

ABSURDITY OF WAR IN JOSEPH HELLER'S *CATCH 22* AND IN KURT VONNEGUT'S *SLAUGHTERHOUSE 5*

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Abstract

In ancient wars, people who were not on the front lines were not affected much by the war and they were in a safer environment. However, in the wars of modern times, there is no longer much difference between being a civilian behind the front lines or a soldier fighting at the front because with the modern warfare methods and machines, war and terror are everywhere now. During World War II, thousands of people died because of the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima, Nagasaki or the bombing of Dresden. Unfortunately, similar war disasters have happened many times and they still continue to happen. As a result of all, death and pain increasingly lose their meaning and become ordinary. Considering the thousands who died in the wars, there being children and babies among them. This means that birth and death occur almost simultaneously. So, war disrupts the normal flow of events and facts and destroys the concept of time. From this point on life becomes absurd. In this paper, Joseph Heller's *Catch 22* and Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse 5* are examined in terms of the absurdity of war and bureaucracy. The protagonists of these two works suffer in the absurd loop of war and seek a way out.

Keywords: World War II, Absurdity of war, Military bureaucracy, *Catch 22*, *Slaughterhouse 5*.

Özet

Eski dönem savaşlarında ön saflarda yer almayan insanlar savaştan pek etkilenmez ve daha güvenli bir ortamda bulunurlardı. Ancak modern zaman savaşlarında artık cephe gerisinde sivil olmak ile cephede savaşan asker olmak arasında pek bir fark kalmadı. Çünkü modern savaş yöntemleriyle ve makineleriyle birlikte savaş ve terör artık her yerde. İkinci Dünya Savaşı sırasında Hiroşima'ya, Nagazaki'ye atılan atom bombaları ya da Dresden'in bombalanması binlerce insanın ölüme neden oldu. Maalesef benzer savaş felaketleri birçok kez yaşandı ve hâlâ yaşanmaya devam etmektedir. Bütün bunların sonucunda ölüm ve acı giderek anlamını yitirmekte ve sıradanlaşmaktadır. Savaşlarda ölen binlerce insan göz önüne alındığında bunların arasında çocuklar ve bebekler de var. Bu, doğum ve ölümün neredeyse aynı anda gerçekleştiği anlamına gelir. Yani savaş olayların ve olguların normal akışını bozar, zaman kavramını yok eder. Bu noktadan sonra hayat absürd bir hal alır. Bu makalede Joseph Heller'in *Madde 22* ve Kurt Vonnegut'un *Mezbaha 5* adlı eserleri savaşın absürtlüğü açısından incelenmektedir. Bu iki eserin başkahramanları savaşın absürt döngüsünde acı çekmekte ve bir çıkış yolu aramaktalar.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İkinci Dünya Savaşı, Savaşın absürtlüğü, Askeri bürokrasi, *Madde 22*, *Mezbaha 5*.

Introduction

1. Overview of *Catch 22* and *Slaughterhouse 5*

Catch 22 was published in 1961. The book conveys the experiences of soldiers stuck between violence and the absurdity of bureaucracy during World War II. The protagonist of the book, Captain John Yossarian, is a member of the bomber squad in the air force. He thinks war is meaningless because in his opinion, it is absurd to risk one's life for the sake of goals that are considered noble. Soldiers have several flights to complete before they can return home. These flight numbers are constantly increased by high-ranking commanders. Captain Yossarian is very angry as his life is in danger due to circumstances beyond his control. There is a regulation called catch 22 that makes it impossible for soldiers to escape the dangers. According to this article, a soldier cannot take part in dangerous flight missions only if he is mad, but the soldier must request that he does not want to fly any more, however, if he makes such a request, this means that he is not mad, so he must perform more flights.

Slaughterhouse 5 was published in 1969. The book is about the interesting events that the protagonist, Billy Pilgrim, experienced. He is unstuck in time. While training to be an

optometrist, Billy Pilgrim is drafted into World War II as a soldier. He is captured by the Germans in the war. He is kept in a slaughterhouse with other prisoners. Allied forces bomb Dresden, thousands of people die, but he survives. After the war, he becomes a successful optometrist and gets married. But interestingly, Billy Pilgrim claims that he was abducted by aliens. The aliens take him to their planet, which they call Tralfamadorian. For the residents of this place, concepts such as present, past and future do not exist. They experience everything simultaneously. For example, a person can be both dead and alive at the same time. Death is an ordinary thing for them, and they use the expression 'so it goes' when someone dies.

2. Absurdity and War

According to *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*, the word absurd is defined as states or conditions in an illogical universe that have no meaning other than their own existence. *The Oxford English Dictionary* focuses on the origin of the word Absurd and defines it as 'out of harmony'. As stated in *the Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, the term absurd is described by existentialists as being compatible with reason but beyond the limits of logic (Cornwell, 2006, pp. 2-3). In terms of Albert Camus, the world cannot be comprehended and therefore it is absurd (Hochberg, 1965, p. 87). As stated in Nina Holm Vohnsen's *The Absurdity of Bureaucracy*, Steven Luper-Foy describes absurdity as "the ridiculous," "the incongruous," "the meaningless," "the senseless" "the futile" and "the pointless" (Vohnsen, 2017, p. 22). Focusing on language, Ionesco states the following about absurdity: "And what is sometimes labeled the absurd is only the denunciation of the ridiculous nature of a language which is empty of substance, sterile, made up of clichés and slogans (...)" (Ionesco, 1960, p. 48).

In *The Myth of Sisyphus* by Albert Camus, the absurd is the metaphysical situation of a conscious human being and this statement does not lead to God, that is, absurd can be defined as sin without God (Camus, 1979, p. 42). Although some commentators equate absurdity with nihilism, according to Cornwell, absurdity arises from nihilism and existentialism fed by death (Cornwell, 2006, pp. 4-5). If the existence of the absurd is explained by the absurdity itself, unlike Dr. Strangelove and his bomb, we can laugh at Sisyphus's constantly pushing the stone uphill, and we agree that absurdity is meaningful only if we cannot agree to it (Wegener, 1967, p. 156). The philosophy on which all these definitions are based is defined as absurdism. It is not possible to think of this philosophy outside of modernism. As Aykaç stated, many schools of thought emerged with modernism, and absurdism is undoubtedly one of them (Aykaç, 2019, p. 213).

Although certain groups of people defend war for various reasons when it starts, as the war continues, people start to question deaths. After a certain point, war disrupts the harmony of life and becomes an absurd concept. Even when the war ends, the absurdity it creates continues because wars have lasting effects on human daily life, psychology, and imagination. It is possible to see these permanent scars in literature. Authors who witnessed the cruel side of war depict it in their works. For instance, in *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Erich Maria Remarque describes the wounded and dying ones on the battlefield (Remarque, 1984). War has catastrophic impacts on fiction. Violence and conflict put immense pressure on nations, individuals, ideas, and language. As war destroys the belief in referring to and influencing the material world a semantic crisis occurs (Dawes, 2002, pp. 2-131). For instance, in *Slaughterhouse 5*, Billy Pilgrim cannot adjust to the normal flow of life after the war and makes absurd claims that he has traveled in time. Another book that reflects the effects of war is Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*. According to Tanrıtanır, in this work Crane displays an anti-war stance, but the transformative effect of the war on the protagonist Henry Fleming is what should be focused on. Henry's cowardice and selfishness seems to have evolved into a confident and brave character as he spent time on the battlefield (Tanrıtanır, 2019, p. 60). War disrupts the normal flow of life and as seen in this story; it sometimes creates its own

heroes out of cowards. This can be considered as another absurdity created by war. Similarly, in John Dos Passos's *Three Soldiers*, the impact of World War I on ordinary American soldiers is conveyed through the eyes of three characters called Chris Chrisfield, Dan Fuseli and John Andrew. In this book John Andrew, like John Yossarian in *Catch 22*, emphasizes the pointlessness of war and that they cannot change anything (Tanritanir, 2016 , p. 378).

David Lundberg emphasizes that World War I literature and World War II literature are different. While the brutality of modern war and the crushing of humans by machines shocked the writers of World War I, the writers of World War II accepted these facts without comment. Even though civilians who remained behind the front lines in World War I experienced famine and similar deprivations, they were not in the violence of the battlefield. However, in World War II, there was not much difference between combatants and non-combatants. From the bombings of Dresden, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, people realized that war was equally dangerous for those behind the front lines as for those at the front lines. Therefore, it is not surprising that in most of World War II literature published after the 1945 war is not a passing phenomenon but a part of the modern world. In Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead*, the Second World War is portrayed not as an extraordinary event rather than as a continuation of what came before it and a rehearsal for what will come after it, and the fascist General Edward Cummings mentioned in the book is a prototype of the political and institutional leaders who would rule the post-war world. Adopting Mailer's logical conclusion and rejecting the postwar military atmosphere, Joseph Heller's *Catch 22* and Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse 5* were among the most popular novels of the 1960s. In these books, war is depicted satirically, as madness and absurdity. According to Joseph Heller, war is a mud in which rationality rolls around, and it is a process in which madness becomes a kind of sanity. There are no rights and wrongs in war, there are catches. Heller's enemy is the military bureaucracy that gives birth to all the nonsense he depicts in *Catch 22*. Kurt Vonnegut's science fiction and fantasy book *Slaughterhouse 5* describes the destruction of Dresden by the British and American air forces. That brutality was carried out under the guise of freedom and justice. In terms of Vonnegut and Heller, the enemy was not the Japanese or the Germans. The enemy was the military bureaucratic mind that produced the idea of war that advocated the destruction of civilians and cities. War, which was once equated with heroism, was seen as brutal and meaningless after World War I. For now, it is considered absurd. It is unknown how it will be called for the next generations. However, if their wars are nuclear, most probably no writer will survive to write about them (Lundberg, 1984, pp. 385-388).

2.1. *Catch 22*

In the book, Joseph Heller emphasizes the pointlessness of war and that no one cares about the soldiers dying: “Men went mad and were rewarded with medals. All over the world, boys on every side of the bomb line were laying down their lives for what they had been told was their country, and no one seemed to mind (...)” (Heller, 2011, p. 32). In the atmosphere of a prolonged war, soldiers who had forgotten what they were fighting for, and they were dying, while the survivors were being rewarded with medals for the ones they killed. In addition, it is clear from the following words that officers do not care about the lives of soldiers: “I used to get a big kick out of saving people’s lives. Now I wonder what the hell’s the point, since they all have to die anyway.” (2011, p. 142).

Catch 22, which emphasizes the absurdity of war and military bureaucracy, is a vicious circle. The absurdity of this military regulation, which is called catch 22, is expressed in a conversation between Captain Yossarian and Doc Daneeka. According to that regulation, if a soldier is crazy, he can no longer go on military missions. However, the soldier must request that he no longer wants to participate in missions. If he is crazy, he won't know how to make demands, and he must go on missions. If he makes the request, that means he's not crazy, so he

must go on missions again (2011, p. 66). Therefore, it is impossible for the soldiers to escape from dangerous duties.

The absurdity of the war environment is also understood from the soldiers' experiences and feelings. For instance, Captain Yossarian goes to the infirmary constantly saying he is sick. His sole purpose is to evade flight missions. Also, he is paranoid and frequently states that someone wants to kill him. Another example of the absurdity of the war environment is that Hungry Joe tells Captain Yossarian that it is normal to have nightmares every night (2011, p. 77).

Also, it is possible to encounter absurdity in many other conversations between soldiers. One of them is between Captain Yossarian and Orr. Orr absurdly believes that he will be apple-cheeked by carrying apples in his cheeks (2011, p. 40). From these examples, the mood created by the war can be observed in the soldiers. Also, soldiers reinforce the absurdity of the war environment with the absurdities they create.

In another part of the book, Colonel Cargill thinks he is addressing the officers. He tells them how honorable it is to be an officer in the American army. However, a sergeant tells the colonel that the people he addresses are not officers but enlisted men (2011, p. 45). It is absurd enough that someone with the rank of colonel does not know whether the people he is talking to are enlisted men or officers.

As described in the book, sleep is much more important for commanders than the lives of soldiers fighting in the field throughout the night. For instance, Captain Black's reply to Corporal Kolodny, who informed him that the soldiers had fought through the night and captured Bologna, was: "What are you waking me up for?" (2011, p. 154). Later, when Captain Black called Lieutenant Colonel Korn to give him the news, the answer he received was: "What are you waking me up for?" (2011, p. 154). After that, when Lieutenant Colonel Korn called Colonel Cathcart, the answer was again: "What are you waking me up for?" (2011, p. 154).

While Colonel Cathcart asks the chaplain to hold a prayer ceremony before the missions, his attempt to change the prayers for his own tastes is another example of absurdity in the book. Colonel Cathcart asks the chaplain to pray for a tighter bomb pattern because General Peckem likes it and thinks that it creates a better aerial photo when the bombs explode close together (2011, p. 239).

Later, during the prayer ceremony, when Colonel Cathcart sees the enlisted men in the area where the officers are, he gets angry at the chaplain and asks why the enlisted men are in the same ceremony. The chaplain sadly answers that enlisted men will be on the same duty as the officers. Colonel Cathcart cannot accept that the ordinary soldiers' god and his god are the same and continues to scold the chaplain (2011, p. 241). As can be understood from this, the commanders see the enlisted men as so worthless and inferior that they cannot even accept that they believe in the same God. This is a religious absurdity of the commanders and enlisted men who live in their own echo chambers.

While soldiers are dying on the battlefield or killing someone to survive, bureaucratic managers' weakness for money and comfort is another example of absurdity in the book. For instance, Major Coverley talks to mess officer Milo Minderbinder about his weakness for fresh eggs, and Milo says that he can bring fresh eggs from Malta if a military airplane is assigned to him (2011, p. 172). Later, on the flight to Malta, Milo tells Captain Yossarian how he made a profit from the syndicate he founded for this egg transportation (2011, p. 284).

Amidst the absurdity of this entire war atmosphere, the only safe environment for Captain Yossarian was the military hospital. Because two things were expected from him in the hospital: to die or to get better. Killing someone was not expected from him. They couldn't

defeat death in the hospital, but they taught death to behave with good manners. In a war environment, being in the front lines or the rear are similar because death is everywhere. Therefore, Yossarian thinks dying in the hospital is more comfortable because people don't die by exploding in blood and clots in the hospital. They don't get struck by lightning, they don't drown, they don't get torn apart by machines, they don't get crushed by landslides. They are not lined up and shot, they are not strangled while being raped, they are not stabbed to death, they are not cut with axes by their parents or children. There are no famines or floods in the hospital. Children don't suffocate in cradles, iceboxes or get run over by trucks. Nobody is beaten to death. People don't commit suicide by sticking their heads into gas furnaces, jumping in front of subway trains, or jumping out of a hotel window, accelerating at sixteen feet per second and hitting the ground with a disgusting plop sound (2011, p. 209).

The following words of Lieutenant Colonel Korn summarize the method used by the authorities to cover up all the absurdity and bureaucratic decadence while manipulating people: "(...) to act boastfully about something we ought to be ashamed of. That's a trick that never seems to fail." (2011, p. 177).

2.2. Slaughterhouse 5

When pain is experienced too much, it loses its extraordinary feature and begins to seem ordinary and even absurd. It's the same for death. In Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse 5*, the protagonist Billy Pilgrim uses the phrase "so it goes", which he learned from the Tralfamadorians, for anything that dies. The version of the book published by Panther Books publishing house in 1970 consists of 134 pages, not counting the cover pages. The phrase "so it goes" appears 106 times in these 134 pages. In other words, there is a death incident on almost every page. In this book, Kurt Vonnegut emphasized that death was an ordinary daily event during the World War II and that pain lost its importance. As Dr. Moreau says in H.G. Wells's *The Island of Dr. Moreau*: "And pain gets needless." (Wells, 1896, p. 136).

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The events that Billy Pilgrim experienced in his childhood and later years in World War II had traumatic consequences for him. A traumatic event he experienced in his childhood was being thrown into the pool by his father while teaching him how to swim. In the book, it is stated that Billy was very scared and numb during this event (Vonnegut, 1970, p. 35). One of the major traumas he experienced during his adolescence was witnessing the Dresden air attack, which caused the death of 135 thousand people. Later in a mental hospital, Kilgore Trout's science fiction books which were recommended to him by a veteran to escape the effects of the war, had a great impact on Billy. As a result of all, Billy claims that he can travel through time, and he makes his first journey to the moment when his father throws him into the pool. From that pool he travels into the battlefield, which is literally a pool of death. According to Billy, he is in a strange time-experience, someone is playing with the clocks. A year passes with each tick of the second on his watch, and he is unable to intervene in all this (1970, p. 21).

Although his time experience seems absurd, Billy's condition can be considered a kind of escapism. When reality becomes unbearable for people, they resort to ways to escape from it. As stated by Tanrıtanır in his work *Paul Auster and Archetypal Criticism*, people who cannot realize their desires and wishes and cannot face reality prefer to live by believing in the reality they have created (Tanrıtanır, 2019, p. 26). However, for Billy, this act of escaping always ends with returning to the battlefield. Therefore, even though he becomes unstuck in time, he is stuck in war and those traumatic and absurd memories haunt him.

One of the other absurdities about Billy, nicknamed "filthy flamingo" (Vonnegut, 1970, p. 29), is that he gives a second chance to the enemy soldier who tries to shoot him. According to his silly understanding of the rules of war, the marksman should be given another chance (1970, p. 29). Billy's calm demeanor despite facing death demonstrates Vonnegut's philosophy

on the futility of human struggles against war (Tanritanır, 2018, p. 111). Besides, afternoons are stingingly exciting for Billy because: “There was so much to see-dragon's teeth, killing machine, corpses with bare feet that were blue and ivory.” (Vonnegut, 1970, p. 49). Another incident that shows that death becomes absurdly unimportant during the war is the reaction of a German soldier to the man who informed him that one of the prisoners had died on the train. He just nods and says 'Yo, yo,' and doesn't open the car with the dead man in it (1970, p. 51). Billy is also a prisoner on this train, and he compares the train to an organism that eats, drinks and defecates through the air vents (1970, p. 52).

Another absurd situation that Billy claims is his abduction by Tralfamadorian aliens. The first question he asked the Tralfamadorians after he was kidnapped was: “Why me?” (1970, p. 56). Tralfamadorians get angry and cannot give a satisfactory answer to the question 'why' and this shows that they do not actually act logically. Actions which are not logical mean absurdity. In Tralfamadore, he is displayed naked to the inhabitants of the planet in a zoo. During World War II, German soldiers made fun of Billy's physical appearance, but in Tralfamadore his body was admired. Unlike Earthlings, these creatures can see in four dimensions, and their way of perceiving people is very different and absurd. According to Billy's description, they see humans as giant millipedes rather than bipedal creatures (1970, p. 62). Also, Billy Pilgrim learns absurd things about death in Tralfamadore. Since the past, present and future are experienced at the same time there, when a person dies, he is not dead indeed, he just looks like he is dead. Consequently, it's ridiculous to cry at his funeral. So, the inhabitants of Tralfamadore say 'so it goes' for dead ones and forget about them. Billy states that he gives the same reaction to the deaths (1970, p. 25). Although this statement is meaningful in Tralfamadore, where the past, present and future are experienced at the same time, it becomes absurd to say it in the world where there is a completely different perception of time. Furthermore, while Billy is traveling in the flying saucer at speeds above the speed of light, he is suddenly thrown into the train traveling at approximately two miles per hour to the German concentration camps. That speed difference creates an absurd experience for Billy (1970, p. 56).

Another interesting thing in this book is that German soldiers made soap and candles from the fat of gypsies, Jews, communists and other enemies of the state in the concentration camps and sold them to British soldiers (1970, p. 67). Although it's a terrible thing to make soap and candles from people, here, Vonnegut emphasizes the brutality and futility of warfare.

One of the parts in the book that expresses the bureaucratic absurdity of the war is Air Marshal Saundby's attempt to rationalize the Dresden attack that caused the death of 135 thousand people. He states that this incident occurred due to unfortunate circumstances during the war, and he continues that those who approved it were not wicked or cruel (1970, p. 125).

Another story in the book that emphasizes the absurd aspects of war is the execution of infantryman Edgar Derby. During the air attack, an entire city is destroyed, thousands of people are killed, but one poor infantryman is arrested, tried and shot because he took a teapot that he found among the ruins (1970, p. 11). While all the deaths and unlawful acts occur on the battlefield, the execution of Edgar Derby for taking a teapot from the ruins is absurd enough.

Conclusion

Joseph Heller's *Catch 22* and Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse 5* are monumental literary works that reveal the absurdities of war and military bureaucracy. The humorous and satiric language of the works draw attention to the deaths and many other atrocities experienced during World War II and emphasize the absurd side of the war. An interesting conclusion to be drawn from the comparison of *Catch 22* and *Slaughterhouse 5* is that in *Catch 22*, Captain Yossarian is a bomber pilot in the air force squadron, and in *Slaughterhouse 5*, Billy Pilgrim is a private fighting in the land forces. The destruction and horror caused by the bombs dropped by Captain

Yossarian and his team can be seen through the events Billy Pilgrim experienced. Furthermore, it seems that the endless flying missions in which Captain Yossarian stuck in *Catch 22* and Billy Pilgrim's being unstuck in time in *Slaughterhouse 5* were consciously chosen by the authors of these books to emphasize the absurdity of war and bureaucracy.

According to the military regulation in *Catch 22*, a soldier can only be exempt from military duties if he is insane. However, that soldier must come and request his exemption from the higher-ups, but a soldier who can make the request is not considered insane. This vicious circle created by Joseph Heller in his book expresses the absurdity of human conflicts and the bureaucracy behind them.

In *Slaughterhouse 5*, Kurt Vonnegut prefers a more metaphysical method and takes the main character of the book, Billy Pilgrim, on time and interdimensional journeys, takes him to strange places like Jonathan Swift does with Gulliver, and presents scenes from life that have become absurd because of the traumas of war. In addition, by adopting a non-linear narrative style, Vonnegut increases the degree of absurdity of war and emphasizes the inevitability of human conflict. Vonnegut also points out the absurdity of war bureaucracy by concluding his book with the words of a general who defended the Dresden attack and the story of a soldier who was given a trial and executed for a teapot he picked up from the ruins of the war.

Joseph Heller in *Catch 22* and Kurt Vonnegut in *Slaughterhouse 5* masterfully express their anti-war stance via stories they tell by using paradox and chaos in harmony. With these extraordinary narrative styles and stories, Vonnegut and Heller invite people to question the system they live in and to take a stance against the wars.

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