

**Impossibility in Joseph Heller's Novel Catch-22**

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### *"وَلَمَّا بَلَغَ أَشُدَّهُ آتَيْنَاهُ حُكْمًا وَعِلْمًا"*

***“And when he reached maturity, We gave him judgement and knowledge.”***

***(Yūsuf 12:22)***

### Dedication

I dedicate this modest academic work to my beloved parents, whose unwavering support, heartfelt prayers, and unconditional love have been the true foundation of every achievement I have reached. To my father, a symbol of strength and quiet guidance, and to my mother, whose patience and compassion have been a constant source of comfort and inspiration. To my dear friends, whose encouragement and kind presence helped me persevere through long nights of writing and reflection. To all my teachers and mentors who, throughout the years, have nurtured my intellectual curiosity and encouraged me to pursue knowledge with purpose and integrity. And with special gratitude, I dedicate this work to Asst. Prof. Dr. Salim Kadhim Abbas, whose supervision, insight, and belief in my potential have been instrumental in shaping the direction and depth of this research. To all of you, I owe my sincerest appreciation. This work stands as a testament to your lasting impact on my academic journey

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**Abstract**

This research investigates the theme of impossibility in Joseph Heller’s "Catch-22", focusing on its role as a central framework for critiquing institutional systems of power, military bureaucracy, and the absurdities of war. The study examines how Heller portrays impossibility through the characters’ struggles with paradoxical rules, circular logic, and dehumanizing military regulations, emphasizing its function as both a thematic and structural device in the narrative. Using thematic analysis, the research analyzes key excerpts from the novel to identify recurring patterns of paradox, absurdity, and existential despair. The findings reveal that impossibility operates as a mechanism of control, trapping characters within irrational systems that prioritize institutional survival over individual humanity. The study demonstrates that Heller’s satirical depiction of impossibility exposes the contradictions inherent in bureaucratic and military systems, while also reflecting broader existential concerns about human agency and meaning in an absurd universe. The significance of this research lies in its contribution to understanding impossibility as a critical literary device that extends beyond "Catch-22", offering a framework for analyzing similar themes in other literary works. By addressing a gap in existing scholarship, this study deepens the appreciation of Heller’s critique of systemic dysfunction and highlights the relevance of his ideas in contemporary discussions about power, bureaucracy, and the human condition. This research can serve as a foundation for future studies exploring the intersections of impossibility, absurdity, and institutional critique in literature, enriching broader fields of literary analysis and existential philosophy.

**1. Introduction**

Joseph Heller’s Catch-22, first published in 1961, is a seminal work of postmodern literature that satirizes the absurdities of war, bureaucracy, and human existence. Set during World War II, the novel follows Captain John Yossarian, a bombardier stationed on the fictional island of Pianosa, as he navigates the chaos of military life. At its core, Catch-22 critiques the dehumanizing effects of war and the maddening, circular logic of military bureaucracy. The very title of the novel has entered the English lexicon as a term for no-win situations, underscoring the paradoxes and absurdities inherent in modern systems of power. The novel’s fragmented narrative structure, dark humor, and exploration of existential themes have solidified its reputation as a modern classic (Recep, 2017).

This research examines the theme of impossibility in Catch-22, focusing on how Heller portrays the intersection of absurdity, military bureaucracy, and the unyielding rules of the armed forces. The study will argue that the concept of impossibility is not merely a thematic element in the novel but a central framework through which Heller critiques the absurd logic of institutional power. By analyzing the characters’ struggles against the irrational constraints of military rules and the inescapable paradoxes they face, this research will shed light on how impossibility operates as a mechanism of control and a source of existential despair. This study contributes to the broader literary discourse on Catch-22 by emphasizing the underexplored relationship between impossibility and the novel’s critique of systemic bureaucracy. While Catch-22 has been extensively analyzed by scholars for its themes of absurdity, existentialism, and anti-war rhetoric, the specific role of impossibility as a thematic and structural device has been relatively neglected in academic discourse. Most studies focus on the novel's satire of bureaucracy or its critique of war, but few have explored how impossibility functions as a pervasive force that shapes the characters’ experiences and the novel’s narrative logic. For example, studies like Bloom’s “Modern Critical Interpretations of Joseph Heller” (1987) emphasizes the novel’s commentary on institutional absurdity but does not delve deeply into how impossibility manifests as a defining characteristic of Heller’s critique (Neziri, et al. 2024).

Similarly, “Satire, Paradox, and the Grotesque in Catch-22” highlights the absurdity of military systems but does not address how impossibility operates as a thematic underpinning for the characters’ struggles. This research seeks to fill this gap by providing a focused analysis of impossibility as a central theme in Catch-22. The primary objective of this research is to analyze how impossibility is constructed and portrayed in the novel, particularly through the lens of military bureaucracy and absurdity. This study will explore questions such as: How does Heller use impossibility to critique institutional systems of power? In what ways do the characters’ encounters with paradoxical rules and circular logic reflect broader existential concerns? By addressing these questions, this research aims to bridge the gap between existing studies on Catch-22 and a deeper understanding of impossibility as a critical element of Heller’s satire. The importance of studying impossibility in Catch-22 lies in its relevance to contemporary discussions about systemic dysfunction, power structures, and the human condition. Heller’s depiction of impossibility resonates in a world where individuals often feel trapped by bureaucratic systems, paradoxical rules, and unattainable expectations (Neziri et al. 2024).

By highlighting the absurdity of these systems, this research not only contributes to literary scholarship on Catch-22 but also offers insights into how literature can illuminate the challenges of navigating institutional power in modern society. In addition to addressing the gap in scholarly discourse, this research will provide a framework for understanding impossibility as a literary device that transcends Catch-22, offering a lens through which similar themes can be explored in other works of fiction. By focusing on the intersections of impossibility, military bureaucracy, and absurdity, this study will contribute to a more nuanced appreciation of Heller’s critique of war and institutional logic, ultimately enriching the broader field of literary studies (Beták, 2017).

**2. Literature Review**

This section provides a detailed review of relevant studies that have explored the themes of absurdity, bureaucracy, military rules, and existentialism in Joseph Heller’s “Catch-22”. While these studies contribute significantly to the understanding of the novel, their approaches differ in focus and methodology from the current research, which aims to analyze the theme of impossibility as a central device in Heller’s critique of institutional systems. By contrasting previous studies with this research, we can highlight the unique contribution of this study in addressing the underexplored role of impossibility in "Catch-22”.

Several scholars have examined the absurdity of military bureaucracy in "Catch-22". For instance, Dunlap (1999) defines military bureaucracy as a rigid institutional framework that prioritizes procedural compliance and the chain of command, often at the expense of innovation and humanity. Studies such as Merrill’s (2014) emphasize how Heller uses bureaucracy as a structural and thematic device to critique the chaotic, cyclical nature of military systems. However, these studies largely focus on the critique of military systems as a whole, without delving into how the concept of impossibility, as embodied in the paradoxical logic of “Catch-22,” shapes the characters’ experiences and critiques power structures. In contrast, this research examines how impossibility operates as a mechanism of control within bureaucratic systems, highlighting the paradoxes that entrap Heller’s characters and illustrating the existential despair that arises from their struggles.

Similarly, studies like Neziri’s (2017) and Seed’s (1989) analyze the psychological effects of war and bureaucracy on soldiers, focusing on how military systems dehumanize individuals and erase their agency. While these works explore the broader existential struggles of characters like Yossarian, they do not directly address how impossibility functions as a pervasive force that reinforces this dehumanization. This research extends their findings by showing how impossibility, as exemplified by the circular logic of “Catch-22,” traps characters in a system where survival is dictated by absurd, irrational rules. By focusing on impossibility as a thematic and structural device, this study provides a deeper understanding of how Heller critiques the dehumanizing nature of institutional systems.

The alignment of "Catch-22"with existentialist philosophy has also been widely discussed. Merrill (1987) and other scholars have drawn parallels between Heller’s work and Albert Camus’ concept of the absurd, particularly as outlined in "The Myth of Sisyphus " (1942). Camus describes absurdity as the tension between the human desire for meaning and the indifference of the universe. Previous studies primarily highlight how Yossarian’s resistance to the irrationality of the military system mirrors Camus’ Sisyphus, whose defiance represents an assertion of individual freedom in the face of absurdity. However, these analyses often treat absurdity as a philosophical backdrop for the novel, rather than examining how impossibility itself functions as a defining element of Heller’s critique. This research builds on these interpretations by demonstrating how impossibility, as a narrative and thematic construct, is integral to the depiction of absurdity in "Catch-22". Unlike earlier studies, this research emphasizes the active role impossibility plays in structuring the characters’ experiences and reflecting broader existential concerns.

In finally, while previous studies have shed light on Catch-22's critique of bureaucracy, war, and absurdity, they often treat these themes as isolated elements. This research contrasts with earlier works by investigating how impossibility serves as a unifying framework that connects these themes, shaping the novel’s narrative logic and its critique of institutional systems.

**3. Methodology**

The data for this study is the text of Joseph Heller’s Catch-22. Specific excerpts from the novel are selected for analysis based on their relevance to the central theme of impossibility. These selections include key events, dialogues, and narrative elements that reflect the paradoxes, absurdities, and challenges faced by the characters. This qualitative study involves using thematic analysis to explore the theme of impossibility in Catch-22. Thematic analysis is a method of analyzing qualitative data to examine the data to identify themes (Cresswell, 2003). The method is chosen for its capacity to identify, interpret, and explore recurring patterns and themes within qualitative data, such as literary texts. By analyzing the novel, the study investigates how impossibility creates Absurd experiences for the soldiers and critiques war, bureaucracy, and human existence. In doing so, this research addresses key questions, such as how Heller uses impossibility to critique institutional systems of power and in what ways the characters’ encounters with paradoxical rules and circular logic reflect broader existential concerns. Through this exploration, the study seeks to bridge the gap between existing analyses of Catch-22 and a deeper understanding of impossibility as a critical element of Heller’s satire.The text of Catch-22 was read multiple times to fully understand the context and nuances of its depiction of impossibility. Special attention was given to recurring paradoxes (e.g., “Catch-22”), bureaucratic absurdities, and the absurd experiences of the soldiers. The novel’s narrative structure and character interactions were carefully examined to reveal the ways in which impossibility shapes their actions and responses. The text was analyzed to identify overarching themes.

For this study, themes such as "Catch-22 as a Symbol of Paradox," "The Absurdity of Bureaucracy," and "Existential Absurdity in War" emerged as central to the narrative. Each theme was clearly defined and linked to the research focus on impossibility. The paradoxes embedded in the novel highlight the irrationality of war and the inescapable constraints imposed by authority. Bureaucratic absurdities expose the flawed logic governing military operations, creating situations where soldiers are trapped in illogical rules. Existential absurdity emphasizes the meaninglessness of war, where survival is dictated by chance rather than rational decision-making. Through thematic analysis, the study uncovers the significance of impossibility as a defining element of Catch-22, illustrating how the novel critiques the structures that shape human experience. By examining the ways in which impossibility operates within the novel, the study provides insight into how Heller’s satire exposes the contradictions of institutional power and the absurd nature of human existence in times of war (Neziri et al. 2024).

**4. Synopsis:**

Joseph Heller’s Catch-22 (1961) is a darkly comedic, anti-war novel that dives deep into the absurdity of military bureaucracy through the experiences of Captain John Yossarian, a U.S. Army Air Forces bombardier stationed on the fictional Mediterranean island of Pianosa during World War II. The story opens in a military hospital, where Yossarian is faking illness to avoid flying more combat missions — a desperate act that sets the tone for his ongoing battle with a system that seems more dangerous than the enemy (Heller, 1961).

From the beginning, it’s clear that Yossarian is obsessed with survival. Unlike his superiors who crave medals and promotions, he simply wants to live. However, each time he gets close to completing the required number of missions, Colonel Cathcart arbitrarily raises the quota, trapping him in an endless cycle of combat. This is where the infamous “Catch-22” comes in: a maddening military rule stating that anyone who wants to be grounded for insanity is clearly sane, because only a sane person would try to avoid combat. In other words, there’s no way out — a cruel paradox that defines Yossarian’s reality (Heller, 1961, p. 46).

The novel doesn’t follow a straight timeline; instead, it spirals through flashbacks, memories, and chaotic events — a structure that reflects the confusion and irrationality of war itself. A major turning point is the gruesome death of Snowden, a young airman who bleeds out in the back of the plane. This traumatic event haunts Yossarian and becomes the emotional core of the novel. Snowden’s death reveals the brutal reality behind all the absurdity: that war is terrifying, personal, and often meaningless. As Yossarian puts it, “man is matter” — fragile and expendable (Heller, 1961, p. 440).

Things deteriorate further as the military command grows increasingly detached from human suffering. Innocent people are punished, entire cities like Rome descend into violence and exploitation, and Yossarian’s friends begin to die or disappear. He tries every trick in the book to escape, from pleading insanity to walking around in a bathrobe, refusing to wear his uniform. But every effort is blocked by red tape, manipulation, or Catch-22 logic.

Eventually, Yossarian refuses to fly any more missions. His stand is brave but risky — and the authorities offer him a deal: if he agrees to praise them and keep quiet, they’ll send him home. It’s tempting, but Yossarian realizes that accepting the deal would mean betraying everything he believes in. Just as he’s about to give in, he learns that Orr — the oddball everyone thought was crazy — had been secretly practicing escape tactics and has successfully fled to Sweden.

Orr’s success is a moment of pure hope. It proves that escape is possible, not just physically, but morally. Inspired, Yossarian finally makes his decision: he won’t play along. He’ll desert the army and try to make it to Sweden too — not just to save himself, but to defy a system that’s been killing people for no reason.

Catch-22 ends not with a triumphant victory, but with a small, defiant act of resistance. Yossarian chooses life, freedom, and truth over blind obedience, and in doing so, becomes a quiet hero in a world gone mad.

Through Yossarian’s journey, Catch-22 highlights the futility of war and the struggle for individuality in the face of overwhelming institutional forces. The novel’s enduring relevance lies in its ability to critique not just the specific absurdities of World War II, but also the universal dysfunction of bureaucratic systems that prioritize their own survival over human life. Heller’s masterpiece remains a timeless exploration of freedom, resistance, and the human condition, offering both a biting satire and a profound commentary on the absurdities of existence.

**5. Findings**

Catch-22, novel written by Joseph Heller, first published in 1961. It is set during World War II and follows the experiences of Captain John Yossarian, a U.S. Army Air Force B-25 bombardier stationed on the island of Pianosa. The novel critiques war, and the illogical systems that dominate human life. The novel begins with Yossarian in the hospital, faking illness to avoid flying more combat missions. The readers are introduced to the absurdity of the military system. Central to this absurdity is "Catch-22," a paradoxical rule that governs the soldiers' lives. Catch-22 states that a soldier can be dismissed , but if they request to be dismissed , they prove their sanity by wanting to avoid dangerous missions. This logic traps Yossarian and his comrades, making it impossible to escape the war. Yossarian becomes obsessed with survival after witnessing the horrific death of Snowden. He becomes increasingly paranoid, convinced that everyone is trying to kill him not just the enemy, but also his own superiors, who keep raising the number of missions required to complete a tour of duty. Yossarian’s growing disillusionment leads him to rebel against the system. He refuses to fly more missions and openly defies his superior (Recep, 2017).

However, his rebellion is met with threats and manipulation. Yossarian is offered a deal by Colonels Cathcart and Korn: he can go home if he agrees to support their policies and stop criticizing them. Initially tempted, Yossarian ultimately refuses, realizing that accepting the deal would betray the men still fighting and dying. Inspired by Orr’s escape, Yossarian decides to desert the military and flee to Sweden. He rejects the madness of war and bureaucracy, choosing life and freedom over complicity in a corrupt system. The novel ends on an ambiguous but hopeful note, as Yossarian runs toward an uncertain future, determined to live on his own terms. Joseph Heller’s “Catch-22” presents impossibility as a thematic and structural device, critiquing the absurdities of war, bureaucracy, and the human condition. Through the titular paradox, Heller explores how institutional systems trap individuals in cycles of futility and despair, denying them agency while perpetuating their own survival. This impossibility is not confined to the military bureaucracy depicted in the novel but resonates as a universal critique of modern systems of power. "Having witnessed the brutalities that war brought and rejecting to internalize those absurdities, they feel being trapped in a paradox that called catch-22." (Recep, 2017, p. 59).

The titular “Catch-22” is the clearest articulation of impossibility in the novel. The paradox traps Yossarian and his fellow soldiers in a system of circular logic, where any attempt to escape their dangerous missions proves futile. The regulation states that a soldier can only be grounded for insanity, but requesting to be grounded is evidence of sanity, thus disqualifying them. "There was only one catch and that was Catch-22, which specified that a concern for one’s own safety in the face of dangers that were real and immediate was the process of a rational mind. 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". This paradox encapsulates the essence of impossibility in “Catch-22”, as it denies the characters any meaningful agency or (Heller, 1961, p. 46). As Merrill (1987) observes, “Catch-22” is not merely a rule but a perfect tautology, a self-sustaining loop that reinforces the system’s logic while excluding any possibility of resistance.” This echoes the bureaucratic absurdities of real-world institutions, where rules often serve to maintain the status quo rather than address individual needs (Parris, 2020).

Similarly, as highlights, the military bureaucracy in “Catch-22” reflects a system that thrives on dehumanization and systematic control, reducing individuals to mere cogs in an unyielding machine. Furthermore, notes that the logic of “Catch-22” exposes how institutional structures perpetuate themselves through paradoxes that undermine meaningful resistance, enforcing a grim inevitability for those ensnared in the system. Heller’s critique of bureaucracy extends beyond the titular paradox, permeating the entire military institution. One of the most striking examples is Colonel Cathcart’s constant raising of the number of missions required to complete a tour of duty. Each time Yossarian approaches the required number, the quota is increased, rendering escape perpetually out of reach. This endless deferral mirrors the existential absurdity described by Albert Camus in The Myth of Sisyphus (1991). Camus uses the myth of Sisyphus, condemned to roll a boulder up a hill only for it to roll back each time he reaches the top, as a metaphor for the human condition: the eternal struggle for meaning in a meaningless universe. Yossarian, like Sisyphus, finds himself trapped in a futile cycle of effort and frustration. Camus writes that "the struggle itself… is enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy" (Camus, 1991, p. 123).

Similarly, Yossarian’s ultimate decision to desert the military can be seen as an act of existential defiance, a refusal to continue participating in a system that denies him agency and humanity. Yossarian’s resistance to the military system can be seen as an assertion of individual freedom in the face of absurdity. Despite the futility of his efforts, his refusal to conform represents a rejection of the dehumanizing logic of war. As notes, Yossarian’s defiance “embodies the existential hero’s revolt against a world devoid of inherent meaning, where absurdity reigns supreme.” Catch-22 captures the surreal senselessness of war, where bureaucratic absurdities and the randomness of death strip away traditional notions of heroism and morality. The absurdity of war is also reflected in the novel’s portrayal of death and survival. The randomness of death, as seen in the senseless demise of characters like Snowden and Clevinger, underscores the lack of logic or justice in the wartime experience. Yossarian’s obsession with self-preservation is a response to this existential absurdity, as he navigates a world where survival is dictated by chance rather than rational decision-making (Leinyuy, 2024).

As Yossarian’s rejection of military authority serves as both an act of rebellion and a desperate assertion of control in a universe governed by chaos and absurdity. The impossibility of escape in “Catch-22” is reinforced through its fragmented narrative structure, which mirrors the chaos and absurdity of the characters’ experiences. Heller’s non-linear storytelling creates a disorienting effect, reflecting the breakdown of logic and coherence in the world of the novel. Argues that “the novel’s structure is itself an embodiment of the impossibility it critiques, offering no linear progression or resolution.” This narrative fragmentation parallels the circularity of “Catch-22” and serves as a formal representation of the characters’ entrapment. The lack of a coherent timeline emphasizes the futility of their attempts to impose order or meaning on their experiences, reinforcing the existential despair at the heart of the novel. Heller’s use of non-linear storytelling often leaves readers disoriented, just as the characters are disoriented by the nonsensical rules of their environment. For example, the circular logic of “Catch-22” itself a regulation that allows soldiers to be grounded if they are insane, but declares any soldier who applies to be grounded as sane for wanting to avoid combat pervades the structure of the novel (Jabbar, 2012).

This regulation traps Yossarian and his comrades in a never-ending cycle of absurdity. The fragmented narrative complements this circularity by denying readers a traditional sense of resolution or progression. As notes, “the constant shifting back and forth in time and place reflects the characters’ inability to make sense of their circumstances, creating a narrative that is as chaotic as the world it portrays.” The novel’s structure also reflects the characters’ inability to control their own fates. For instance, Snowden’s death is revealed in fragments throughout the text, with the full story only coming together near the end of the novel. This delayed revelation mirrors Yossarian’s psychological trauma, as he struggles to process the random and senseless nature of death in war. The fragmented recounting of Snowden’s death highlights the novel’s existential themes: there is no clear cause-and-effect relationship, no justice, and no meaning to his demise. As points out, “the disjointed narrative mirrors the disintegration of traditional notions of time, morality, and causality in a world governed by absurdity.” Additionally, the lack of a clear timeline undermines any sense of personal growth or progress for the characters. The narrative frequently loops back to the same scenarios, such as Colonel Cathcart’s relentless efforts to raise the number of missions, which traps the soldiers in an endless cycle of combat. Yossarian’s repeated and futile attempts to escape, whether by refusing to fly missions or faking illness, are emblematic of this cyclical structure (Watzke, 2001).

Heller denies his characters and his readers the comfort of closure, forcing them to confront the chaos and absurdity of a world without meaning. Through its fragmented structure, “Catch-22” not only disorients readers but also reinforces the novel’s central themes: the absurdity of war, the dehumanizing effects of bureaucracy, and the existential despair of living in a chaotic and meaningless world. This narrative choice is not merely stylistic but deeply thematic, emphasizing that in a world governed by illogical rules and circular reasoning, neither the characters nor the readers can find solace in coherence or resolutions. The theme of impossibility in Catch-22 aligns closely with the absurdist vision of Samuel Beckett’s Waiting for Godot. In Beckett’s play, Vladimir and Estragon wait endlessly for a figure Godot who never arrives. This endless waiting mirrors the paralysis experienced by the characters in Catch-22, who are trapped in a system that denies resolution or progress. Both works use absurdity to critique the systems that govern human existence, highlighting the tension between individual agency and institutional control. As explains, absurdist literature reflects a world where meaning is elusive, systems are arbitrary, and individuals are left to confront their own powerlessness. Esslin’s discussion of absurdity in “Waiting for Godot” offers a framework for understanding how Heller uses similar techniques in “Catch-22” to expose the futility and despair of navigating institutional systems (Paris, 2020).

In “Catch-22”, the soldiers are caught in a bureaucratic trap that makes escape impossible, as the circular logic of “Catch-22” itself dictates that there is no way out. Yossarian’s ultimate decision to desert the military can be seen as a rejection of this paralysis a refusal to wait any longer for a resolution that will never come. Impossibility in “Catch-22” is not only a structural element but also a psychological force that shapes the characters’ experiences and responses. The soldiers are not just physically endangered by their missions but also mentally destabilized by the absurdity of their situation. Yossarian’s paranoia, for example, reflects the psychological toll of navigating a system that denies him agency. This is exemplified in Yossarian’s obsessive fear of death, which drives him to see danger everywhere, even in mundane situations. The pervasive sense of impossibility in “Catch-22” creates a psychological landscape of fear and alienation, where characters are unable to trust the systems or people around them. Like Beckett’s characters, who attempt to find meaning through repetitive and futile actions, the soldiers in “Catch-22” are trapped in an endless cycle of meaningless tasks. Colonel Cathcart’s continual decision to raise the number of required missions exemplifies this futility, as it ensures that no soldier can ever complete their service and return home (Leinyuy, 2024).

That this endless escalation of demands mirrors the absurdist notion that human effort is perpetually undermined by forces beyond control, leaving characters in a state of existential paralysis. The soldiers’ attempts to impose logic or fairness on their circumstances are futile, as the very nature of “Catch-22” ensures that reason and justice have no place in their world. Both “Waiting for Godot” and “Catch-22” also explore the impossibility of genuine communication within absurd systems. In “Catch-22”, dialogue often becomes nonsensical, as characters such as Major Major and Milo Minderbinder engage in circular or contradictory reasoning. For instance, Major Major’s refusal to see anyone in his office except when he’s not there creates a Kafkaesque loop of absurdity. This mirrors the fragmented and repetitive conversations between Vladimir and Estragon in “Waiting for Godot”, where language fails to establish clarity or connection (Illing, 2014).

As Hussein (2020) observes in his seminal work on the Theatre of the Absurd, “the breakdown of communication in absurdist literature reflects the larger breakdown of meaning in a world governed by illogical and arbitrary forces.” Yossarian’s ultimate decision to desert the military can be interpreted as a rejection of the paralysis imposed by absurdist systems. In contrast to Vladimir and Estragon, who remain in their endless wait, Yossarian’s desertion represents an act of agency a refusal to participate any longer in a system that denies him autonomy. As argues, “Yossarian’s rebellion against the absurdity of war is not a solution but an assertion of his individuality in the face of an indifferent universe.” His decision to flee, even at great personal risk, is an existential act of defiance that echoes Camus’ vision of the absurd hero, who strives for freedom and meaning despite the hopelessness of his situation. Thus, the theme of impossibility in “Catch-22” operates on multiple levels: structurally, through the novel’s fragmented and circular narrative; psychologically, as a force that destabilizes the characters’ sense of self and agency; and thematically, as a critique of the absurdity of bureaucratic systems. By aligning itself with the absurdist tradition exemplified by “Waiting for Godot”, “Catch-22” highlights the shared human struggle to find agency and meaning in a world governed by chaos and futility.

"The enemy is anybody who’s going to get you killed, no matter which side he’s on" (Heller, 1961, p. 124).

This sentiment underscores the existential absurdity of war, where survival is dictated by chance rather than rational decision-making. Heller’s characters are “reduced to mere instruments of war, their individuality erased by the overarching system.” As observes, Catch-22 “portrays a world in which human beings are subordinated to the impersonal machinery of bureaucracy, leaving little room for personal agency or individuality.” This dehumanization is central to the novel's critique of war and its absurd logic. The impossibility of preserving one’s humanity in such a context becomes a central theme of the novel, as the characters struggle to assert their agency in the face of overwhelming institutional power. By linking impossibility to existential absurdity, Catch-22 transcends its specific historical context to offer a universal critique of institutional power and the human condition. Explore how bureaucratic systems create classifications and demands that are often contradictory, forcing individuals into impossible situations. Their analysis of systemic dysfunction parallels Heller’s depiction of military bureaucracy, where rules are designed to preserve institutional power at the expense of individual well-being(Leinyuy, 2024).

Impossibility in Joseph Heller’s Catch-22 functions as both a thematic and structural device, critiquing the absurdity of war, bureaucracy, and human existence. By portraying characters trapped in circular logic, arbitrary rules, and an oppressive military system, Heller captures the existential despair of navigating institutional power. When viewed alongside works such as Albert Camus’ “The Myth of Sisyphus” and Samuel Beckett’s “Waiting for Godot”, “Catch-22” emerges as a profound exploration of the absurdity of human existence, offering a timeless commentary on the impossibility of escape and the defiance of the individual in the face of systemic control. This impossibility, reinforced by the novel’s fragmented structure and dark humor, continues to resonate in contemporary discussions about power, agency, and the human condition (Neziri rt al,. 2024).

**5. Discussions**

The findings of this study highlight the centrality of impossibility as a thematic and structural device in Joseph Heller's Catch-22. By focusing on the intersections of military bureaucracy, absurdity, and existential despair, this research uncovers how impossibility operates as both a mechanism of control and a lens through which the dehumanizing effects of institutional power are critiqued. This discussion interprets these findings in relation to the research questions and highlights their broader significance, both within the context of Catch-22 and in contemporary discourse on systemic dysfunction and the human condition. Through an extended analysis, this discussion will demonstrate how impossibility shapes the characters’ experiences, critiques bureaucratic absurdity, reflects existential concerns, and offers insights into larger systemic issues that transcend the novel’s historical setting (Neziri, et al,. 2024).

One of the key insights of this research is the identification of impossibility as a pervasive force that shapes the characters’ experiences and the novel’s narrative logic. The concept of "Catch-22" itself epitomizes this theme, serving as a symbol of the paradoxical and self-perpetuating rules of military bureaucracy. The regulation that governs Yossarian and his comrades illustrates how impossibility becomes a tool of control, trapping individuals in a loop of circular reasoning that denies them agency. For instance, Yossarian’s realization that claiming insanity to avoid flying missions demonstrates sanity encapsulates the absurdity of these regulations. This paradox reveals how bureaucracies maintain their power by creating rules that are impossible to navigate or escape, leaving individuals powerless to challenge the system. This theme of impossibility as a mechanism of control is reinforced by the actions of figures such as Colonel Cathcart, who continuously raises the number of required missions, ensuring that no soldier can ever complete their service and return home. This endless escalation mirrors the logic of the titular “Catch-22,” where there is no possible resolution (Howes, 2018).

As Merrill (1987) observes, “Catch-22” is not merely a rule but a perfect tautology, a self-sustaining loop that reinforces the system’s logic while excluding any possibility of resistance. By foregrounding impossibility in this way, Heller critiques the irrationality and inhumanity of institutional systems, reflecting the broader existential concerns of individuals navigating such systems. Moreover, impossibility is not limited to the military bureaucracy but reflects a universal critique of institutional power. In contemporary contexts, bureaucratic systems often impose similarly paradoxical rules and unattainable expectations, leaving individuals feeling trapped and powerless. For example, modern workplaces and government institutions frequently require individuals to meet contradictory demands or navigate opaque systems, perpetuating the same kind of futility depicted in Catch-22.

The analysis also reveals how impossibility manifests through the absurdity of bureaucracy. Military regulations in Catch-22 are portrayed as mechanisms that prioritize the survival of the system over the well-being of individuals. Characters such as Yossarian and his comrades are reduced to mere instruments of war, their individuality erased by the overarching logic of institutional power. This observation that Catch-22 critiques the dehumanizing effects of military life, and argument that bureaucracy perpetuates absurdity rather than resolving it. By highlighting the absurdity of military bureaucracy, Heller exposes the ways in which institutional systems strip individuals of their humanity. For example, Milo Minderbinder’s obsession with profit over human life exemplifies how the system prioritizes its own preservation over the moral and ethical concerns of its participants. Milo’s syndicate, which profits from both sides of the war, underscores the complete breakdown of logic and morality within the bureaucratic system (Neziri’s et al,. 2024).

This absurdity is not confined to the military but resonates with real-world institutions, where individuals are often reduced to mere cogs in a machine and their well-being is subordinated to the goals of the system. The findings of this study expand on these perspectives by demonstrating how impossibility functions as the underlying logic of these bureaucratic absurdities, creating a surreal environment where traditional distinctions between sanity and insanity collapse. This blurring of boundaries underscores the novel’s existential critique, as soldiers are forced to confront the meaninglessness of their experiences within an illogical system. By reducing individuals to instruments of war, the system denies them agency and humanity, creating a sense of alienation and despair that resonates with the broader themes of absurdist literature.The study highlights how impossibility reflects broader existential concerns, aligning with Albert Camus' concept of the absurd. Camus (1942) describes absurdity as the tension between the human desire for meaning and the universe’s indifference. In Catch-22, this tension is vividly depicted through the soldiers’ futile attempts to navigate a system that denies them agency. Yossarian’s resistance to the absurd logic of military bureaucracy can be seen as an assertion of individual freedom in the face of existential despair (Jabbar, 2012).

This interpretation echoes Merrill’s (1987) argument that Catch-22 mirrors Camus’ philosophy, portraying a universe governed by arbitrary and irrational rules.However, this study extends Merrill’s analysis by emphasizing the role of impossibility as a defining characteristic of the novel’s critique, illustrating how Heller uses paradoxes and circular logic to expose the contradictions inherent in institutional power. For example, Yossarian’s ultimate decision to desert the military can be seen as an act of existential defiance—a refusal to participate in a system that denies him autonomy. This act aligns with Camus’ vision of the absurd hero, who confronts the meaninglessness of existence by asserting his own freedom and agency. The parallels between Catch-22 and other works of absurdist literature, such as Samuel Beckett’s Waiting for Godot, further underscore the existential themes of the novel. In Beckett’s play, the characters Vladimir and Estragon engage in repetitive and futile actions while waiting for a figure—Godot—who never arrives. Similarly, the soldiers in Catch-22 are trapped in a system that denies resolution or progress, forcing them to confront the absurdity of their circumstances (Couder, 2019).

Both works highlight the tension between individual agency and institutional control, using absurdity to critique the systems that govern human existence. The significance of these findings lies not only in their contribution to literary scholarship on Catch-22 but also in their broader relevance to contemporary discussions about systemic dysfunction and the human condition. Heller’s depiction of impossibility resonates in a world where individuals often feel trapped by bureaucratic systems, paradoxical rules, and unattainable expectations. The novel’s critique of military bureaucracy serves as a microcosm for examining the ways in which institutional power operates in modern society, offering valuable insights into the challenges of navigating such systems. For example, the circular logic of “Catch-22” can be seen in modern bureaucratic systems that require individuals to meet impossible conditions, such as job seekers being asked to have experience before being hired or patients navigating complex healthcare systems that prioritize profit over care (Hirth, 2016).

These contemporary parallels highlight the enduring relevance of Heller’s critique, demonstrating how literature can provide a lens for understanding the systemic issues that shape human experiences. Additionally, this study fills a gap in the existing scholarship on Catch-22 by providing a focused analysis of impossibility as a central theme. While previous studies have explored the novel’s satire of bureaucracy and its critique of war, few have examined how impossibility operates as a thematic and structural device. By addressing this gap, this research not only enhances our understanding of Catch-22 but also offers a framework for analyzing similar themes in other works of fiction. The intersections of impossibility, bureaucracy, and absurdity identified in this study provide a lens through which the contradictions of institutional power can be explored in a broader literary context (Neziri et al,. 2024).

**Conclusion**

This research explored the theme of impossibility in Joseph Heller’s Catch-22, examining its role as both a structural and thematic device in critiquing the absurdity of war, bureaucracy, and the human condition. Set within the chaotic environment of World War II, Heller’s novel presents paradoxes—most notably “Catch-22” as mechanisms of control that strip characters of agency and expose the futility of seeking logic or fairness within institutional systems. Through thematic analysis of key narrative elements and characters, the study highlighted how impossibility manifests in circular logic, fragmented narrative, and psychological despair. The findings support and extend existing scholarship on absurdist literature, particularly in relation to Albert Camus’ concept of the absurd and Samuel Beckett’s Waiting for Godot. However, this research contributes uniquely by foregrounding impossibility not just absurdity as the core force shaping the novel’s critique. This emphasis reveals a deeper layer of Heller’s satire, positioning impossibility as a literary tool to challenge systems that thrive on contradiction and dehumanization.

While the study offers a focused literary analysis, it is limited in scope to a single novel and theoretical lens. Future research could compare Heller’s treatment of impossibility with other works of war fiction or explore how different cultural contexts represent institutional paradoxes. This research contributes to a broader understanding of how literature reflects and critiques systemic dysfunction. By analyzing the psychological and structural effects of impossibility, the study sheds light on contemporary concerns about power, control, and the erosion of individuality.

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