the old man and the old woman, fill the stage with empty chairs and address absent people, which emphasizes the absurdity and emptiness of the universe.

However, probably the most important figure associated with the Theatre of the Absurd was Samuel Beckett (1906-1989). His play *Waiting for Godot* presents a story of two men, waiting for a person named Godot, without being sure if Godot even exists. The play was strikingly different from what was considered the traditional drama – there was no particular plot, logic, cause and effect, no climax or moral, and ultimately no meaning. One critic summarized the play, taking a line from it, "Nothing happens, nobody goes, it's awful." As Abrams and Harpham (2011: 2) point out, *Waiting for Godot* is absurd in two ways, as it mocks the traditional assumptions of the Western culture and parodies the conventions of traditional dramatic forms. Beckett's plays are tragic, although not in a classical sense, but their tragic quality lies rather in "its pain at human suffering, in its dismay at life's brevity, in its frustration at absurdity" (quoted in Newton 2008: 145).

Another significant figure of the genre was Jean Genet (1910-1986), the author of such plays as *The Balcony*, *The Blacks*, *The Maids*, and *The Screens*. As Esslin (1961: 200) puts it, Genet's plays "are concerned with expressing his own feeling of helplessness and solitude when confronted with the despair and loneliness of man caught in the hall of mirrors of the human condition." Also early plays by Harold Pinter and Edward Albee are written in a similar style. What is more, many novels incorporated the elements of absurdism, including *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, which will be discussed in the subsequent chapters.



## Chapter 2. Joseph Heller *Catch-22*

### 2.1. About Joseph Heller

Joseph Heller (1923-1999) was a “major voice in post-1950 American fiction” (Enc. 616). He was born in a Russian Jewish family; at the age of 19 he enlisted in the US Army’s 12<sup>th</sup> Air Force Division. Without a doubt, these experiences influenced him and were an inspiration for his works. After the war finished, he completed his studies at New York and Columbia universities. In 1953 he published *Catch-22* and since then became a full-time writer. In 1981 Heller was diagnosed with Guillain-Barre syndrome, which left him temporarily paralyzed. The writer died of a heart attack in 1999.

*Catch-22* was Heller’s most famous book and he even adapted it for the stage. He wrote the next novel, *Something Happened*, only twelve years after the publication of *Catch-22*. The novel received mainly positive reviews and Kurt Vonnegut himself stated that it was a masterpiece. *Something Happened* is a story narrated by Robert Slocum, a middle-management executive living in New York, and shows “the dehumanizing weight of the business world and the emotional bankruptcy of bourgeois American experience” (Shaffer 2011: 615). The character has a wife and three children, facing typical problems at home and at work. However, he is full of apathy, anxiety, and alienation, feeling deprived of confidence and courage. The novel does not have a specific plot, as most of it focuses on various events from the protagonist’s life, with little connection or cause-and-effect logic.

The publication of Heller’s next novel, *Good as Gold*, took place in 1979. In that text the author touches upon the themes of Jewish identity, showing the struggles of the main protagonist, Bruce Gold, a New York college professor. The major section of the book also focuses on Gold’s visit to Washington, D.C., after being appreciated by the president. This type of character is typical of Joseph Heller, as Parini (2003: 194) defines him, “the outsider: the male protagonist who is by some varying circumstance placed in an environment in which he is not at ease.”

In the 1980s Heller published *God Knows* (1984) and *Picture This* (1988), both of which “foreground the unreliability of history and the absurdities of its written record,” with the author being satirical about religion, war, money, and politics (Shaffer 2011: 615). Heller’s other novels included *Closing Time* (1994) and *Portrait of an Artist as an Old Man* (2000).

## 2.2. *Catch-22* as an absurdist novel

*Catch-22* is a novel set during World War II; while some critics state that the war is merely a setting, for others it is the subject of the book. Indeed, although it concentrates on the absurdities of military conflicts, “the madness of existence extends beyond the military into civilian life” (Whitehead 2014: 56). Parini (2003: 193) describes the book as a “mad swirl of events, settings, and circumstances that are calculated to bewilder,” whereas describing the plot of the book is “somewhat quixotic enterprise.”

The main protagonist of the story is Yossarian, a pilot in the air force, and the war experience is hell for him. Yossarian and other pilots are promised that they will only fly a certain number of missions and then be sent home; however, they are still required to stay. The protagonist questions the meaning of the war, wondering why he has to risk his life constantly. He attempts to fake illnesses and insanity in order to be discharged from the service, but finds out that it is impossible because of *Catch-22*, which is explained in the following way:

“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. Orr would be crazy to fly more missions and sane if he didn’t, but if he were sane he had to fly them. If he flew them he was crazy and didn’t have to; but if he didn’t want to he was sane and had to. Yossarian was moved very deeply by the absolute simplicity of this clause of *Catch-22* and let out a respectful whistle” (C22 5).

Another *Catch-22* is that Yossarian and other pilots are always required to obey the commands of officers. Therefore, even though at first it was stated that one has to fly 40 missions in order to be sent home, Yossarian must fly more missions only because his commanding officer constantly increases the number of missions. As Doc Daneeka explains to Yossarian, “even if the colonel were disobeying a Twenty-seventh Air Force order by making you fly more missions, you’d still have to fly them, or you’d be guilty of disobeying an order of his” (C22 43).

The self-contradictory rule of *Catch-22* is thus extremely absurd in itself. Nevertheless, Heller, unlike other absurdist writers as Pynchon or Vonnegut, does not accept absurdity “as an ontological fact,” but rather as a “by-product of the bureaucracies in control

of modern mass society” (Harris and Harris 1972: 34-35). Indeed it is undeniable that the book criticizes military bureaucracy, also representing the American government on the whole; according to Booker (2002: 33) the novel’s intention in the times when it was written was to criticize McCarthy’s anticommunist policies, which went to absurd extremes. However, *Catch-22* is also considered to have a broader, more universal meaning, applying to all institutions which enforced normality and routine in the post-war US. The central values for the 1950s, Booker claims, are thus reversed in Heller’s book through the presentation of the polar opposition between the normal and the abnormal.

The world of Yossarian is a world of the abnormal, a world where absurd reigns. One air pilot, Dunbar, cultivates his boredom so that his time will pass more slowly. He “was working so hard at increasing his life span that Yossarian thought he was dead” (4). Yossarian himself does unusual things, for instance, he is allowed to eat all fresh fruit that he wants because of his liver condition; however, he does not eat any, fearing that his liver will improve, hence he gives the fruit away. Other soldiers also go to great lengths to avoid missions, for example, one day mess sergeant Snark adds soap to the sweet potatoes, as a result of which all men were sick and the mission was naturally cancelled. These situations show the absurdity of the war, as no one would do any of these things in normal circumstances; in the times of war, however, men would do the most absurd things only to avoid putting their lives at risk one more time. This world is thus driven by “contradiction, antinomy, anguish, or impotence,” as Camus wrote in *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

On the other hand, the main protagonist, Yossarian, represents the normal, being an individual who attempts to fight the abnormal and the absurd, that is, the military bureaucracy. However, *Catch-22* is the best example of its absurdity and, apparently, it is impossible to fight it, therefore Yossarian runs away. The protagonist also mentions the absurdity of war itself; in his conversation with Clevinger, he says that winning the war is actually pointless for those who died during the war. Clevinger, however, accuses him of giving comfort to the enemy, to which Yossarian responds, “The enemy is anybody who is going to get you killed” (C22 94). This also includes Colonel Cathcart, the commanding officer, who constantly raises the number of missions which are in fact pointless.

The absurdity of Yossarian’s situation indeed lies in the fact that he is surrounded by hostile forces, thus he feels hatred not only for the enemies of his country, but also for his countrymen, who put him in this situation. The flaws of Yossarian’s antagonists are exaggerated so as to emphasize their absurdity. For instance, Colonel Cathcart is a grotesque figure overwhelmed with his ambition to become a general. One day Cathcart sees a

photograph in *Saturday Evening Post*, which shows a colonel whose chaplain conducts prayers before missions; since then the Colonel is obsessed with having his picture published in *Saturday Evening Post*. In order to achieve his goal, he will stop at nothing and try many different things, even starting prayers. On the whole, the fact that he increases the number of missions is motivated not by any particular strategic reasons but rather his desire to be promoted, which makes his actions even more absurd (Doskow 2008: 37)

General Peckem, similarly, is driven by an ambition to replace General Dreedle, and tries to make Dreedle's life more difficult, for example, through issuing a directive requiring "all tents in the Mediterranean theatre to be pitched along parallel lines with entrances facing back proudly toward the Washington Monument," even though it was "none of General Peckem's goddam business" (C22 17).

There is also Captain Black, who is "sadistic and vindictive" (Doskow 2008: 36). He starts Glorious Loyalty Oath Campaign, which means that in order to get a meal, get a haircut, or receive anything that is necessary for life, soldiers have to sign the oath, cite the Pledge of Allegiance, sing "The Star Spangled Banner," and perform other patriotic acts. However, this absurd rule, which was intended to impose some kind of order, results in an even greater disorder and chaos, as soldiers were busy singing, pledging, and signing, hence the missions were delayed. All these characters "selfishly, often maliciously, run the machinery war;" they are obsessed with the advancing their careers, often at the expense of other people (Lupack 1995: 49). Colonel Korn explains this in the following quote: "Everyone teaches us to aspire to higher things. A general is higher than a colonel, and a colonel is higher than a lieutenant colonel. So we're both aspiring" (C22 327). However, their motivations are selfish and malicious indeed.

Therefore, as Brustein (2008: 6) writes, *Catch-22* is an indictment of war profiteers, whose embodiment is Milo Minderbinder, the mess officer of Yossarian's squadron, who runs the M&M Enterprises, a corrupt syndicate with a financial motive. Minderbinder does business with all nations, except Russia, which means that he profits from cooperation with both sides of the conflict. At one point, he bombs a German bridge for Americans and, at the same time, direct the anti-aircraft defence for the Germans. When Yossarian's squadron bombs the bridge, a man is killed, but Milo refuses to accept his responsibility for his death. He says, "If I can persuade the Germans to pay me a thousand dollars for every plane they shoot down, why shouldn't I take it?" (C22 196), to which Yossarian responds by explaining that the Germans are the enemy. Minderbinder, however, fails to see the consequences of his excessive profit seeking, such as the death of many people (Henriksen 1997: 252).

Another interesting figure, which Brustein (2008: 34) calls a “typical Heller blend of humor and horror,” is Major Major. His father decided to call his son Major Major Major, as a joke; he spent his whole life in isolation and misery. He becomes appointed major by mistake, thus he is not respected by his inferiors. At some point, he decides that he “never sees anyone in his office while he’s in his office” (C22 81) When Appleby, one of the pilots, is told this by Sergeant Towser, he thinks Sergeant is trying to fool him, but then Towser confirms that one can never see Major Major.

Another absurd situation involved Mudd, a soldier referred to as the “dead man in Yossarian’s tent.” The problem is that his belongings remains in the tent because before he died the soldier “had never officially gotten into the squadron, he could never officially be gotten out” (C22 82). This is a Catch-22 situation as well, because there is no one who has the authority to remove his belongings. In theory, the dead man never existed so he cannot be dead either, and Sergeant Towser indeed refuses to admit his existence. Absurd regulations are again disconnected to the reality.

A similar thing happens to Doc Daneeka, a physician in the squadron and Yossarian’s friend. Daneeka is afraid of flying, which is ironical given the fact that he has been assigned to the Air Force. One day he asks another pilot, McWatt, to perform a flight instead of him, which McWatt does, writing Daneeka’s name in the papers. Unfortunately, McWatt kills a young pilot, Kid Sampson, and is so devastated by it that he commits suicide, crashing into a mountain. Ironically, the deaths of Kid Sampson and McWatt upset Colonel Cathcart so much that he decides to increase the number of missions again. This is yet another example of absurdity, as more missions will only mean more deaths. However, the real absurd happens when Doc Daneeka is stated to be dead because, according to the records, he was on the plane with McWatt. When Daneeka himself appears in front of the officers, they refuse to acknowledge that he is alive, insisting that he is dead. A humorous conversation ensues, as one of the officers states, “You’re dead, sir. That’s probably the reason you always feel so cold.” Daneeka tells them they have gone crazy and walks away, which the other officer comments in an equally absurd way, “I’m going to miss him. He was a pretty wonderful guy, wasn’t he?” (C22 263).

Daneeka’s wife is also informed about her husband’s death, which leaves her devastated. One day she receives a letter from Daneeka himself, in which he convinces her that he is still alive. She writes him back, but the letter returns stamped “killed in action,” which results in Mrs. Daneeka’s even greater confusion, until she learns that she is entitled to some financial benefits because of Daneeka’s death. This alleviates her pain and allows to

start a new, more enjoyable life, while her husband is worrying why she never responds to his letters. Daneeka asks other people for help, and finally he writes to his wife again, begging her to “bring his plight to the attention of the War Department,” but as soon as she receives that letter, she also receives one from Colonel Cathcart, including his condolences. Unsurprisingly, Doc Daneeka’s death upset Colonel Cathcart so much that he raised the number of missions again. The whole episode is a farce, so absurd that humorous.

It seems that the world of *Catch-22* is itself an inescapable catch-22 for its protagonists. However, as Melley (2000: 71) remarks, other characters do not want to escape this “iron cage of bureaucracy,” because they are unaware of being trapped within such cage. Bureaucratic rules have thus been internalized by them to such extent that they have influenced their perception of the world, hence their compliance with the system. Yossarian, however, is not one of them, as he fully realizes his entrapment, which makes him more and more frustrated and hopeless with every day, which he expresses in a conversation with Major Danby: “I’ve flown seventy goddam combat missions. Don’t talk to me about fighting to save my country. I’ve been fighting all along to save my country. Now I’m going to fight a little to save myself... If I were to die now, it wouldn’t be for my country. It would be for Cathcart and Korn” (C22 342). This conversation ends with both men agreeing on the hopelessness of their situation.

“Then there is no hope for us, is there?”

“No hope.”

“No hope at all, is there?”

“No, no hope at all.” (C22 345)

Surprisingly, however, hope does appear at the end of the novel, as it is revealed that Orr has managed to escape to Sweden. The chaplain, who delivers this information to Yossarian, sees it as a miracle, a miracle of human intelligence, endurance, and perseverance, a miracle which brings back his faith in God. Yossarian is elated as well and makes a decision about following in Orr’s footsteps, although Major Danby warns him that he will be caught. The chaplain, on the other hand, is overjoyed with the idea and supports Yossarian in it. Escaping to Sweden indeed seems almost impossible, but the example of Orr gives Yossarian hope that his catch-22 situation can be escaped. However, the pilot does not expect to make it to Sweden, but his escape is rather an “absurd act of protest, an antinomian refusal to accept the false dichotomies represented by the hegemonic fiction of *Catch-22*” (Potts 1995: 39). This ending gives hope to the readers rather than leaves them hopeless and cynical; even if Yossarian does

not make it to Sweden, at least he is capable of saying “an existentialist ‘No!’” to the system that destroys him.

### 2.3. Postmodernist techniques

Harris and Harris (1972: 33) write that although *Catch-22* “abandons conventional novelistic techniques, it lacks neither craft nor form;” they call it a radical protest novel. Aldridge (1968: 4-9), in turn, state that it is an anti-novel, and Denniston (1965), similarly, believes *Catch-22* is not a novel, but rather as an episodic and formeless text and a mixture of genres. There is no doubt, indeed, that the absurdist theme is treated with absurdist and postmodernist techniques rather than traditional literary conventions. The very concept of catch-22 is crucial to the novel; if it is understood by the readers, they are capable of “catching” its instances throughout the novel. Catch-22 is thus not only a principle which governs the world of Yossarian and his fellow soldiers, but also a key element of the book’s discourse (Craig 2000: 60-61).

To start with, Heller subverts the literary conventions and thus surprises the readers’ expectations. One of these techniques is to write extensive descriptions of serious scenes, but in the climactic point the seriousness ends with some trivial, ludicrous effect; the scene below illustrates it:

“The captain nodded, and the chaplain gazed at his porous, gray pallor of fatigue and malnutrition with a mixture of pity and esteem. The man’s body was a bony shell inside rumpled clothing that hung on him like a disorderly collection of sacks. Wisps of dried grass were glued all over him; he needed a haircut badly. There were great, dark circles under his eyes. The chaplain was moved almost to tears by the harassed, bedraggled picture the captain presented, and he filled with deference and compassion at the thought of the many severe rigors the poor man had to endure daily. In a voice hushed with humility, he said, ‘Who does your laundry?’” (C22 214)

This scene is typical of the whole novel, which shows the unpredictability and insanity of the world which Yossarian inhabits, through describing absurd situation in which the logic of cause and effect is non-existent.

As Brustein (2008: 5-7) points out, the comic scenes are more effective in demonstrating the macabre of the war than realistic descriptions. However, the atmosphere of

the final chapter is much more gloomy, as the main protagonist walks through the street of Rome, witnessing horror and evil everywhere around him. This final scene makes it clear that Heller's use of comedy is "his artistic response to his vision of transcendent evil, as if the escape route of laughter were the only recourse from a malignant world" (Brustein 2008: 7).

Also Heller's use of language in the novel is interesting. Unlike in traditional novel, the relationship between words and things is non-existent; what readers expect the words to mean is soon negated (Craig 2000: 61). As Marr (2009: 176) argues, language seems to be totally disconnected to rationality, although it is neither irrational nor purposeless. On the contrary, it is a powerful weapon in the hands of bureaucracy, used to ensure social control. For instance, when Major Major is appointed the new squadron commander, he is told by Colonel Cathcart, "But don't think it means anything, because it doesn't. All it means is that you're the new squadron commander" (C22 42). However meaningless it sounds, it in fact has some purpose, that is, to reinforce the structure of domination. In other words, Cathcart is not only informing Major Major about his new position, but he is also diminishing his status and at the same time reaffirming his superior position. This dialogue illustrates the surreal quality of communication in *Catch-22*, where words lose their referential contexts and are placed in new contexts (Marr 2009: 177).

Harris and Harris (1972: 43) also note the recurrent use of tautological, meaningless dialogues. One example can be found in the scene of Clevinger's examination by the Action Board:

"Just what the hell did you mean, you bastard, when you said we couldn't punish you?"  
"I didn't say you couldn't punish me, sir."  
"When?" asked the colonel.  
"When what, sir?"  
"Now you're asking me questions..."  
"I'm sorry, sir. I'm afraid I don't understand your question."  
"When didn't you say we couldn't punish you? Don't you understand my question?"  
"No, sir. I don't understand."  
"You've just told us that. Now suppose you answer my question."  
"But how can I answer it?"  
"That's another question you're asking me." (C22 57)

This dialogue involves also another device used repeatedly by Heller, that is, repetition. In many dialogues, particularly in the above scene, sentences are repeated all over again, offering no solution or conclusion, but further emphasizing the insanity of the reality. Apart

from the comic effect of the use of repetitions, they are also a “vehicle for meaning,” in the words of Craig (2000: 63-65).

### **Chapter 3. *Slaughterhouse-Five* by Kurt Vonnegut**

#### **3.1. The author’s profile**

Kurt Vonnegut was a prolific writer, the author of a number of short stories, novels, dramas, and drawings. He was born in 1922 in Indianapolis; later he started studying science at Cornell University, but soon withdrew and joined the army. The experiences of World War II had a huge impact on Vonnegut and his writing; perhaps the most traumatic event that he witnessed was the bombing of Dresden, in which thousands of German citizens were killed. After the war, he worked as a journalist, studied anthropology, and started to sell short stories to magazines. Vonnegut also taught at universities and delivered public lectures, being highly appreciated for his literary achievements by critics and readers. He died in 2007 (Mattox 2011: 892).

*Slaughterhouse-Five*, published in 1969, remains Vonnegut’s most famous novel, but he wrote texts in different genres and raising different topics. For instance, such stories as “Unready to Wear” (1953), *The Sirens of Titan* (1959), *Cat’s Cradle* (1963), *Galapagos* (1985), or *Timequake* (1996) are imagined scenarios of the consequences of excesses and abuses of technological advances, which leaves “humans in starkly altered and often exaggeratedly difficult situations.” *Jailbird* (1979) and *Mother Night* (1962), in turn, are “highly realistic books.” Vonnegut also wrote essays, speeches, interviews, and reviews; most of his works contained a lot of dark humour and satire, as they often involve the critique of the twentieth century, being an indictment of war, corporate and political power, capitalist individualism, abuses coming from the development of technology, Christian hypocrisy, anthropocentrism, and middle-class values (Mattox 2011: 892).

On the whole, Vonnegut’s writing style involves postmodernist techniques to a large extent, such as fragmented narrative, laconic syntax, short paragraphs, and repetitions. His writings often shift from irony and farce to The writer openly rejected literary traditions and

conventional perception of the world. Vonnegut's works emphasized "the connectedness of humans to each other and the need for common decency to all" (Mattox 2011: 893).

### **3.2. *Slaughterhouse-Five***

The main protagonist of *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a man named Billy Pilgrim, a chaplain's assistant, who is taken prisoner during World War II. He is transported to Dresden, where he witnesses the bombing of the city in 1945. After the war, Billy starts a family, has two children and becomes a successful optometrist, suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder and spends some time in mental institution. One day his plane crashes and Pilgrim is the only survivor; later his wife dies of monoxide poisoning. Billy then goes to a radio talk show, where he describes how he was abducted by aliens and taken to their planet, Tralfamadore, where he learned about their philosophy of life. These events are not presented in chronological order in the novel, instead Billy travels in time to different moments of his life.

It cannot be doubted that one of the central motifs of the novel is the absurdity and cruelty of the war. The bombing of Dresden, witnessed by both the protagonist and the author himself, was a real historical event, but it is not presented in a manner typical of war novels. Federman (1993: 27) explains that the goal of Vonnegut was not to describe the war as it was, but rather offers his own vision of the war. The author is not trying to relive those days, but rather to "rethink, revise his vision of that tragic and absurd moment." The narrator says at the beginning, "All this happened more or less. The war parts, anyway, are pretty much true" (*SF* 1). This opening reduces the certainty of the described events and emphasizes the overall meaninglessness and uncertainty. What is more, it is also a way for the author to detach himself from the text (Coale 2014: 268).

Without a doubt, the supernatural motif makes the novel even more detached from historical fiction, and can be surprising in itself. According to Marvin (2002: 128), the science fiction episodes of the novel "provide an interesting perspective on the issue of why wars happen." The causes of wars, Marvin claims, could be seen better by people if their perception of the past and the future was as clear as their perception of the present. This is impossible though for people, thus Vonnegut introduced Tralfamadorians, the creatures who are capable of this. Billy learns that they believe in the inevitability of all events, therefore, whatever they do, it cannot change the course of events, hence there is no reason for asking "why?" Billy also adopts this passive, indifferent attitude in his life, and every time a death occurs in the plot, the narrator comments it with short "so it goes." However, this very

repetition emphasizes the ridiculousness and absurdity of this attitude, as many things could have been changed if something had been done, and while death in general cannot be escaped, it can be prevented, especially during the war. As a consequence, it can be assumed that wars are not inevitable, however, the question remains why they still happen.

As noted earlier, many critics stated that *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a novel that advocates quietism, fatalism, and a sense of hopelessness. Lundquist (1977: 18-19), for instance, claims that black humour, present throughout the novel, is a consequence of this hopelessness, which expresses the lack of fit between human beings and the world they inhabit. Billy's response to this is escaping into a quietistic world of fantasy, rejecting "the worried ethical, tragical point of view of Western man" and instead adopting "a serene, conscienceless passivity" (Tanner 1990 : 128). His time travel liberates Billy from any constraints, allowing him to create a world in his own imagination. However, it can be stated as well that Pilgrim is rather an object of satire than the expression of the novel's philosophy. Pilgrim's serenity is achieved at the expense of "indifference to moral problems which is the ultimate 'cause' of events like Dresden" (Merrill and Scholl 1990: 146-148).

As Cacicedo (2005: 363-366) points out, Billy's avoidance of the real world and his time travel makes him incapable of facing the traumas that resulted from his World War II experiences, or even the events from his childhood, such as when his father wanted to teach him how to swim by throwing him into the deep end of the pool. It is perhaps the bombing of Dresden that has had the greatest influence on Billy's life, which leads him to a nervous breakdown. As a consequence of these traumatic events, Pilgrim is merely a powerless, passive observer of his life rather than an active agent of his own existence; he has no control over his life. Eventually, however, he faces his trauma, thinking about the quartet singing at his eighteenth wedding anniversary, which he associated somehow with "an experience he had a long ago. He did not travel in time to the experience. He remembered it shimmeringly" (*SF* 78). Finally, he is comforted, "It was all right. (...) everything is all right, and everybody has to do exactly what he does. I learned that on Tralfamadore." For Cacicedo (2005: 367), Billy's personal trauma can be read as a metaphor of the national trauma after bombing Dresden: "if it cannot be recollected consciously, it will be re-enacted."

On the whole, *Slaughterhouse-Five* might be read as a broader metaphor; the very title of the novel is intended to "deconstruct the romantic facet of the traumatic effects of war rather than merely glamorizing them" (Diwany 2014: 88). The character of Billy stands for the parody of the American dream, its victim. His life, traditional and apparently successful at both professional and personal levels, is thus the facet of this American myth, but what he

hides inside is much more gloomy, which results in a kind of schizophrenic duality. It appears that such character, so representative of the American myth, should survive the war and witness the triumph of his country. However, he returns home not as a heroic warrior but rather a “shell-shocked victim exhibiting the classic characteristics of postcombat stress and depression” (Lupack 1995: 111). In the face of these new experiences, Billy seems incapable of continuing his life within the frameworks of this American morality, as the old values are no longer meaningful, and the sense of disillusionment prevails.

His experience is shared with many other characters in the novel, including Eliot Rosewater, who also ends up in a hospital. The post-war trauma leads to Rosewater’s alcoholism, but alcohol is only an ineffective, temporary solution. In his new world he becomes a nihilist, incapable of finding meaning in the old values, in traditional religion, morality, or philosophy. Rosewater, however, does not wish to find the truth, but rather wishes to be given some new lies to believe in, which would make his life at least slightly more meaningful and less empty. As a way of escaping, Rosewater takes to the world of science-fiction and the books by Kilgore Trout. These fantastic books allow Rosewater to view the world from a different perspective and give an illusion of a reality which makes sense (Marvin 2002: 130).

There is also the character of Edgar Derby, a person “mournfully pregnant with patriotism and middle age and imaginary wisdom” (*SF* 67). Derby is a perfect example of an American patriot who cherishes American values, thus he volunteers for the war. However, he is killed, not in the battle though, but he is executed for stealing a teapot. His death is thus senseless and stands for the end of this American idealism; this moment was described by Vonnegut himself as the climax of the story. Ronald Weary, in turn, is a young American, who indulges in his imaginary world, thinking of him and his companions “the Three Musketeers” and fantasizing about what he could do. He saves Billy’s life because he desires to be a glorified hero.

*Slaughterhouse-Five* shows not only the absurdity of the war, but of the world in general. The Tralfamadorians, for instance, call people “the great explainers, explaining why this event is structured as it is, telling how other events may be achieved or avoided.” This is exactly the point raised by absurdists, who pointed out human beings’ demand for rationality in the world which is chaotic and meaningless. The alien creatures, on the other hand, choose not to ask “why?” and accept the world as it is (Freese 2009: 29).

### **3.3. Vonnegut’s writing style**

As Marvin (2002: 114) points out, in *Slaughterhouse-Five* Vonnegut “invented a new way of telling a story,” having realized that conventional techniques of telling stories are insufficient and inadequate for describing war experiences. In traditional novels, the plot is centred around a conflict between characters that leads to a climax and its resolution; in Vonnegut’s story, on the other hand, there was neither climax nor resolution. What is more, traditional war narratives tend to focus on heroic actions of the protagonists, hence glorifying the war, which was not the author’s intention.

The readers are aware of the unconventionality of Vonnegut’s narrative techniques since the very first chapter, where the author explains why he wrote the novel and how he struggled with writing by means of conventional techniques. For instance, Vonnegut informs the readers about the climactic point of his novel, that is, the execution of Edgar Derby, thus destroying any suspense, which he also does throughout the novel. The readers are also informed about various events from Billy’s life, such as the abduction by the Tralfamadorians, being shot, etc. As Allen (2009: 7) describes this, “rather than being a straight line, the narrative chronology of *Slaughterhouse-Five* is more like an ascending, widening spiral that circles over the same territory yet does so from an ever higher and wider perspective.”

Another interesting technique used by Vonnegut is the presence of narrator, who appears on several occasions, which blurs the lines between the narrator and the author of the novel. As Diwany (2014: 85-86) writes, there are three major instances of the author’s appearance:

- on the day of Billy’s daughter’s wedding, the man answers the phone and almost smells the “breath - mustard gas and rose” of the speaker on the other side; this is a reference to Vonnegut’s own words about his disease “late at night sometimes, involving alcohol and telephone. I get drunk, and I drive my wife away with a breath like mustard gas and roses. And then (...) I ask the telephone operators to connect me with this friend or that one, from whom I have not heard in years,”
- in the latrine he stands next to a man who “wailed that he has excreted everything but his brains... That was I. That was me. That was the author of the book,”
- when Billy and his fellow prisoners of war arrive at Dresden, someone behind him says ‘oz,’ “That was I. That was me.”

Another postmodern aspect of *Slaughterhouse-Five* is its fragmented narrative and spatio-temporal uncertainty, in the words of Diwany (2014: 87). Tralfamadorians have a peculiar concept of time:

“The time would not pass. Somebody was playing with the clocks, and not only with the electronic clocks, but the wind-up kind too. The second hand on my watch would twitch once, and a year would pass, and then it would twitch again. There was nothing I could do about it. As an earthling, I had to believe whatever clocks said – and calendars.”

Postmodernist treatment of time and history rejects linearity of time and chronological order of events. In *Slaughterhouse-Five* Vonnegut presents the world of chaos and nothingness, presenting many moments of Billy’s life at once (McKean 1969). Non-linearity also reflects Nietzschean idea of “eternal recurrence,” which ultimately denies any meaning or purpose. What is more, the writer emphasize the insignificance of time; Billy feels so out of place in his world that time has no meaning to him, unlike to his wife, who always has to know the time. Then he starts time traveling, shifting between the past and the future. The whole science fiction episode is thus incorporated in the novel to present this postmodernist perception of time (Diwany 2014: 87).

Or, as Marvin (2002: 115) points out, time travel is Vonnegut’s solution to the problem of impossibility of telling his story by means of traditional techniques. This results in an impression that readers are witnessing the events when they happen rather than reading the text about the past. Furthermore, it also emphasizes the “artificiality of any writing about the past;” while traditional novels depict the events in a rather clear and accurate manner, the readers of *Slaughterhouse-Five* are constantly reminded that they are reading fiction, even despite the initial “All this happened, more or less.” Vonnegut’s novel is thus an interesting combination of fact and fiction, which presents truth by means of fictional techniques. What is even more, the science-fiction thread allows to overcome yet another problem of telling Vonnegut’s story: “There is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre” (*SF* 10). The author himself does not present any explicit point of view on the war, but allows the readers to make connections between short but vivid scenes and form their own opinions. However, the overall message of these scenes is that the bombing of Dresden, however it can be motivated, cannot be justified given the death of so many people.

On the other hand, Allen (2009: 9) notes that despite the lack of chronological narration, the novel still offers its readers some story, building towards the bombing of

Dresden. Therefore, Allen argues, *Slaughterhouse-Five* is neither a conventional novel nor a purely experimental novel, but it is rather “one superimposed on the other.” While the parts describing Pilgrim’s life are relatively easy to follow, forming a kind of Bildungsroman, the Tralfamadorian parts are much more metaphorical than literal, with “no beginning, no middle, no end, no suspense, no moral, no causes, no effects” (*SF* 40), serving as a vehicle for Vonnegut to convey certain messages about the nature of life, death, and time. The contradictory perceptions of these problems by people on Earth and Tralfamadorians are thus reflected in differing narrative structures.

## Conclusions

All things considered, it is unsurprising that the theme of absurdity is often raised in war novels, as absurdity seems to be at its peak during the war. The atrocities of the war, however, are difficult to depict by means of conventional narrative techniques, especially if the authors witnessed those cruelties themselves. This is the case with Joseph Heller and Kurt Vonnegut, who experienced the horrors of the war *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, which are classical examples of postmodernist fiction. Both authors use postmodernist techniques to present the war, such as fragmented and episodic narrative, non-linearity of the plot, the lack of chronological order of events, traditional structures of the plot, and the cause-and-effect relationships. In both novels, the use of language is far from conventional, as there is no relationship between what is being said and what is happening. What is more, Heller makes an extensive use of comic scenes, which is his way of depicting the absurdity and evil of the war. Vonnegut, in turn, introduces the concept of time travel, which allows him to present the war and philosophical issues, such as time and death, from a different perspective. He also employs a peculiar narrative technique, blurring the lines between the author and the text.

These unusual solutions make the two novels considerably different from traditional war novels; they might be more difficult to read, but at the same time they show distinctly that military conflicts are absurd, as they always result in the deaths and suffering of innocent people. Yossarian rebels against his participation in the war and views it as pointless, hence he wants to escape and finally attempts to do so. Billy Pilgrim, on the other hand, becomes a passive observer of his own existence as a result of war experiences. A number of other characters in the two novels died the unnecessary deaths and many of those who survived were scarred for life, suffering from traumas. After witnessing the cruelty of the war, they cannot find any meaning in old values and beliefs, which leads to the feelings of meaninglessness, disillusionment, and frustration. Summing up, it is clear that Vonnegut and Heller showed in their novels that war does not only takes away people's lives, but also generates and reinforces absurdities which distort people's mental framework that made sense before the war.

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