

Chapter 1

Introduction

I. Philosophical Perspectives on Absurdity

In common parlance, the word absurd refers to something that is incongruous, illogical, or insensible. But the term also carries a special meaning in philosophy and literature. According to *The Harper Collins Dictionary*, "Absurd" refers to "philosophical views about human existence" advocated by "existential philosophers" that stress "life's meaninglessness, inconsistency, and lack of structure" (1). Albert Camus is the principal thinker who introduced this term to characterize human existence through his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*. In this essay, Camus talks about a mythical Greek character Sisyphus. Sisyphus is condemned to roll a rock to the top of a mountain. But it falls back to the bottom as soon as he takes it to the top, thus forcing him to do the same work again and again. Camus meant Sisyphus and his work as the representatives of general human condition. Like Sisyphus, all men keep on "struggling hopelessly and pointlessly to achieve something" but their life remains essentially "futile" (Solomon 102).

According to Camus, human existence has become meaningless because it inhabits the universe that is indifferent, even hostile to it. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus described such state of human existence as an "irremediable exile" (qtd. in Abrams 1). For Camus and other existential thinkers, the delinking of life and the world results from several reasons. One is the inadequacy of reason itself. The other is the lack of fixed organizing principles in the universe that guide its functioning. According to the existential thinkers, all philosophical systems prior to them underlay an assumption regarding the universe as a "total system" that was "presided over by a Creator God or a purely rational one developing in an evolutionary progress toward higher and higher goals" (*Encyclopedia of Philosophy* 3: 147). But they argue that such understanding of the world can no longer be true because the progress of science had

undermined belief in the authority of god, and the belief in progress towards betterment was disproved by the world wars.

Besides, the universe that the existentialists talk about rarely includes its physical aspect. Explanation and inquiry of the physical aspect and physical forces of nature belong to "the territory of natural sciences," which they do not intend to "trespass upon" (*Encyclopedia of Philosophy* 3: 148). Therefore, the universe that primarily concerns them is the social world that is governed by a coherent philosophical system which includes all the social, cultural, religious, and other beliefs of a society. This system served as the source of meaning and purpose for life as it provided explanation for the personal life as well as for the entire world. The loss of belief in such system, therefore, meant the loss of the source of meaning and explanation for life, making it absurd or meaningless.

The existentialists' distrust of the rational philosophical systems was combined with the distrust also of the foundation upon which it was built: the reason. Reason can not provide ultimate explanation of the universe because the universe does not possess any fixed patterns. It can not completely explain the individual reality as well because the individual reality "always evades complete conceptualization" (*Encyclopedia of Philosophy* 3: 147). Therefore, the existentialist thesis that human life is absurd seems to be the result of their criticism of the capacity of reason. But when they argue that human existence can not be understood with the help of rational concepts, they also mean that the human life itself possesses characteristics that can not be explained by reason alone.

Although the criticism of reason and philosophical systems are the common concerns of existentialists, they are primarily concerned with the condition of human existence. The isolation of human existence from the conceptual systems of philosophy makes them easy to reflect upon concrete individual existence, to bring into light "the uniqueness and mystery of each human life" which is their main goal (Bigelow 172). The existentialist thinkers like Camus and Sartre

perceived that reflection upon the human existence was required by the time because human life "had lost all its meaning" after the World War II, and because "the certitudes and unshakable basic assumptions of former ages" that supported life had collapsed in the cataclysm of the war (Esslin, "Absurdity" 23).

Sometimes, such philosophical notions of absurdity, together with Camus who introduced this term, are thought of as being separate from existentialism. One reason behind this is that Jean-Paul Sartre, not Albert Camus, is regarded as the central existential thinker. But Jacques Ehrmann has observed that both Camus and Sartre "represent the twin poles of one anguish" and that they work with "kindred assumptions" (95). Besides, David D. Galloway in *The Encyclopedia Americana* states that the word "Absurd" (1: 57), when used in philosophy, relates to the principal existential thinkers like Soren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus. Therefore, absurdity can best be understood as the existentialist thinkers' characterization of human existence in the disillusioned age following the world wars.

II. Absurd Literature: A Mirror of the Philosophical Absurdity

The views about the absurdity of human life are not limited to the theoretical writings of existentialist thinkers alone. They are reflected in literature as well. Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus themselves wrote plays and novels that exhibited their ideas expounded in philosophical treatises. Besides them, a large number of writers, especially dramatists, have expressed a sense of philosophical torment at the meaninglessness of existence. Martin Esslin coined the term the "theater of the absurd" to refer to such works. In his book titled *The Theater of the Absurd*, he discusses the works of Samuel Beckett, Arthur Adamov, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet, Harold Pinter, and other minor writers that belong to this tradition. He finds that the plays of these writers are more admirable than the ones written by Camus and Sartre themselves. According to him, absurd plays reflect the "senselessness of the human condition," which requires them to abandon "rational devices and discursive thought" ("Absurdity" 24). But Sartre and Camus have

not abandoned them, thus creating a contradiction between the form and the content. As a result, he concludes that the plays of Sartre and Camus do not exhibit absurdity as efficiently as the works of absurd playwrights do.

Esslin evaluates that the new philosophical ideas about absurdity triggered an innovation in both the form and content of drama, resulting in a radically new convention. One of the writers that he discusses is Samuel Beckett. Beckett's plays and novels are marked by a "sense of mystery, bewilderment, and anxiety when confronted with the human condition and his despair at being unable to find meaning in existence" (Esslin, "Beckett" 45). His plays introduced innovation by abandoning realistic settings, plots, and characters. Beckett also adhered to the utmost economy of language and wrote in French rather than in his native language English in order to avoid the use of ornate style. He feared that the use of embellished style would overshadow the content of his work.

Although Beckett endlessly searched for new style and ways of expression, the thematic content of his plays and novels remained essentially the same. According to Christopher Innes, he expressed the "existential vision" informed by the "painful awareness that our life has no purpose" through his plays (426).

Like Beckett, Eugene Ionesco was equally concerned about the futility and purposelessness of human existence. He himself described absurd life as the one "[c]ut off from" all "religious, metaphysical and transcendental roots," thus making it "senseless, absurd, useless," according to the introduction of *The Theatre of the Absurd* (qtd. in Esslin, "Absurdity" 23). He wrote plays like *The Chair*, *The Bald Prima Donna*, and *The Lesson*. His plays, like Beckett's, are characterized by innovative forms. *The Bald Prima Donna*, for example, starts and ends with the same dialogue, thus overlapping the end with the beginning. Ionesco himself described that the theme of his play *The Chairs*, as Esslin quotes him, is the "metaphysical emptiness" ("Ionesco" 152). Similarly, Arthur Adamov is also credited with writing some

remarkable plays in this new convention, and nourishing the tradition of the absurd. Likewise, Esslin describes Genet as dealing with the “feeling of helplessness and solitude when confronted with the despair and loneliness of man” in his works (“Genet” 200). Harold Pinter also “acknowledges the influence of Beckett and Kafka” in his works that is manifested in his concern with “man at the limit of his being” (Esslin, “Pinter” 261).

Esslin's seminal study on the convention of absurd theatre and his discussions on the dramatists belonging to this tradition may leave the impression that absurdity is found in only plays. But the philosophical influence of existentialism is not limited to the drama alone. Albert Camus himself wrote novels like *The Stranger* and *The Fall*. Franz Kafka's novels *The Trial* and *The Castle* are generally regarded as the most eloquent expressions of absurd vision of human existence. They depict a life after all "old secure foundations have collapsed. . ." (Doren 368). Similar vision is found, according to Doren, in the works of Thoman Mann like *The Magic Mountain*, and *Mario and the Magician*. And, as Jean Bruneau discusses in his article titled "Existentialism and the American Novel" (66-72), many American novelists like Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, and John dos Passos exhibit the influence of existentialism. Joseph Heller is another prominent American novelist whose works exhibit the influence of existentialism, especially of absurdity.

II. Absurdity of *Catch-22* under Critical Scrutiny

Catch-22 has remained Heller's most celebrated work. It has also generated a lot of criticism, especially for its absurdity. According to Leon F. Seltzer, both the theme and the style of *Catch-22* have been described as reflecting the absurdity of human existence. Seltzer's observation can also be proved by its mention in *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. M.H. Abrams has included it under the topic “Literature of the Absurd” (1) as a work for exhibiting “black humor” (2), an element found usually in such literature. Abrams has mentioned it again to

illustrate another topic “Antihero” (11) through its protagonist Yossarian. This topic also has close relation to the absurd literature.

Charlie Reilly, while giving a brief introduction to the writer and his works in her interview with Heller, has mentioned numerous characteristics of Heller’s works that are commonly found in absurd literature. She observes the presence of comic qualities and experimental nature in Heller’s works. Besides, she also finds his fiction an “eerily insane one” that is “filled with preposterous characters mired in outrageous circumstances” (507). There are numerous instances in the novel that support her comments. Heller does not use chronological order in narrating the events. They are based on the characters’ experiences, so they keep on switching back and forth in time. For example, Yossarian, the central character of the novel, frequently remembers the death of Snowden but its full account comes only at the end. There are also humorous scenes in *Catch-22*. Orr, for example, talks about his boyhood when he walked around with crab apples in his cheek and horse chestnuts in his hands. One character named the soldier in white, so named because he is covered from head to toe in bandages, is kept in the medical ward where Yossarian and Clevinger are also living in order to avoid fighting. The character is taken away from the ward after Nurse Cramer finds him dead. But he reappears again a long time later, and there are indications that he is still alive.

Almost everyone who has written on the thematic or stylistic aspect of the book has acknowledged the presence of absurdity, but there is considerable debate on how this absurdity should be understood. Reilly is one of them. She argues that the absurdity in the novel has a satiric intent. According to her, *Catch-22* presents a “brilliant attack not only upon the horror and lunacy of a just completed war but [also] upon the hypocrisy and savagery of the ongoing McCarthy witch hunts” (508).

Like Reilly, Leon F. Seltzer is another major critic who finds the absurdity in

Catch-22 underlying a satiric intent. He accepts that *Catch-22* exhibits absurdity because it abandons logical order in narrating the events. The novelist also makes use of grotesque atmosphere in the novel. But he interprets the chaos in *Catch-22* as “exposing the alarming inhumanities which pollute our political, social, and economic system” (290). This is in essence a Marxist perspective, since these inhumanities result from the capitalistic system that is always guided by the principle of making profit.

Seltzer makes a lengthy and meticulous analysis of Milo’s character, the flagrant embodiment of capitalism in the novel. Although Milo contracts with the enemy to bomb and strafe his own airfield, Seltzer finds the author at pains to show him in positive light. This leads him to conclude that Milo’s indoctrination into the capitalistic culture makes him morally insane although Milo himself is not aware of this. Moreover, he finds that this aspect of the novel--its criticism of ruthless capitalism through Milo--has not received enough critical attention. But the author himself, according to him, wanted his novel to be viewed through such perspective.

Alberto Cacicedo as well sees the absurdity in *Catch-22* through moral lenses. He argues that Yossarian’s decision to escape to Sweden at last, instead of accepting an unscrupulous deal with the higher authority and returning home, is a protest against the tyrannical military mechanism. A straightforward absurdist approach to the event could have termed it antiheroic. But in Cacicedo’s estimate, having his hero Yossarian decide to go to Sweden at last, Heller has successfully “produce[d] the saeva indignatio (savage indignation) that Jonathan Swift, for example, considered the affective preliminary to ethical social action” (357). Such reading is consistent with the claims made by Yossarian in his debate with Danby where he says that, in spite of his decision to run away from the military establishment, he will not avoid his responsibilities.

Cacicedo’s further explanation on how Yossarian fulfills his responsibility of

protest is a little surprising. According to him, Yossarian performs this not by running away to Sweden but by recollecting, toward the end of the novel, of his friend Snowden's death over Avignon because it shows an "impulse toward ethical, responsible behavior" (358). Had Yossarian not relieved this traumatic memory, he could have been accused of being a quietist, of accepting the injustice that Yossarian suffers. His point is that relieving traumatic events is itself a kind of protest against the destructive system.

Like Cacicedo, Robert M. Young also sees Snowden's death as the central event of *Catch-22*. But he explains the bizarre activities of its characters through psychoanalytic perspective, rather than explaining the significance of the single event. He mentions the selfish, often inexplicable activities and behaviors in a number of characters like Dreedle, Peckem, Cathcart, Black and others. According to him, people use "utterly selfish and survivalist" methods of protection in extremely dangerous situations (891). Once General Dreedle was in a briefing room, where he was interrupted by loud screams from Danby, Yossarian, and Dunbar. He warns them to stop screaming, but Danby irritates him shouting again. Dreedle gets terribly irritated at such disobedience and rashly orders Cathcart to shoot Danby. But his son-in-law Moodus intervenes, and Danby's life is saved. Likewise, General Peckem is more concerned about cultivating sophisticated manners than performing his duties. He is more concerned about neat aerial photograph made by falling bombs than about hitting the targets. His only goal is to outsmart General Dreedle and get ahead in rank. Colonel Catchcart constantly raises combat missions to become a general, and Captain Black makes all the military men sign loyalty oaths even before eating.

But Young observes that *Catch-22* contains a profound morality because everybody in the book does not betray decency. Therefore he concludes that *Catch-22* is "ultimately a book about ideals . . . about how hard it is for people to behave well, especially in groups and institutions under duress" (902).

Young also notes that Yossarian takes the war very personally and falsely believes that everyone around him wants to kill him because of his intimate experience of the horrible scene of Snowden's death. This event brings Yossarian face to face with the grim reality about the fragility of human existence. The other is the death of Kid Sampson when Yossarian is lying with Nurse Duckett by the seaside. Kid Sampson gets unwittingly killed by McWatt when he only wants to frighten him by flying very low over Sampson's raft. This event also "convey[s] an awful contingency, a callousness of God, nature and human depravity" (900). Still another terrible event is Aarfy's rape of a girl named Michaela and his act of throwing her out of a window after she dies in course of rape. Young views this event as well very significant to Yossarian particularly because it follows his walking through similarly harrowing scenes in Rome.

Young's emphasis on such grim realities that Yossarian encounters in the book makes him say that *Catch-22* is more than black humour. But Daniel Green argues that any discussion of comedy in the novel should examine comedy itself. He writes:

In fact, in my analysis, *Catch-22* is first and foremost a comic novel whose primary structural principle is the *joke* and whose design and execution are most appropriately construed as the vehicles of mirth. This description is also intended to underscore the book's accomplishment, but without divorcing its comedy from its overall seriousness of purpose. (187)

Green finds that the critics have shied away from discussing the comedy of the book because of its grave subjects like "war, death" and "systemic oppression" (195). But those who reject traditions can treat even the loftiest subjects humorously. He discusses the way Heller describes the event of Snowden's death in the novel. The event is very important because it gives Yossarian close experience of death. When Snowden was killed by the anti-aircraft fire in a combat mission, Yossarian was also in the same plane. While describing this event as well,

Heller does not sound serious. He compares the spilled contents of Snowden's stomach, torn by anti-aircraft fire, to garbage.

Besides black comedy, one very common and often discussed stylistic feature of absurd literature is the pattern of communication. Michael Moore has written on the presence and significance of this element in the novel. He says that the central character Yossarian is suffering from “schizophrenia” because he fails to communicate his ideas clearly to the others, and concludes that the novel demonstrates the importance of proper use of language for “mental health.” Unlike Moore, Alec Solomita finds farcical quality in the dialogues in the novel.

Like Michael Moore, D. C. Dougherty uses clinical terms to examine the novel. He describes it as a “paranoid fiction.” But he states that the purpose of *Catch-22* is not to highlight the psychopathology of the characters. Dougherty sees *Catch-22* as examining the political implication of paranoia, “revolv[ing] around the notion of victimization by . . . a military bureaucracy that willingly sacrifices individuals in its quest for power.” But he underscores the fact that such a tyrannical system can exist because its victims do not rise against it. In other words, the paranoiac individuals, who believe that the other people or institutions can direct all activities and do any kind of harm to them, have helped the existence of such tyrannical bureaucratic systems.

The selfish and ignoble behavior of many characters, along with the breakdown of communication, their aberrant states of mind and mental disorders explained in many ways by the critics quoted above are the themes commonly found in absurd literature.

There are other critics also who have analyzed the issues related to humor, morality, and behaviour of the characters. Jerry M. Lewis and Stanford W. Gregory, for example, discuss the value of the novel from sociological point of view. Their theme, the “inept” behavior of characters, is familiar to readers of absurd literature as characters in such literature are misfits

(58). They argue that the ineptness of characters in *Catch-22* can not be adequately explained through traditional sociological perspective. Such traditional perspectives assume that the individuals in any society do not play active role to become “inept.” But in *Catch-22*, they find that the characters consciously behave in a way that is unacceptable to the society.

Similarly, Norman Podhoretz appreciates the novel for the prolific presence of humour in it. But he deplors the “moral, spiritual, and intellectual harm” *Catch-22* has inflicted on the people (37). This harm is the result of Heller’s appraisal of cowardice in the novel. But Podhoretz sees this necessary for the aesthetic purpose of the book. The book, according to him, makes more sense when read as a criticism of the nature of entire American society in the contemporary period because it had lost all sense of right and wrong. The novel becomes less persuasive when read in its relation to the World War II because it criticizes the horrors of war as violently as its heroic virtues. When Yossarian, toward the end of the book, claims that he is patriotic and thinks of his country more than himself, the satirical purpose of the novel is lost. This ethical self-justification given by Yossarian also contradicts most of the book because it comes only at the end of the novel. Until then, in Podhoretz's opinion, the novelist makes us believe that Yossarian is thinking only of himself.

Although Podhoretz does not examine the novel directly from the perspectives of absurdity, his dissatisfaction with the novelist's criticism of heroic virtues reinforce the opinion that Yossarian is an anti-heroic character. This relates his critical evaluation as well to the other critics' comments on the affinities of the novel with absurd literature.

Another critic Charles J. Norlan directly states that *Catch-22* "document[s] the modern existential condition" of human life (77). But he does not find the author tormented over the metaphysical emptiness of human condition. Rather, just like Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, he sees the author arguing for the centrality of life and love.

Besides them, some other critics have also commented on the role of real life experiences and Heller's meticulous planning of the novel in advance. Particularly remarkable among them are Michael C. Scoggins and James Nagel. Scoggins has explained how the novelist has drawn extensively on his own experience as a bombardier in the World War II. Nagel's observation reveals that *Catch-22* shares the stylistic features of absurd literature in its presentation of "illogical structures [and] chaotic events" (404). Nagel also warns against unwary application of assumptions of absurd literature to understand the lack of chronology and logic in the novel because they are intentionally used by the author.

A careful reading of the novel reveals that Heller is not guided by the assumptions of absurd literature while writing the novel. Although the novel has a grotesque, absurd atmosphere in it, Heller has used these seeming absurdities to undercut the underlying theoretical assumptions. These assumptions are manifested by different aspects of absurd literature.

Chapter 2

Existentialism in Absurd Literature

I. Meaningless Language in Absurd Literature and Its Theoretical Underpinnings

The meaninglessness of human existence in absurd literature is expressed both through the portrayal of life, embodied in the characters, that exhibits the theoretical views found in existential philosophy, and also through the use of meaningless language. Language serves as the inevitable medium of literary expression. It is therefore natural for language to be affected by the theoretical aspect of any literary work. This leads to the conclusion that if the meaninglessness of human existence is the theme of absurd literature, then the use of language in such literature should also reflect such meaninglessness. Critics have acknowledged this fact. Moreover, the concern with language in absurd literature is noticeably more than usual. This is the influence of structural and post structural theories of language that attained prominence in the twentieth century.

Mainly critics have paid attention to the use of meaningless language in absurd drama. This is not surprising since the existentialists have found that dramatic dialogue, “whether in novels or plays,” is more appropriate medium of expressing the “author’s intentions” than “deductive argument” (*Encyclopedia of Philosophy* 3: 149). Martin Esslin has written a lot on the use of language in absurd plays, which is an important component of style in them. For example, he observes that Samuel Beckett always struggled with language to make it an appropriate medium of his intentions. This struggle, together with Beckett's intention to direct the readers' attention to the "sense of deadness, of leaden heaviness and hopelessness" (Esslin, "Beckett" 70) drove him to subvert the logic of language. For Beckett, logical language provides the readers an escape into its own chain of meaning. So he always made minimum use of language, because he feared that its ornate use would direct the reader's attention on itself.

Beckett's conscious attempts to avoid the use of ornate language did not result from this fear alone; he firmly believed that language could not communicate any meaning at all.

Beckett's distrust with the communicability of language resulted primarily from his belief in meaningless universe. When the whole world ceases to make sense, language also changes into mere sound without sense.

Esslin observes such tendency in other writer of absurd plays as well. He finds Arthur Adamov's play *Le Ping-Pong* unreadable because of its use of completely meaningless speeches. Eugene Ionesco is also equally concerned with the "impossibility of communication--words cannot convey meanings because they leave out of account the personal associations they carry for each individual" (Esslin, "Ionesco" 146). This is demonstrated through his works *The Lesson*, and *The Bald Prima Donna*. Although all absurd playwrights sought to introduce new views and styles of language use, the conceptual content of their work is same.

This content is the mysterious, inexplicable nature of human existence. The absurd playwrights' insistence on its inexpressibility coincides with the existentialist notion that life cannot be explained through easy, logical, and clear-cut concepts. Besides, when the existentialists stress that life cannot be rationally explained, they also emphasize on its inner stratum characterized by "obsessions, nightmares and anxiety. . ." (Esslin, "Ionesco" 128). Language becomes unreliable for absurd playwrights because it cannot communicate this vision of human existence that is itself incomprehensible, inexpressible.

Martin Esslin, therefore, argues that the overriding concern of absurd writers is to communicate the incommunicable nature of human existence. He also concludes that absurd playwrights' criticism of language conceals a desire for a genuine communication. This shows that the writers of absurd literature intend to endow language with some kind of communicative capacity, but their attack on language complicates such intention. Their primary concern in criticizing language seems to be its inability to communicate deep, metaphysical concerns about

human existence. But they extend their criticism to ordinary language use as well. In their opinion, the failure of language to convey profound philosophical concern proves that it can not be a means for ordinary communication as well.

Apart from these absurd playwrights discussed by Esslin, Victor Brombert has observed the use of meaningless language in Camus's novel *The Stranger*. He explains:

. . . all the trivial remarks . . . make up a good portion of the book. He said yes, he said no, he washed his hands, he smoked a cigarette, he was hungry-- all this not only is tedious, but also too obviously calculated [to make] the novel . . . [look] absurd. (122)

As we see, the mundane and repetitive remarks like "he said yes" and "he said no" reflect the absurdity of the protagonist, Mersault's existence. Brombert further notes that Mersault's utterances are very short and thoughtless. Camus occasionally subjects him to "a burst of lyricism," but this seems "incompatible with his character" (122).

Camus's style in *The Stranger* is a product of his attempt to reflect his concern about human existence. It does not seem to come from any influence on him about any theoretical perspective on language. In fact, Camus has rarely theorized on language. This is true to other existential theorists also. It is not surprising since their chief concern is human existence. But an existential writer, who has expressed his views about language, is Martin Heidegger. For Heidegger, according to the article on him in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*,

Language comes to be understood as the medium through which anything, including the human, first becomes accessible and intelligible . . . Heidegger says that humans do not speak, but rather language speaks us, an idea that became central to poststructuralist theories. (Guignon 319)

Heidegger, hence, has not argued that language is meaningless, as absurd dramatists have made of it. But he has unwittingly contributed to this view through his contribution to

poststructuralist theories. Poststructuralist theorists, treading on the footsteps of structuralist thinkers, posit language as a system independent of human beings. They divorce language from human experience, as language is viewed as an entity with its own systems and conventions. Heidegger has served the poststructuralists in saying that language speaks humans rather than humans speaking it. This divorcing of language from human experience serves as groundwork for poststructuralists to explain its nature. Because language is independent of human agency and intentionality and because it generates meaning out of its differential system, as structuralists claim; the poststructuralists, especially Derrida, argue that the differential play of language is infinite. Language hence becomes incapable of communicating meaning because of its own inherent nature, obliterating the "possibility of determinate communication" (Abrams 238). This brief quote from Samuel Beckett's novel *Murphy* seems to illustrate such view, although it was first published before this view gained currency: ". . . spattered with words that went dead as soon as they sounded; each word obliterated, before it had time to make sense, by the word that came next. . ." (27).

In this way, both the theoretical views regarding the absurdity of existence as advocated by existential and absurd writers like Camus, and the poststructuralist theories on language that locate its meaninglessness in its very structure jointly assert their legacy in the use of meaningless language in absurd literature. While the metalinguistic comments in absurd literature are helpful to understand these influences, the dialogues are meant to illustrate them.

II. Bleakness of Human Existence: The Rationale behind Antiheroes

Even more important than the meaninglessness of human existence that gets reflected in the language is the portrayal of human life itself embodied by the protagonists in absurd

literature. Human existence in absurd literature is often embodied by the “Antihero,” who does not manifest the “largeness, dignity, power, or heroism” as the “traditional protagonist” does (Abrams 11). In contrast the “antihero is petty, ignominious, passive, ineffectual, or dishonest” (Abrams 11). Such portrayal of life found in the antiheroes is understood in two ways. Some see these antiheroic qualities only as means of satirizing the traditional modes of life embodied by the traditional protagonists. Such interpretation is of those readers who argue that the meaninglessness in absurd literature underlies the writer’s aspiration for meaning. But when the absurd literature is understood as it is, the antiheroes open up a long-standing debate on whether existentialism is optimistic and liberating; or gloomy and pessimistic. The qualities that Abrams associates with these antiheroes, if understood in this light, raise serious questions against the liberating potentiality of existentialism.

Existentialists have vehemently opposed the charge that they are pessimistic but the antiheroic qualities support despair and pessimism more than courage and optimism. There are convincing reasons behind this. To begin with, existential thinkers have preoccupied themselves with the problems of human existence, leaving themselves with little space for exploring a world of hope and optimism beyond the problems of existence. Albert Camus himself, who is sometimes described as an optimistic thinker, agrees that existentialism is a pessimistic philosophy. According to him, existentialism has to embrace the pessimism because it is the problem of the whole civilization. He further explains his position:

If the whole epoch has suffered from nihilism, we cannot remain ignorant of nihilism and still achieve the moral code we need. No, everything is not summed up in negation and absurdity. We know this. *But we must first posit negation and absurdity because they are what our generation has encountered and what we must take into account.* (59) (emphasis added)

This proves that the premise of thinking for existentialism has been negation and absurdity.

Therefore it is not surprising to find pessimism in them.

To add to it, even the most upbeat accounts of existentialism do not advocate optimism as commonly understood. Henri Peyre, who argues that existentialism is not a literature of despair, tells that the existential writers have made prolific use of suffering in their works. In his opinion, existentialism seeks to make men aware of the extremely harsh circumstances that surround his existence. They also insist that human beings should not expect redemption from any external power or agency. The only option left for them is to act courageously on their own. Hence, Peyre acknowledges that human existence is overwhelmingly difficult, but beyond the difficulty a "vista of unlimited hope extends" (32). This position is typical of everyone who sees existentialism in this light--its obsession with despair and pessimism are always--meant to refute them.

Furthermore, Peyre tells that the tilt of existentialism toward despair is impelled by the traditionally advocated easy optimism which presupposed only goodness residing in the world. In reality, however, evil is rampant and it often defeats the good. Therefore, the optimism in existentialism has to encounter this facile optimism. Jean- Paul Sartre, Peyre tells us, intends to repudiate this kind of optimism by "showing the youth of today the intricate difficulties it will have to unravel, the nauseating anguish it will have to experience" (32). Once again, existentialists are interpreted as inexorably endowing their assertions and preoccupations with a purpose directly opposite to these preoccupations.

However, Peyre's analysis can be used to reach another kind of conclusion. He says that existentialism advocates the view of life ridden with difficulties. Therefore, existentialist writers could be expected to pin their hope for life in overcoming these numberless difficulties. But the existential theorists are not always sure of overcoming these difficulties, although they speak highly of the struggle against them.

In *The Rebel*, Camus writes that the universe has imposed suffering in life in the form of death, and various forms of injustice. He calls for a "metaphysical rebellion" against the unjust circumstances of human life (29). The metaphysical rebel must fight against the sorrows and injustices imposed by the world without the aid of any transcendental power. But such protest becomes only partially successful even after the rebel pushes the god out of his heavenly throne. It is because the rebel thereafter must "create the justice, order and unity" (31). Camus warns that the deviation of such struggle from its primary purpose can unleash great terror and destruction in the society. Such situations, if they recur again and again, make the rebellion unsuccessful.

The following passage, however, reveals that Camus has deeper anxieties about the success of the rebellion other than his fear from its derailment from the main objective:

One hundred and fifty years of metaphysical revolt and of nihilism have witnessed the persistent reappearance, under different guises, of the same ravaged countenance: the face of human protest. All of them, decrying the human condition and its creator, have affirmed the solitude of man and the non-existence of any kind of morality. . . . Those who have rejected, for the world they had just created, all other principles but desire and power, have been driven to suicide or madness and have predicted the apocalypse. As for the rest, they have chosen pomp and ceremony, the world of appearances, murder and destruction. (72)

Faced with uncertainty about the prospect of the success of rebellion, Camus proposes perpetual protest in *The Rebel*, the need to accept rebellion as an integral fact of life. Hence Camus's doubt about the success of rebellion threatens not only to make it futile, but also to give the rebels no way forward other than making themselves tyrannical or giving up the struggle. In the latter case, they should fall back again into the lap of fictitious hope of divine force.

Camus's anxieties about the success of the "dominion of man" (31), a condition in which man himself will be responsible for all the aspects of his existence without the support of any divine or omnipotent force, are also manifest in his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Sisyphus's condition is symbolic of the fate of anyone pitted against the implacable universe. Sisyphus in this essay cannot overcome the conditions of his suffering--he can never succeed in resting the stone on the top of the mountain--but Camus prescribes that "One must imagine Sisyphus happy" (70). To imagine Sisyphus happy in this case is to reconcile with the absurd condition of one's existence, to learn to live happily despite the failure to overcome the absurdity of life. Although Camus holds rebellion against meaninglessness in life in high estimate, this shows that his prescription for happiness in life does not follow the success of rebellion but it consists in reconciling with the absurdity.

Camus himself has accepted such philosophical stance. In an interview compiled in the book *Resistance, Rebellion and Death* under the title "The Wager of Our Generation," Camus is asked the question: "In all your work there co-exists philosophical pessimism and, nonetheless, not optimism but a sort of confidence. Confidence . . . in action rather than its results." (246). To this question, Camus responds that all men live in the same condition.

Theoretically, Camus held up the value of revolt against the insurmountable absurdity of existence. But he did not feature any such rebellious characters in his novels. For example, Victor Brombert has made the following observation of central character Mersault in his *The Stranger*:

Mersault feels his loneliness, but does not even attempt to find a meaning for his life. He accepts conditions as they are, and shows not the faintest desire to change them. He knows overwhelmed by his fate but he does nothing to liberate himself.

(120)

Brombert's analysis proves that Camus himself had given in to the absurdity, although this was not directly expressed in his works like *The Rebel* and *The Myth of Sisyphus*. If this were not true, Mersault, the central character of *The Stranger* should not have exhibited such passivity and powerlessness.

Critics have pointed out similar views expressed in Camus's another novel *The Fall* also. In Carl A. Viggiani's opinion, Camus sounds a little optimistic in *The Rebel*. This optimism is expressed in his hope of establishing a realm of justice in the world without the support of god because god could not stop the miseries of the world. But *The Fall* shows that Camus has lost this hope as well. Viggiani finds the hopelessness reflected in the activities of the protagonist Jean-Baptiste Clamence. Clamence, according to Viggiani, "is a demonic figure. His function . . . is to sit at the center of the worldly Hell and, by catching the conscience of his victims, to weave a web of human solidarity in guilt" (66).

It is now quite easy to see that there is consistency in the delineation of such characters in all works of absurd literature. These antiheroes not only show passivity and powerlessness, but like Clamence, they sometimes engage themselves in activities that are demonic. The protagonist of *Endgame*, Hamm, is even more demonic than Jean-Baptiste Clamence. When his servant Clov detects a flea in his trousers, he orders him to kill it immediately because he fears that "humanity might start from there all over again" (Beckett 835). Such desire to obliterate the whole of humanity must be understood as the expression of extreme frustration and pessimism about it. This also ridicules interpretations made about absurd theories and literature that they intend to dispel pessimism.

There is a debate on whether existentialism sought to eliminate heroic potentiality of human life. Henry Peyre argues that existentialism accentuates "austere heroism" that can be "attained through lucidity, courage [and] intellectual agility" (26). These heroic qualities, according to him, can save us from the pitfalls of our existence. But the article on existentialism

in *Everyman's Encyclopedia* directly contradicts his position. According to it, existentialism advocates "the absolute inanity of existence, absurdity of the universe [and] negation of all creation. . ." (5: 170). Such view does not provide any scope for heroism. Besides, a heroic view of life should necessarily underscore the lofty virtues like courage and bravery. But the same article states that existentialism refutes the existence of such loftiness in mankind, and highlights only his sorrows and sufferings.

Moreover, existentialist thinkers lay special emphasis on extreme situations for understanding the true nature of human existence. Therefore, "Axiety, dread and death" emerges as a major theme in existentialism, according to the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (3: 149). Existentialists insist that men must confront the void to understand their life. Martin Heidegger emphasizes on living with a sense of one's death in one's mind. Karl Jaspers says that human beings understand the existential truths of their life only when they encounter the situations that bring them face to face with the transience and perishability of their existence. Gordon E. Bigelow has put these concerns even more accurately:

For the man alienated from God, from nature, from his fellow man and himself, what is left at last but Nothingness? The testimony of the existentialists is that this is where modern man finds himself . . . on the brink of a catastrophic precipice, below which yawns the absolute void, an uncompromised black Nothingness. (176)

Absurd literature features characters that sometimes fall into this pit as the suicide of Murphy shows. Even when they do not commit suicide, they are not able to do anything at all. A short comment by Beckett on the same character Murphy before he kills himself proves this point: "To die fighting was the perfect antithesis of his whole practice, faith and intention" (26). This lack of motivation for the action, therefore, reflects the existentialists' preoccupation with the overwhelmingly harsh nature of human existence.

For Jean-Paul Sartre, difficulties in human life arise from human attempts to establish their own identity, and from their attempts to live authentic life. According to the article on Sartre in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, Sartre insists on rejecting social conformity in order to live a truly authentic life. He calls living inauthentic life acting in bad faith, but it is very hard to get rid of this:

. . . bad faith is erroneously viewing ourselves as something fixed and settled . . . but it is also bad faith to view oneself as a being of infinite possibilities and ignore the always restrictive facts and circumstances within which all choices must be made. On the one hand we are trying to define ourselves, on the other hand we are always responsible for what we are and always responsible for what we have made of ourselves. But there is no easy resolution or ‘balance’ between facticity and freedom, rather a kind of dialectic or tension. (Solomon 711)

This dialectic, according to Sartre, is the source of despair because it generates an irreconcilable conflict between the deterministic situations that surround our life, and our attempts to liberate us from their clutches. But, Sartre has even more to say about the external conditions of man’s existence. According to him, human identity has to cope with other people’s perception. Of course, nobody can remain free of others’ attention in the society. But our society, according to Sartre, pays more attention to our bad deeds than the good ones when forming opinions about our character. Therefore, even our unintentional involvement in some humiliating act puts an indelible stigma in our image. This stigma becomes an intolerable burden in our conscience, since we constantly remember that our identity in the society carries the black mark. This also leads to so deep a frustration that in his play *No Exit*, a character utters the line: “ ‘Hell is other people.’ ” (qtd. In Solomon 711)

Another article in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* on Martin Heidegger also shows that Heidegger as well, like Camus, thought of human existence as alien and exiled. For

Heidegger, there is no essential, fixed nature that defines a human being. Heidegger used the term Dasein to mean existence defined in the process of our activities. This Dasein, according to him, finds itself hurled into a hostile world where it should define itself. Thus Heidegger also, according to the article on existentialism in the same book, should be understood as contributing to the central claim of existentialism

. . . that we human beings exist without justification (hence 'absurdity') in a world into which we are 'thrown,' condemned to assume full responsibility for our free actions and for the very values according to which we act. . . . (McBride 256)

Both Sartre and Heidegger, therefore, set up the task of overcoming the alienation of human existence. Sartre, as explained above, has recognized the task as almost impossible because it needs to establish equilibrium between what we are and what we want to be. Neither Heidegger expresses a confidence regarding the ability of exiled humans to overcome this alienation. Camus has already acknowledged that human beings cannot overcome the absurdity, but should reconcile with it. Hence all efforts of human beings to establish meaning in life become futile, because the accounts of the existentialist thinkers' show serious doubts on the success of such attempts. This is the main source of despair, and consequently, of the passivity and powerlessness of the antiheroes. These antiheroes, therefore, should be understood as manifesting the limitation of existentialism itself because it recognizes the need for overcoming meaninglessness or absurdity of life but shows no confidence in doing so.

III. The Problems of Authentic Existence: Its Critique of Society and Contribution to the Misfits

The harshness of human existence and despair in existential theories has produced antiheroes in absurd literature. Besides being inactive, these antiheroes are also misfits in the society. This tendency to represent misfits in absurd literature can be traced back into

existentialism, especially in its notion of authentic existence as the only suitable mode of living for establishing the meaning and purpose of life. This notion of authentic existence is also bound up with the notion of freedom as conceived by existential thinkers. Steven Crowell, in his article on existentialism in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, has based his definition of existentialism on the notion of authenticity: ". . . existentialism may be defined as the philosophical theory which holds that a further set of categories, governed by the norm of authenticity, is necessary to grasp human existence." Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Sartre have their own ways of describing authentic existence. All of them have emphasized on non-conformity, on disengaging oneself from ordinary and accepted ways of doing things. But existentialism lays very little or no practical guidelines for new ways of doing things. Its preoccupation with the criticism of social conformity, therefore, risks producing only misfits.

The misfits have already spanned the pages of absurd literature. Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, for example, features tramps like Vladimir and Estragon as its main characters. His novel *Murphy* has its protagonist Murphy who sets himself adrift from the mainstream society of both Dublin and London. It can hardly be believed that existentialist theorists meant to produce only such misfits to embody their vision of authentic existence. Albert Camus, for example, says in *The Rebel* that the rebel, who embodies his idea of authentic existence, should be able to create his own principles of justice and order. If the notion of authentic existence, as they argue, is understood to be the admirable mode of living that lives up to the standard as conceived in existential philosophy, these misfits cannot be viewed as embodying this notion. However, the absurd works of literature like those quoted have been interpreted as reflecting the theoretical bases of existentialism, not mimicking or undermining it. This leads us to the conclusion that there must be some inadequacies or awkwardness in the notion of authentic existence.

The chief source of such precariousness could very well be the result of cross-purposes into which this notion is put. As its very name indicates, the focus of existentialist philosophy is on existence. According to Crowell, it seeks to bring out the uniqueness of existence. This uniqueness, he says, "remain[ed] invisible to traditional philosophy, with its emphasis either on what follows unerring objective laws of nature or else conforms to the universal standards of moral reason." Bringing into light of the aspect of existence neglected by traditional philosophy should not necessarily involve it in lambasting the whole society and culture as the existential theorists have done. Although any society or culture could be explained in terms of some philosophical system, it is not convincing to say that the whole of any society lives rigidly under the dictates of any philosophical system. When the existentialists applied the philosophical concept of authentic existence to criticize social conformity; they have not only been guided by this far-fetched assumption but have also neglected how human life can be possible in total isolation from society.

Some existentialists have indirectly confessed the vicissitudes of such a violent rejection of everything in the traditional society and culture. Camus has, for example, prescribed Aristotelian mediocrity at one point in *The Rebel*. He acknowledges that the rebellion "destroys" when it goes for "absolute rejection" of what exists; and also when "it blindly accepts what exists and gives voice to absolute assent" (73).

Martin Heidegger feared the loss of authenticity as inevitable because of our involvement in the society. For him, human beings can not live a truly authentic life because they follow the norms provided by their society and culture. So, all people living in a society become indistinguishable from one another because the rules and models of behavior that a society wants its members to follow are same. Heidegger, hence, castigates stereotyped social roles but has little to say about the new role. His emphasis on total disengagement from society leads him to awkward position. So he is compelled to acknowledge that "our lives are inseparable from our

community's existence" and he redefines authenticity so as to accommodate this problem:

"authenticity involves seizing on the possibilities circulating in our shared 'heritage' in order to realize our communal 'destiny' " (Guignon 319).

Like Heidegger, Kierkegaard also castigated the crowd, his equivalent for society, and assigned the objective truths of science and history to the crowd. Therefore, as Crowell writes, he also saw the society cultivating conformity. Since he believed in the passion of faith that is not justified by reason or objective truths, he declared that society does not permit the people to live a truly meaningful life. Crowell gives further assessment of Kierkegaard's opinion of the crowd:

The crowd is roughly public opinion in the widest sense-- the ideas that a given age takes for granted; the ordinary and accepted way of doing things, the complacent attitude that comes from the conformity necessary for social life-- what condemns it to 'untruth' in Kierkegaard's eyes is the way that it insinuates itself into an individual's own sense of who she is, relieving her of the burden of being herself. . . .

Kierkegaard's criticism of society, once again, is guided by the assumption that the entire society is rigidly governed by scientific and historical facts, leaving no room in it for authentic existence.

According to Crowell, Friedrich Nietzsche also attacked the society because it indoctrinated individuals into "docility and unfreedom by conforming [them] to the universal standards of morality." Like Heidegger and Kierkegaard, Nietzsche saw the whole of society living under a system. This system is of ethics, as Crowell explains, the entire "Judeo-Christian moral order." For Nietzsche, moral principles of Christianity emerged as collective defenses of the weak against the strong. Such moral code, then, necessarily admits the inferiority of the weak. In the long run, people internalize this sense of weakness, thus turning themselves into so-

called herd animals. Therefore, Nietzsche saw that the god in Christianity and its ethical system throw grave obstacles on fulfilling life because they always caution people to suppress their energy and enthusiasm.

After he dismissed the entire moral order, Nietzsche recognized the need for a standard for human life. A person who rejects the moral order of society can rise above the criterion of good and evil. However, this state of being, as Crowell writes, does not mean for Nietzsche anarchic fulfillment of all kinds of desires. This would mean a return to full-fledged barbarism. But when it comes to provide a standard for such existence, Nietzsche seems to find himself at a loss because, as Crowell mentions, he "variously indicate [s] such a standard in his references to 'health,' 'strength,' and 'the meaning of the earth,' " without providing adequate conceptualization of these concepts. Therefore, Crowell suggests we turn to his concept of aesthetics in order to understand his principles that are necessary to guide one's life. Surprisingly, these principles are not different from the self-control and tolerance that belong to traditional ethics. It is because Nietzsche finally admits that our ways of fulfilling our wishes must be appropriate in the society which requires our offensive wishes to be brought under control.

Jean-Paul Sartre, the principal existential thinker, had his own way of criticizing conformity. But he did not criticize the society and morality as openly as Kierkegaard and Heidegger, although his premises and conclusions are the same. His idea of authenticity is also more closely bound up with the notion of freedom which he formulated in the slogan: "existence precedes essence" (*The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* 3: 149).

This can be further clarified with the help of two types of being that Sartre devised to explain the existence: the in-itself and the for-itself. Sartre identified the for-itself with human consciousness and therefore, human reality and existence. In-itself designates the things that can not be conscious of their own existence. The identity of in-itself is determined by their properties that can also be called their essences. But the for-itself lacks such static, inherent

properties. Therefore the "in-itself is the realm of self-identity" since it already possesses a fixed nature, while "the for-itself is incomplete and in a perpetual search . . . for self- identity" (Machado 252).

This for-itself constructs self-identity by engaging in what Sartre calls projects. Taken simply, these projects are the human beings' engagement in the world they live in. Such involvement not only establishes the identity of the agent involved but also helps the engaged agents to understand the world. According to Crowell, in the process of engagement, "things present themselves not only as indifferent givens, facts; but as meaningful, salient, expedient, obstructive, and so on." During the process, the agent is totally immersed in the activity that is going on. But Sartre describes that such person, who is lost in his work without any prior thinking about it, is also exercising his choice.

Hence, Sartre encounters an awkward position in his thought. This is because he is opposed to the Cartesian view of ego as a stable object constituted by the power of thinking or consciousness. Saying that human actions done only after a process of thinking involve choice will reinstate the Cartesian view of ego. As Sartre sees that both types of actions--done deliberately and done suddenly--involve a choice, he holds human beings equally responsible for both types. This is a precarious position and Crowell says that the existentialists have been criticized for this.

To reinstate this in simple terms, Sartre argues that our engagement with the world requires our total immersion into it. At this time, it is not possible to take an evaluative position toward our work. When he says that people should be responsible for such actions, he requires them to be evaluative of their action before doing them or while doing them. This is a straightforward contradiction.

Now, how can we establish our self-identity according to this criterion that involves irreconcilable contradiction? Sartre himself did not realize this contradiction. But he saw

problems with our engagement in the society. As the projects that define us come from our society and its traditions, these projects do not permit the authentic existence. Therefore, the people who seek to define themselves on the basis of their day-to-day activities become all alike. They end up enacting stereotyped roles.

In this way, Sartre also reaches the conclusion that authentic existence cannot be realized in society. At this point, he realizes that there is no possibility of life in total withdrawal from the society. So, Sartre concludes that the authentic existence is just an "attitude," as Crowell writes, that explains the inauthentic existence as authentic, as "the engagement in my projects as my own (eigen)." Far from providing new ways of living as expected, Sartre ends up prescribing only an attitude. If the authentic existence involves only a perspective, Sartre's rejection of the entire society and its traditions as barriers of authentic existence is not justified. No society can forbid anyone from taking up any perspectives on his way of life.

Besides this, the moral and ethical evaluation of the new mode of living that Sartre formulates also involves only seeing our actions into new attitude: The fact that such actions are exactly like that done traditionally in societies does not now trouble Sartre. The following illustration provided by Crowell proves this:

My moral act is inauthentic if, in keeping my promise for the sake of duty, I do so because that is what one 'does' (what 'moral people' do). But I can do the same thing authentically if, in keeping my promise for the sake of duty, acting this way is something I choose as my own, something to which, apart from its social sanction, I commit myself.

If Crowell's evaluation is to be believed, this marks an anticlimactic point in existentialism. Despite the claim of existential thinkers to establish new grounds of values and new standards for human existence, this example radically falls short of such claims. Therefore, the characters

in absurd literature cast adrift from the society, but they do not exemplify new standards, ethics, and morals through their life.

Chapter 3

Critique of Absurdity in *Catch-22*

I. Dialogues in *Catch-22*: Mimicry of Absurd Literature

Heller's use of repetitive dialogues in *Catch-22* gives important insights on how he uses this technique used by absurd writers; and how he also makes a mockery of this technique. In order to portray the meaninglessness and futility of existence, the absurd writers engage their character in "lucid but eddying and pointless dialogue" (Abrams 2). A brief quote from Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* can serve as an illustration of how language for absurd writers has ceased to become an effective means of communication.

NAGG. Can you see me?

NELL. Hardly. And you?

NAGG. What?

NELL. Can you see me?

NAGG. Hardly. (829)

Not only the questions these characters ask are similar, but also they reply using same words because they are intended to question the potentiality of language to communicate.

Heller also makes ample use of such repetitive dialogues that makes his novel readily comparable to the works of other absurd writers such as Beckett. Early in the first chapter of the novel titled "The Texan," the following conversation between Yossarian and the chaplain clearly reflects Beckett's pattern:

'That's good,' said the chaplain.

'Yes,' Yossarian said, 'Yes, that is good.'

'I meant to come around sooner,' the chaplain said, 'but I really haven't been well.'

'That's too bad,' Yossarian said.

'Just a head cold,' the chaplain added quickly.

'I've got a fever of a hundred and one,' Yossarian added quickly.

'That's too bad,' said the chaplain.

'Yes,' Yossarian said. 'Yes, That is too bad.' . . .

'That's too bad.'

'Yes,' Yossarian said. 'Yes, that is too bad.' (19)

The repetition of the lines "That's good" and "That's too bad" thoughtlessly by Yossarian and the chaplain may lead us to conclude that Heller exposes the meaninglessness of the life these characters are living. Their conversation, instead of communicating anything worthwhile, may be said to be mere "patter" (Esslin, "Beckett" 47). But a closer look at the situation reveals that even such formulaic repetitions are not used to demonstrate the inability of language to communicate; nor to deflect the readers' attention from the dialogues to some mysterious, non-communicable depth of human existence. Heller uses them to convey simple and immediate concerns of the characters arising from specific situations.

As we go through the novel, it becomes evident that Yossarian here is expressing his emotional instability and suspicion toward the chaplain. The characters in *Catch-22*, working under extremely dangerous, life-threatening situations, are worried about the survival. In the dialogue quoted above, Yossarian first mentions that he has a fever, and the chaplain sympathizes him. This suddenly triggers Yossarian's subconscious fear of death, which actually impels him to utter the same line "That's too bad." This becomes further clear when the readers come across Yossarian's fear about "Ewing's tumor and melanoma," his worries about "the many diseases and potential accidents threatening him" (225).

Another reason behind Yossarian being so dismissive in this reply to the chaplain can be his suspicion toward the latter because Yossarian did not know who he was. And since he was feigning illness to avoid flying combat missions, he also fears that the chaplain will know his pretense that could return him to his regular duty. It is not difficult to understand this as he

deflects the chaplain's question about his identity even after they develop some intimacy in the process of communication. The basis for this is served by Lieutenant Natley, another character in the novel, whom the chaplain already knows before he comes to Yossarian. When Yossarian discovers that the man he is talking to is a harmless chaplain and after the chaplain makes persistent offers of help to Yossarian, Yossarian keeps full trust in him. After considerable probing, Yossarian develops intimacy with the chaplain, addresses him as the father. He also warns him not to visit the other wards because "They're filled with lunatics" and that may infect the chaplain since "Insanity is contagious" (22).

This example serves as an illustration of how the seemingly eddying dialogues in *Catch-22* are rife with various concerns and purposes of the characters. They are definitely not pointless.

One other example from the novel gives further proof of this point. This time the central character in the novel, Yossarian, repeats the words of a genuinely sick soldier to convince the medical team of his similar illness; and to avoid returning to combat duty.

'I see everything twice!' the soldier who saw everything twice shouted when they rolled Yossarian in.

'I see everything twice!' Yossarian shouted back at him just as loudly with a secret wink.

'The walls! The walls!' the other soldier cried. 'Move back the walls!'

'The walls! The walls!' Yossarian cried. 'Move back the walls!' (232)

Yossarian's repetitions here are not meant to criticize language. Nor is he mocking at the inability of the medical team to understand any grave concerns of the sick soldier, as his hilarity in the wink shows it.

The other assumption about absurd literature is that language in absurd literature is unrelated to human experience and emotions. Using repetition in conversation, writers of absurd

literature illustrate this feature. Once again, an analysis of such instances in *Catch-22* reveals how Heller cleverly puts them not at the service of this assumption. Rather he uses them to reflect the temperament and nature of the characters. When Yossarian, the protagonist of the novel, gets wounded by an anti-aircraft fire in a combat mission, he repeatedly pleads another man in the same plane Aarfy to help him: " 'I'm hit, Aarfy ! Help me!' " (367). Aarfy pretends not to hear and repeatedly answers " 'I still can't hear you' " (367). Yossarian then grows desperate and accuses Aarfy of being insensitive which is an accurate description of Aarfy's character.

If analyzed through the assumptions of absurd literature, Aarfy would definitely not be blamed for insensitivity because such literature, as Esslin quotes Beckett, assumes that "no communication is possible" ("Beckett" 32). Therefore, all attempts to communication are bound to fail. It is perfectly natural for Aarfy not to hear, understand, and act on the pleadings. The more Yossarian requests him to clear his way so that he can get back from the nose of the fighter aircraft into the body of the plane, the more exasperating does Aarfy's repeated answer become to the readers.

Clearly, Aarfy is taking sadistic pleasure in seeing Yossarian desperately struggling to run into safety. Aarfy is indeed a demonic person. He rapes and murders the maid Michaela who served in the officer's apartment. When Yossarian responds to the incident with horror, Aarfy dismisses the murder as a minor case not worthy of convicting him for: " 'She was only a servant girl. I hardly think they're going to make too much of a fuss over one poor Italian servant girl when so many thousands of lives are being lost everyday' " (528). Aarfy's destructive insensitivity, therefore, leads him to claim that he does not hear Yossarian. His repeated disclaimers are not meant by the author to demonstrate the inability of language to convey the emotional urgency of Yossarian's frantic pleadings to Aarfy. Nor are they divorced from Aarfy's nature, since he is an indifferent sadist.

Heller, of course, does not make use of only the dialogues involving sparse words and repetitions, but such use is too noticeable to escape our attention. Besides, what makes such dialogues prominent is their resemblance with similar instances that readers come across in other works of literature like that in the *Endgame*. Even before the readers start to grasp the "outrageous senselessness . . . of the book's action" (Seltzer 290), they are initiated into the absurd milieu of the novel through this technique widely in absurd works of literature.

Dr. Michael Moore has sought to provide an exhaustive explanation for all the dialogues in *Catch-22*. His analysis also proves that the dialogues in *Catch-22* do not carry all the assumptions of absurd literature. Although he sees such instances as demonstrating the "breakdown of communication," he does not find them dissociated from the emotions and experiences of the characters. Rather, he says that the novel illustrates the "importance of semantic hygiene for mental health."

Alec Solomita's comments similarly reveal how the novel's dialogues bear similarity to absurd literature, not guided by the same assumptions. They are "elliptical," and "cumulative" (63). But he finds that they are used for humorous purposes only.

Therefore, it is helpful to see the use of dialogue as pertaining to the use of absurdity of the novel as most critics have done. But he has cleverly mocked this technique found in other absurd works of literature. While such technique in such works is intended to express the meaninglessness, isolation, and purposelessness of human existence, and the meaninglessness of language itself; Heller demonstrates how the superficially meaningless language communicates desired meanings. Even if we were to believe that the use of meaningless dialogue, as some critics argue, is intended to mount an attack on the conventionalized, everyday use of language in order to underscore the possibility of true communication; Heller does not seem to be attacking such language at all. Rather, he happily embraces such language and uses it to achieve

communication, which the critics on absurd literature and the writers deem impossible in the manner Heller has done.

Heller, therefore, does away with the assumptions about language in absurd literature: That language is meaningless and it can not communicate; and that language does not convey human emotions and experiences. Rather, he is advocating the communicability of language and its ability to express human emotions even when its nature belies this fact. Although an absurd theorist, Albert Camus has emphasized this fact quite clearly in his essay "Create Dangerously":

He [a true artist] has only to translate the sufferings and happiness of all into the language of all and he will be universally understood. As a reward for being absolutely faithful to reality, he will achieve complete communication among men. This ideal of universal communication is indeed the ideal of any great artist.

(257)

Absurd writers attack language because it fails to communicate the sufferings of life that result from its absurdity.

II. Yossarian: A Hero with Compassion

The analysis of the protagonist of *Catch-22*, Yossarian's actions gives important insight on whether Heller has also given in to the absurdity of human existence, as embodied by the passive and powerless antiheroes of absurd literature. These antiheroes do not engage in meaningful, heroic action because existentialism, that provides the theoretical support to absurd literature, describes human existence as a state of incurable isolation and exile in the implacable universe. Some critics see Yossarian as such typical antihero. One of them is M. H. Abrams, who has described Yossarian as an exemplary antihero.

But the author Joseph Heller himself has told that he modeled Yossarian after the Trojan hero Achilles in the *Iliad*. In the interview with Charlie Reilly, Heller says he uses a conscious relation between *Catch-22* and the *Iliad*. He further elaborates:

I was very conscious of Homer's epic while writing the novel, and at one point, late in the book, I directly compare Yossarian to Achilles. . . . Most people think the *Iliad* ends with the Trojan horse, but Homer's work and mine stop long before. Just as the *Iliad* is ending there's that magnificent scene when Achilles meets with Priam and his sympathy and emotions finally come pouring out. The ending of *Catch-22* shows Yossarian going through a similar experience. (518)

Although Heller does not state what this experience is, we can nevertheless be sure that the experiences are those described in the passage titled "The Eternal City" that occupies twenty pages of the book, from page 511 to 530. The experiences that Yossarian undergoes in this chapter are his compassion for a girl-- a prostitute's sister-- in Rome that extends in turn to his concern for all the children in Africa and his disgust with the rape, murder, injustice, cruelty, and immorality in general. The girl Yossarian wants to protect is his friend Nately's whore's kid sister. His observation of the poverty of the girl that is sure to drive her to prostitution, if not protected in time, arouses in him disgust with the barbaric sacrifice of children in Africa.

The same chapter also includes Yossarian walking through the streets in Rome. While walking through the streets in Rome, he further encounters "the shivering, stupefying misery in the world that never yet had provided enough heat and shelter and food and justice for all but an ingenious and unscrupulous handful" (520). These scenes torture and enrage him. Back into his own apartment, he is shocked to see the rape and murder of Michaela by a fellow soldier Aarfy.

This chapter of the novel, hence, depicts Yossarian as a hero with a compassion for the whole of humanity and a righteous moral disgust with the injustice, cruelty, immorality, crime, and rape. In the antiheroes like Mersault of *The Stranger*, as already mentioned, such things do

not move them at all because they have completely surrendered to the absurdity of existence. Therefore, even the death of Mersault's own mother and his killing of a man do not arouse any emotions in him at all.

The significance of this chapter for the novel has not escaped the critics' attention. According to Robert M. Young, Yossarian here "sees tableau after tableau of cruelty, rape, gang rape, beating of children and a dog" that evoke "the ubiquity of the theme of pointless suffering and murder" (900). This pushes Yossarian to the verge of despair but he manages to preserve his integrity, as Young notes here:

The book turns on the axis of hope and decency versus despair and cynicism. . . . Everyone gives in to it at one point or another, except that the chaplain and major Danby and Yossarian, along with the women, retain some ability to think and try to live out decent values. (895)

But Yossarian in the earlier part of the novel manifests considerable self-centeredness and even cowardice. He feigns liver pain in order to stay away from fighting; he delays the bombing mission to Bologna putting the life of ground troops at great risk; he does not care about the target while dropping bombs. As one of his friends Clevinger once enumerates his qualities, Yossarian has an

. . . unreasonable belief that everybody around him was crazy, a homicidal impulse to machine gun strangers, retrospective falsification, an unfounded suspicion that people hated him and were conspiring to kill him. (30)

Yossarian performs one heroic feat when he successfully hits a bridge at Ferrara. Although he was awarded a medal for this, Yossarian had hit the target at second attempt only and at the cost of Craft and his crew in another fighter plane. His bosses Colonel Cathcart and Colonel Kraft even say that awarding him with a medal was only to cover up a fatal flaw during the operation, "to act boastfully about something we ought to be ashamed of" (180).

Besides, Yossarian sometimes does not discriminate between his side and enemy's side. For example, his list of dangers on his life not only includes Hilter, and Mussolini but also Lieutenant Scheisskopf, Appleby, Haverymeyer, Nurse Cramer, and Nurse Duckett. Among them, Nurse Cramer and Nurse Duckett help him. Neither do Appleby and Havermyer cause any kind of discomfort to him.

Once Yossarian approaches the major of his group, Major Major, to ground him or send him back home. Then the major asks Yossarian if he wanted his country to lose the war. To this he answers that his side has more soldier, more monetary resources, and superior firepower. When Major reminds him that every American soldier could feel that way, he retorts that he would "certainly be a damned fool to feel any other way" (135).

This shows that Yossarian has no concern about the defeat of his country. His overriding concern is his own life and he wants to return home immediately because he is afraid.

These tendencies, together with his decision to escape from the military installment in Pianosa, have earned him the status of antihero. Therefore, Norman Podhoretz has raised serious questions regarding the parallels between *Catch-22* and the *Iliad*:

Now it is certainly the case that the side of war upon which *Catch-22* dwells exclusively and obsessively--its grisly horrors and the human pettiness it can elicit--are vividly recorded in the *Iliad*. . . . But in Homer's epic, all this is intermingled with the great virtues that war also elicits, and of which the poem sings even more melodiously. These virtues--courage honor, sacrifice, and nobility-- also make an occasional appearance in *Catch-22* but mainly in order to be given as ferocious a beating by Heller as the one he administers to war it self.

(33)

But Podhoretz has taken up only one strand in Yossarian's character. He ignores the side of Yossarian that is fully cognizant of the virtues like bravery and sacrifice. In earlier sections of

the novel, these virtues are a little overshadowed because Yossarian fumes and frets over the constant raising of the number of missions by Colonel Cathcart each time he is about to complete the required number of missions to return home. He never demands to be grounded and returned home before he finishes the required number of missions. When he talks with Clevenger about the mission over Bolonga, Yossarian reveals the reason behind his resentment: " 'Am I supposed to get my ass shot off just because the colonel wants to be a general?' " (160). Despite his complaining, it is Yossarian who, as the lead bombardier, successfully drops bombs at the targets and destroys the enemy ammunition stores in his mission over Ferrara.

Besides, as one of the most patriotic and courageous characters Major Major admits, Yossarian would be abnormal if he did not experience fear. He further says that even the bravest men experience fear. The only difference between the so called brave men and Yossarian is that they hide their fear, while Yossarian does not. This becomes clear when Yossarian becomes a rebel and refuses to fly more missions after he completes seventy missions. After Yossarian revolts, everyone takes interest in him and inquire whether he is going to be court-martialled, all clandestinely. One of them is Haverlymeyer, who is reputed not to take evasive action, thus acting courageously all the time.

It is, therefore, helpful to see Yossarian not as an antihero but as a heroic character possessing courage, honor, compassion and sacrifice although he also exhibits characters that make him anti-heroic. Moreover, Heller himself seems to be aware of these traits in him, as he says in his interview that "Yossarian is different from most heroes of antiquity" (518). Obviously, the antiheroic traits should be the most important differences between him and the heroes of antiquity who never expressed even minor misgivings and weaknesses.

A very important trait in Yossarian's character is also his moral integrity. Maintaining the moral integrity in such life-threatening situation is itself a Herculean task, as Robert M. Young has explained. Yossarian can not, of course, vanquish the enemies that include not only the axis

powers but also the unjust military hierarchy itself. In such situation, heroism or "man's greatness" consists in being "just to himself" (Camus 39-40). Despite this solution proposed by Camus in the essay "The Night of Truth" in the book *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*, Camus himself seems to have lost the strength in his own assertion when delineating the characters of Mersault and Clamence. But Heller manages to preserve the moral integrity of Yossarian to some extent.

When Yossarian is seen as completely devoid of heroic qualities, the novel's ending contradicts its earlier sections. This undermines the artistic integrity of the book, as Podhoretz argues. But one finds the novel's ending unjustifiable only if one completely ignores the positive traits in Yossarian's character in the earlier part of the book. Besides, it is highly unlikely since Heller, who says in his interview, that he does "an enormous amount of planning, of prewriting" would leave such glaring flaw in the book (513).

A better clue to understanding the novel could be obtained from the author himself. In the interview with Charlie Reilly, Heller says that wanted to develop "a sharp contrast between realistic and surrealistic techniques" in his *Closing Times* (510). This proves Heller used opposing styles in his works, and *Catch-22* also can be understood in such light.

Keeping this in mind, the readers can easily see how the earlier sections of the novel intermingle both realistic and surrealistic techniques. Beginning with chapter 40, the surrealistic technique is entirely dropped as the novel focuses on various ethical and moral dimensions of Yossarian's rejection of the unscrupulous deal with the military authority to return home, and to run away from the establishment on his own. At the same time, it should not go without saying that the surreal atmosphere of the book does influence the protagonist to some extent, as he confesses: " 'I would not want to live without strong misgivings' " (Heller 568). But the misgivings are never able to destroy the moral and ethical integrity as well as his ability to take decisive actions.

The ending of the book testifies this. When Yossarian is seriously debating with major Danby on Yossarian's decision to escape the military establishment, Yossarian claims that he "is not running away from [his] responsibilities," but "running to them" (567). A straightforward absurdist explanation for his act could term him a coward, escapist, antiheroic person. But his decision comes at the end of considerable self- search over the moral and ethical implications of the act and a heated debate with Major Danby and the chaplain over these issues. Although major Danby initially seeks to dissuade Yossarian from his decision, he finally recognizes the justness of Yossarian's stance and offers him money instead. If Yossarian's stance was escapist and self-centred, Major Danby, who claims himself to be a university professor with deep knowledge of ethical issues, would not consent. Neither would the chaplain do it.

Yossarian, before the military authority offers him a deal, refuses to admit for duty. Instead he walks around carrying a gun with him. This troubles the military authority and they offer him to return him home on condition that he should talk positively about them. In the process of negotiation with them, Colonel Korn is forced to recognize his rebellion as just since he had done it after completing seventy missions, more than three times the number--twenty five-- as required by the air force headquarters: " 'You know, one good potato can spoil the rest' " (539). This confession also reveals that Yossarian's refusal to continue his work is impelled more by their unjustifiably raising the combat missions than by Yossarian's fear or cowardice.

Critics have dwelt on the seemingly unnerving ending of *Catch-22*. Some of their observations fit Yossarian into a prototypical antihero while others begrudgingly hold his action into positive evaluation. Jerry M. Lewis and Stanford W. Gregory, for example, say that Yossarian's last action makes him "incompetence par excellence . . . his action is self-serving" (72). If this were true, some of his colleagues like the chaplain, Major Danby and even the authority against whom he rebels, should not have seen his action as just.

Leon F. Seltzer has characterized Yossarian as a hero for his final act. For him, the novel's ending proves that Yossarian upholds imperishable human spirit. He praises Yossarian for his integrity and courage as well. But since Seltzer believes that absurd literature is ultimately about the cosmic absurdity of human existence, the indomitable human spirit exhibited by Yossarian's action forecasts its "tragic untenability" (Seltzer 309).

However, it is not necessary to interpret the novel in terms of cosmic absurdity that overshadows the undefeatable human spirit in Yossarian. Richard Ruland and Malcolm Bradbury's analysis of post war Jewish writing proves this. As they evaluate, the Jewish American fiction after the Second World War should not be seen in solely philosophical perspective because it brought to the American novel a mixture of art, politics, history, and morality. Although it contains a "metaphysical vigor and surreal inner agony," its thrust is ultimately moral since it "express[es] moral aspiration and vivid humanism" (376-377).

III. Conformity with Ethical and Moral Values Necessary for Meaningful Life

The moral concerns of the novel can also be discussed in relation to the deviant behavior of the characters because many characters in *Catch-22* are misfits. Among them Jerry M. Lewis and Stanford W. Gregory have discussed the behavior of the protagonist Yossarian and Major Major. They analyze the ineptitude of these characters through sociological perspectives. But such tendency can also be viewed through existential notions of authentic existence. According to the existentialists, conformity with the society robs an individual of authentic existence, reducing him/her into an indistinguishable mass follower. Ineptness or non-conformity is therefore inevitable for authentic living.

Such analysis of *Catch-22* can be very interesting. The characters here can be understood as illustrating the allure of authentic existence when they stand at odds with the acceptable ways of behaving in the society. But their non-conformity mostly remains a means of

momentary amusement, and sometimes even the cause of great discomfort to others rather than helping them in any significant way to discover their true self.

One problem that the readers encounter in such reading is that *Catch-22* does not use general society as its setting. Rather, the characters in the novel are mostly military men working in the military installment in Pianosa. Therefore, their non-conformity can be understood as only a protest against this military installment rather than against the society in general. But many critics have related the novel to the society in general rather than limiting it to the issues of war and the military alone. Alec Solomita's review of a book by Harold Bloom that includes the critical essays on the novel testifies this fact. He finds Nelson Algren, Robert Brustein, Leon F. Seltzer and Sanford Pinsker all erroneously applauding the novel for its social satire, where in fact, the picture of society drawn in the novel is a hard-core leftist's rather than being a truly realistic one as Solomita finds it. But Seltzer does not see the novel as inspired by leftist ideology:

Several writers have by now argued that the novel is not basically about World War II at all, and even Heller has pointedly remarked: 'I deliberately seeded the book with anachronisms like loyalty oaths, the helicopters, IBM machines and agricultural subsidies to create the feeling of American society from the McCarthy period on.' (291)

If *Catch-22* is then interpreted as a social satire as intended by the author himself and other critics, its principal setting -- the military installment in the fictional island Pianosa-- must be seen in some way the representative of the society in general. From here the military men are sent into combat tours of duty. This situation is extremely dangerous and life-threatening. Therefore the non-conformist, deviant behavior with such situation would be highly desirable according to the requirements of existentialism that emphasizes on such behavior even in

normal social settings. But the deviant behavior of the characters here in many instances rarely helpful for characters to live a meaningful life.

The protagonist of the novel *Yossarian*, for example, is entrusted with the responsibility of censoring enlisted men patients' letters when he is in hospital. In the process, he sometimes eliminates all "modifiers" from the letters, sometimes every adverb and every adjective," and sometimes all "articles" (14). This is done, we are told, to break monotony. Sometimes he signs Washington Irving and Irving Washington in the letters he censors, resulting in having detectives question him and his fellows. While Yossarian here might get enjoyment for giving trouble to the military hierarchy, he sometimes engages in perversions that have serious consequences to the families of the men who send the letters. This happens when he begins attacking the "names and addresses on the envelopes, obliterating whole homes and streets, annihilating entire metropolises with careless flicks of his wrist as though he were god" (15).

Even Clevinger starts signing names like John Milton and Washington Irving in letters after a detective talks about it to him. Such whimsical activities, however, can not necessarily be understood as what existentialists meant by non-conformity with society. But Erik R. Mortenson suggests that even the works that deviate from everyday work routines should be understood in this light because they express a "desire to return to a moment overflowing with personal freedom and action" (27). According to this criterion, such whims as Yossarian and other characters in *Catch-22* engage in can well be described as exercises for authentic existence.

Besides Yossarian and Clevinger, the other characters that engage in aberrant activities, sometimes to enliven routine work and sometimes for their purposes are Mcwatt, General Dreedle, Corporal Snark, and Major Major. Mcwatt amuses himself by flying too low to Yossarian's tent in order to frighten him. This harmless amusement later on proves disastrous when he unwittingly slices Kid Sampson in half with the propeller of his aeroplane. Mcwatt himself commits suicide after this, by crashing his aeroplane into a mountain. General Dreedle,

another character in *Catch-22*, opposes his daughter's marriage with Colonel Moodus. After the marriage, he gives emotional torture to his son-in-law. He walks around both with his son-in-law and a very beautiful nurse on his side. He makes the nurse dress provocatively and show overt sexual gestures from time to time in order to whip Moodus into frenzy, but he never allows him to touch her. His only aim, as he says himself, is "just to drive" Moodus "crazy" (275). Corporal Snark, another character, poisons the whole squadron by mixing "cakes of Gi soap into the sweet potatoes" (85). Major Major, after he is promoted to the major of his squadron, never allows anyone in his office as long as he is in, thus putting all the men under his command at great discomfort.

These examples show that the deviant behaviors, as the existentialists claim, do not necessarily uncover the hidden potentialities of one's life. They serve only as sources of simple amusement in some cases. In some cases, the people may not have any purpose or intention in doing them. For example Colonel Cargill is described as so "awful a marketing executive" who could be "relied on to run the most prosperous enterprise into the ground" (40). We are given no explanation as to why he did it except for Heller's amusingly dismissive explanation of him as "a self made man who owed his lack of success to nobody" (40). Most importantly, what must not be neglected in case of persons like that of Mcwatt, Yossarian, Dreedle and Snark is that they cause trouble and discomfort to the others.

The existentialists' scorn for social conformity springs from their belief that society represses one's life. "According to Daniel Belgrad in 'The Culture of Spontaneity,' existentialists struggled to live authentically, open to the possibilities of existence and to avoid enslavement to the dictates of conceptual structures and social norms" (Mortenson 27). Such rejection of social norms, traditional ethical and moral concerns by existentialists can even mean "blind following of one's instincts and primitive impulses," according to *Everyman's Encyclopedia* (5: 170).

Following this line of argument, the Beats have deemed "sexual promiscuity" necessary for authentic existence, according to John Clellon Holmes (qtd. in Mortenson 33). Existentialist thinkers have not stated this explicitly, but their violent dismissal of all social norms and ethics leads naturally to the conclusion that sexual promiscuity free of control from all moral and ethical concerns is necessary for authentic existence.

Many characters in *Catch-22* visit brothels in Rome for unfettered fulfillment of their sexual desires. But paradoxically some of them find that even amidst such promiscuous behavior arise some ethical concerns that they can not escape. And these concerns initiate them into traditional social roles and responsibilities. One such character is Nately. Nately first visits a whore in Rome to fulfill his sexual desires but later wants to marry her and protect her kid sister as well:

Nately moved to her in a happy daze, so overcome with rapture that he hardly minded when her kid sister interrupted him again by flying into the room and flinging herself down on to the bed between them . . . Nately settled back smugly with an arm about each feeling strong and protective. They made a wonderful family group, he decided. The little girl would go to college. . . . (450)

Through this example, Heller demonstrates how ethical and moral concerns sometimes arise out of immoral activities. Moreover, he does not reject, like the existentialists, all traditional ethical and moral principles in order to create them anew. Rather, he feels that "certain principles of morality must be preserved," as Seltzer quotes him (291). This is also evident in his positive treatment of those who sincerely follow their morality rather than those who abandon them. Some of his characters like Major Major and the chaplain become misfits not because they abandon traditional ethics but because they have firm belief in them and embrace them sincerely. This suggests that the challenge of life even in modern times is not to

abandon old values of life and create new ones as existentialists have claimed but to preserve and respect them.

That Heller is for preserving traditional ethical norms is evident in his admiration for Natally's father who preserves them and his scornful contrast with the immoral brothel runner in Rome:

This sordid, vulturous, diabolical old man reminded Natally of his father because the two were nothing at all alike. . . . Natally's father was a sober, philosophical and responsible man; this old man fickle and licentious. Natally's father was discreet and cultured; this old man was a boor. . . . Natally's father believed in honor . . . was dignified wise and venerable; this old man was utterly repellent. . . . (311)

The author here presents a sharp contrast between morality and immorality and merciless attack on the latter. Existential thinkers also did not mean that authentic existence should embrace immorality, but their treatment of all acceptable social norms as hindrances to authentic life would make it difficult to reject immorality as Heller has done. We can compare, for example, Natally's venerable description of his father with Hamm's berating of his father in *Endgame* as "accursed progenitor" and "Accursed fornicator" (Beckett 828-29).

Heller, in this way, demonstrates that what is an obstacle for meaningful life is not the inauthenticity produced by conformity with social norms and values, but the lack of proper respect for them. What is at stake for meaningful life is not the challenge to establish new grounds of ethics and values but the challenge to overcome the temptation of abandoning traditional ethics and morals.

The goodness of the chaplain, for instance, makes him a misfit in the military establishment where majority of people do not follow any code of conduct. The officers, we are told, "invariably welcomed him with excessive cordiality when approached and waited

comfortably for him to go away" (342). This atmosphere flounders his own beliefs and faiths. After he is avoided by everyone and given no work at all, the chaplain tells a lie to the doctors that he is sick to stay in the hospital. At this time, he realizes how difficult it is to uphold one's faith and how easily one would deviate from it:

It was almost no trick at all, he saw, to turn vice into virtue and slander into truth, impotence into abstinence, arrogance into humility, plunder into philanthropy, thievery into honor, blasphemy into wisdom, brutality into patriotism, and sadism into justice.... It merely required no character. (Heller 459)

But he doesn't give in, as Seltzer has also noted, because the chaplain has "enough character to resist giving way to his demonic conclusions" (305). These examples prove that Heller underscores the need for preserving traditional moral values, irrespective of the conformity or non-conformity resulting from it.

Chapter 4

Conclusion

Catch-22 exhibits many features of absurd literature, but Heller has used these features to contradict underlying theoretical assumptions that govern absurd literature. One feature of absurd literature is its use of meaningless dialogue between characters. While this is chiefly evident in absurd dramas, the dialogues in *Catch-22* bear resemblance to this technique as they involve short and repetitive utterances as in absurd dramas. While this feature in absurd dramas is used to show the meaninglessness of language as well as human existence, Heller uses it in *Catch-22* mainly to convey the emotional urgency of the characters, and their nature. The seemingly meaningless dialogues in the novel carry meaning and significance.

Absurd literature also features antiheroes who are passive, ineffective, and powerless. Heller's protagonist in the novel, Yossarian, sometimes exhibits cowardice, and self-centeredness. But this is not the dominant trait of his character. He rises against the injustice meted out to him by the military authority. His revolt shakes the military authority, and impels it to approach him with an unscrupulous deal to send him back home. It also instills confidence in other meek characters like the group's chaplain for similar revolts against the injustice.

Yossarian's rebellion proves that he is not a prototypical antihero. These antiheroes remain passive in circumstances because they perceive that the absurdity of life can not be overcome. But Heller endows his protagonist with the ability and courage to rise against his circumstances.

Another aspect related to Yossarian's rebellion is his rejection of the unscrupulous deal with military authority that would enable him to return home. This exhibits his strong ethical and moral concerns. Besides, his determination to protect a whore's kid sister in Rome from prostitution further reinforces his strong sense of morality and his compassionate character. This trait of Yossarian's character again refutes an assumption underlying the absurd literature.

Existentialism, that provides theoretical ammunition to absurd literature, finds no use of traditional principles of ethics and morality. It insists on creating new grounds of ethics and morality.

Heller's emphasis on preserving traditional ethical principles is demonstrated not only through Yossarian but also through other characters. His sympathetic treatment of the characters like the chaplain, Nately and his father further proves his point. The chaplain resists the temptation of abandoning moral integrity, although he finds it too easy. Sometimes, Heller makes obvious comparison between moral and immoral characters, like Nately's father and the brothel-runner in Rome. He holds the former in admiration and the latter in contempt. This shows that human existence has not altogether lost its meaning as the ethical and moral values still continue to confer it a measure of dignity and respect.

Again, existentialists are very unlikely to uphold the traditional resources to combat their perception of the meaninglessness of human existence. They have coined a concept called authentic existence in order to retain the purpose and meaning in life. But they have said little in this regard other than criticizing society and social conformity, usually caused by ethical and moral values in their perception. However, they agree that the greatest challenge for meaningful existence is to establish new principles of morality and new grounds of meaning in order to realize the authentic existence. Through the ethical concerns in *Catch-22*, Heller demonstrates how the resources of old society can still be useful for meaningful living. No new grounds, as existentialist have claimed, are always necessary.

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