
by

YARA YEHIA ZAWEEL

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by

YARA YEHIA ZAWEEL

Approved by:

Dr. Robert Myers, Associate Professor  Advisor
English Department

Dr. Syrine Hout, Associate Professor  Member of Committee
English Department

Dr. John Pedro Schwartz, Assistant Professor  Member of Committee
English Department

Date of thesis defense: January 17th, 2007
I, Yara Yehia Zaweel

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I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Robert Myers, without whose help and guidance this thesis could not have been completed. I would also like to thank Dr. Syrine Hout and Dr. John Pedro Schwartz for their contributions and for being a part of my thesis committee.

I would also like to express my appreciation for the constant love and support of my family and my friends.
AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Norman Mailer, Joseph Heller and Kurt Vonnegut are three American writers who fought in the Second World War and wrote anti-war novels based on their experiences as soldiers during the war. Mailer, Heller and Vonnegut had to come up with new narrative forms and strategies in order to cope with the violence they experienced during World War II. In order to write their narratives, these three authors had to debunk earlier war myths, such as the myth of the good war, the hero myth and the myth of regeneration through violence as described by Richard Slotkin. Hence, Mailer’s *The Naked and the Dead*, Heller’s *Catch-22* and Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five* are anti-war novels that criticize earlier war myths and create new narratives and new forms of expression in their respective novels.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: AMERICAN WAR NARRATIVES AND THE MYTH OF REGENERATION THROUGH VIOLENCE

A. Violence and War in the U.S.

The history of the United States of America is a particularly violent one, consisting of numerous wars dating all the way back to the Indian Wars of the earliest settlers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and continuing up to the modern wars of the twenty-first century. War has been the focus of a great many of American literary works because, as James Tatum states in *The Mourner’s Song*, “the one impulse that has proved as enduring as human beings’ urge to make wars is their need to make sense of them” (Tatum xi). The major American wars that have had the greatest impact on American consciousness and which have generated the largest number of literary works are: the Indian Wars, the Civil War, World War I and World War II. In his book *Regeneration through Violence*, Richard Slotkin describes the Indian Wars as the “distinctive event of American history, the unique national experience” (78). Leslie A. Fiedler, in *Love and Death in the American Novel*, states that “horror is essential” to American literature and this horror, manifested in different ways, stems from the “obsessive concerns” of American life with the historical relationship the nation had with Native Americans (27).

The Civil War, World War I and World War II have had an equally “profound impact on American society” (Lundberg 373). The “profound impact” that these wars have had on the American consciousness is clear. The literature of these wars, observes Lundberg, “continues to influence present concepts of war and its nature” (373).
Though he excludes the Indian Wars, James Dawes, in *The Language of War*, describes the development of violence starting with the American Civil War, continuing through World War I and including World War II:

First, the multiplication of violence in the Civil War…Second, the industrialization of violence in World War I, with its startling innovations in weapons technology and its subsequent destabilization of basic moral categories…and third, the rationalized organization of violence in World War II (22-23).

Dawes asserts that “war is violence maximized and universalized” (1). The response of American literature to war and violence has, as one would expect, changed after each major war. Although American war literature started out conforming to Slotkin’s myth of regeneration through violence, after World War II, many literary texts subvert this myth and find very little that is regenerative in war. Norman Mailer’s *The Naked and the Dead*, Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22* and Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five* are three post-World War II novels which challenge the myth of regeneration through violence. Instead of portraying violence as regenerative, these three novels, which are the subject of this study, indicate that violence serves no purpose and does not lead to any form of regeneration. *The Naked and the Dead*, *Catch-22*, and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, portray violence, especially in war, as absurd, meaningless and destructive.

Wars and the extreme violence that necessarily accompanies them are not mere events in the history of the United States. Violence in America is, according to Richard Slotkin, a part of the national character; it has reached mythical status (*Regeneration* 5).
He further discusses the mythical status of violence in America in his book *Gunfighter Nation*, in which he writes:

There has been enough actual violence…to support the belief that America has been a peculiarly violent nation. However…what is distinctively “American” is not necessarily the amount or kind of violence that characterizes our history but the mythic significance we have assigned to the kind of violence we have actually experienced, the form of symbolic violence we imagine or invent, and the political uses to which we put that symbolism (13).

The narratives of war that have emerged from each of these wars are affected by the mythologizing of violence in America, and they all conform to the myth of “regeneration through violence” proposed by Slotkin in his book of the same title. James Fenimore Cooper’s Indian war narrative *The Last of the Mohicans*, Stephen Crane’s Civil War narrative *The Red Badge of Courage* and Ernest Hemingway’s World War I narrative *A Farewell to Arms* and Spanish Civil War novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, all conform to varying extents to Slotkin’s myth of regeneration through violence. After World War II, however, something in American war narratives appears to have changed. Regeneration through violence seems to have ceased to function as an ideology. After World War II, writers, especially veteran writers, needed a new way of writing about war; new narrative forms in which violence contains no regenerative aspect. This creation of new forms to narrate the significantly new violent experience of the Second World War can be seen in the three post World War II novels that are the subject of this study: *The Naked and the Dead* by Norman Mailer, *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller and *Slaughterhouse Five* by Kurt Vonnegut.
B. The Myth of the Frontier and Regeneration through Violence

The psychology and world view of people’s ancestors are transmitted through national mythologies that directly affect their perception of contemporary reality and are embedded and passed down in literature (Regeneration 3). Slotkin, in Regeneration through Violence, writes about the mythology of the American frontier and its inherent violence. He later states in Gunfighter Nation that “violence is central to both the historical development of the frontier and its mythic representation” (11). The definition of myth here differs, however, from archetypal myth or folk legends; Slotkin’s use of the term “myth,” which I adopt in this study, is defined by him as:

A complex of narratives that dramatizes the world vision and historical sense of a people or culture, reducing centuries of experience into a constellation of compelling metaphors… Myth can be seen as an intellectual or artistic construct that bridges the gap between the world of the mind and the world of affairs…It draws on the content of individual and collective memory, structures it, and develops from it imperatives for belief and action (6-7).

The earliest experience of Americans is the experience of the settlers with the Indians and the wilderness. Hence, the first American mythology emerged from colonial Puritan writing about these experiences of the frontier (Regeneration 21). The reasons that the Puritans first came to North America was that they “saw in America an opportunity to regenerate their fortunes, their spirits and the power of their church and nation” (5). In his book Love and War in the American Novel, Fiedler describes the reasons behind the migration of Europeans to the “New World”:

A dream of innocence had sent Europeans across the ocean to build a new society immune to the compounded evil of the past from which no one in
Europe could ever feel himself free. But the slaughter of the Indians, who would not yield their lands to the carriers of utopia, and the abominations of the slave trade...provided new evidence that the evil did not remain with the world that had been left behind (143).

As a result of the violence involved in the settlers dominating the frontier and making America their homeland, “the means to that regeneration ultimately became the means of violence, and the myth of regeneration through violence became the structuring metaphor of the American experience” (Regeneration 5). The Puritans articulated their experiences in the wilderness of the new land, and they developed those experiences into national mythologies (178). This myth-making was part of the Puritan’s “mythopoeic mode of consciousness” in which early American writers were preoccupied with creating a national identity and mythology (3-7). Regeneration through violence thus became a narrative format, “a variation on the great central myth of initiation into a new world and a new life that is at the core of the American experience” (179). According to Slotkin, “myths reach out of the past to cripple, incapacitate or strike down the living” (5). Consequently, the myth of the frontier and the myth of regeneration through violence did not remain in early American writing and modes of thought. These myths became structuring metaphors for future violence in America.

In Regeneration through Violence, Slotkin defines the myth of the frontier as the “conception of America as a wide-open land of unlimited opportunity for the strong, ambitious, self-reliant individual to thrust his way to the top” (5). Violence and regeneration through this violence is central to this myth of the frontier since this myth required and justified the massacre of the Native Americans (Gunfighter 11). For
example, the Pequot massacre in 1637, which was the first major act of genocide in New England, was one that the European settlers felt justified in committing
(*Regeneration* 69). They also felt justified in conquering the wilderness since the conquest of land was conceived as the only way to create a strong new nation
(*Gunfighter* 10). David E. Nye asserts: “White Americans observed the rapid disappearance of the Native American with equanimity and naturalized it as part of an inevitable process” (9). Nye quotes Alexis de Tocqueville in order to support his observation:

> The Anglo-American race…fells the forests and drains the marshes; lakes as large as seas and huge rivers resist its triumphant march in vain…The American, the daily witness of such wonders, does not see anything astonishing in all this. This incredible destruction, this even more surprising growth, seems to him the usual progress of things in this world. He gets accustomed to it as to the unalterable order of nature (9).

The myth of regeneration through violence, as elaborated by Slotkin, is evident in this quote from De Tocqueville. From the “incredible destruction” perpetrated by the “Anglo-American race,” there is “surprising growth,” and this growth is ascribed to “the unalterable order of nature.”

Although historians often refer to the war in Vietnam as the longest American war, in reality, the American-Indian wars, which started around 1500 and continued until 1900, are actually the longest (Vernon 270). In *Gunfighter Nation*, Slotkin asserts that violence has been fundamental to the creation of an American national identity (10), and the myth of the new frontier has had strong, though “latent ideological power” for the American people throughout the centuries (2). Slotkin quotes Henry David
Thoreau to emphasize the fact that the frontier did not disappear with the official closing of the geographical frontier:

The frontiers are not east or west, north or south, but wherever a man fronts a fact, though that fact be his neighbor, there is an unsettling wilderness between him and Canada, between him and the setting sun, or, farther still, between him and it. Let him build himself a log house with the bark on where he is, fronting IT, and wage there an Old French war for seven years, with Indians and Rangers, or whatever else may come between him and reality, and save his scalp if he can

(Regeneration 521).

In this passage, Thoreau redefines the term frontier and makes clear the fact that when the actual territory of the American frontier was officially closed, the term ‘frontier’ “became primarily a term of ideological rather than geographical reference” (Gunfighter 4).

Due to the “latent ideological power” of the myth of the frontier, any allusion to it, like any allusion to events like Pearl Harbor or Custer’s Last Stand, will evoke in any American, asserts Slotkin, an almost unconscious understanding of the whole history of that event (Gunfighter 6). The importance of the myth of the frontier and its relevance to modern life can be seen in its manifestations in film, especially in the genre of westerns, which Slotkin discusses at length, or in the genre of science fiction (e.g. Star Trek: The Final Frontier). This myth is also evident in war rhetoric. For example, during the war in the Philippines, Roosevelt referred to the Filipinos as ‘Apaches’ (Vernon 271), and the soldiers in Vietnam called the country “Indian country” (Gunfighter 3). The myth even exists in the clearly titled children’s game of “Cowboys and Indians.” The importance and far reaching effect of this myth was even employed by Hitler, who used
the genocide of Native Americans as a model for the Holocaust. According to Noam Chomsky, Hitler literally said, referring to the genocide of the Native Americans: “That’s what we’re going to do to the Jews” (Chomsky 135). Despite the pervasiveness of both the myth of the frontier and the myth of regeneration through violence, most people are not conscious of it. In fact, Chomsky claims, most Americans could not come to terms with the “original sin” of Native American genocide in American history until the 1960s (215).

C. The Hero Myth

An essential component of any national mythology is the hero, and the hero of the frontier myth is derived from early American experiences in the wilderness and with the Indians (Regeneration 225). Every hero also has an enemy, and, according to Slotkin, “the archetypal enemy of the American hero is the Red Indian, and to some degree all groups or nations which threaten us are seen in terms derived from our early myths” (Regeneration 558). For example, to James Fenimore Cooper, the author of The Last of the Mohicans, “the Indian represents…whatever in the American psyche has been starved to death, whatever genteeel Anglo-Saxondom has most ferociously repressed” (Fiedler 195). When the “American hero” is threatened or challenged by an external power, the response is “extraordinary violence” done by “privileged heroes” (Gunfighter 193). The archetype of the hero is present in most stories, and the American “privileged hero” of “extraordinary violence” is an essential component of most American pre- World War II novels. Daniel Boone, for example, is an early American hero who was a celebrated hunter and slayer of Indians. He is, according to Slotkin, “the most significant, most emotionally compelling myth-hero of the early republic” (Regeneration 21).
In *The Last of the Mohicans*, James Fenimore Cooper used the historical figure Daniel Boone, the archetype of the American “myth-hero,” as a model for the protagonist of the novel, Hawkeye (*Gunfighter* 16). In Stephen Crane’s Civil War novel *The Red Badge of Courage*, the main character, Henry Fleming, is a hero who, despite his preliminary fears, becomes one of American culture’s most celebrated literary heroes and finds regeneration in his new found bravery. Robert Jordan, the hero of Hemingway’s *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, is another war hero who sacrifices himself for the benefit of his comrades and finds regeneration in that act of sacrifice itself and, one might add, in the love of a woman. Post-World War I novels are similar to earlier war narratives; they both have “a faith in the potentiality of the heroes to perform significantly morally affirmative acts” (Walsh 112).

However, after World War II, war narratives changed, especially in the narratives examined in this study, and, there was no more regeneration to be found through violence, and there were no “morally affirmative acts” (Walsh 112). Dickstein asserts that post-World War II novels never “fall back upon the old romantic idea of war… Those who survive come out not as heroes—their heroism is always savage, unthinking, or quite accidental—but simply as changed men. The crucible of combat has made them different, besides showing them stark, unforgettable things about who and what they are” (37). The protagonists of the war novels of Norman Mailer, Joseph Heller and Kurt Vonnegut are not in any aspect “privileged heroes,” and even though they are capable of “extraordinary violence,” they do not find regeneration in it in any way. In various respects, they are impotent.
D. Regeneration through Violence and the Hero Myth in *The Last of the Mohicans*

James Fenimore Cooper’s novel *The Last of the Mohicans*, first published in 1826, is an example of how the myth of the frontier is manifested in Indian war narratives. Cooper was, according to Slotkin, one of “the first American novelists of stature who dealt with the frontier” (*Regeneration* 467). The central conflict of *The Last of the Mohicans*, the rescue of Alice and Cora, is based on a real historical incident in which Daniel Boone rescued three young girls, including his daughter, who were held captive by an Indian tribe (*Regeneration* 286). In the novel, Cooper presents a dual image of the Indian. He presents us with Chingachgook and Uncas, both noble Indians, and at the same time, he presents us with Magua, the bad Indian, and the villain of the story. However, Cooper does not present both good and bad in one Indian character since that, according to Fiedler, would make the Indian a separate “psychological entity”; a human being instead of an allegory (199). Fiedler asserts that in his representation of Magua, Cooper is making the statement that “even in the wilderness there was a violence and terror, even in the natural something dangerous to the progress of mankind” (197). Uncas, the noble savage, is killed by Magua. This enrages Hawkeye who shoots and kills Magua. The novel ends with a funeral for Uncas and Cora, who had been killed by a follower of Magua. However, despite the deaths of two “good” characters, there is hope at the end of the novel.

Fiedler observes that, in the world of *The Last of the Mohicans*, “the threat of death turn[s] in an instant to the promise of life, the darkest danger to the most glorious delivery” (201). In addition to the fact that the villain dies, Hawkeye’s pledge to Chingachgook at the end of the novel that he is and always will be there for him, indicates that after the chaos, fighting and death, there is a “restoration of order and
innocence” (Fiedler 205). Hawkeye became a model for future versions of the frontier hero. He is “a White man who knows Indians so well that he can almost pass for one” (Gunfighter 16). According to Slotkin, Cooper’s image of Hawkeye, the mythic hero, “became a figure in the popular imagination, to which all subsequent versions of the hero had perforce to refer, whether in emulation or denigration” (Regeneration 468).

Hawkeye came to represent “civilization’s most effective instrument against savagery—a man who knows how to think and fight like an Indian, to turn their own methods against them” (Gunfighter 16).

E. Regeneration through Violence and the Hero Myth in The Red Badge of Courage

Stephen Crane is viewed by many as the most important novelist writing about the American Civil War, which has been described as “the world’s first truly modern conflict” (Deats 134). Most Americans directly associate his novel The Red Badge of Courage with the Civil War (Lundberg 374). Although Crane did not have any direct experience with the war, he wrote a novel that may be said to embody the attitude towards war at the time (374). The critic Jeffrey Walsh believes that Crane’s The Red Badge of Courage “emphasizes the subtle mystery of battle and its pageantry” (15). Crane described in detail the horrors of the Civil War, which was one of the bloodiest wars in America. However, Crane, like many other Americans, considered the violence of the Civil War to be “a source of moral and social cleansing and unification” (Dawes 243). In The Red Badge of Courage, Crane used war and its inherent violence as “a symbol of life experience, of confrontation. He saw in battle an opportunity for shaping human identity” (Cooperman 46-47). Crane used war as a narrative tool or framework through which to explore and elaborate on general human traits—war was seen as a
“part of the natural intercourse of the human race” (Cooperman 193). Crane offered a horrifying view of the Civil War, but his goal in doing so was not to criticize the violence or to condemn war. The vivid descriptions of the fighting and of people dying were meant to enhance the status of Henry Fleming, the protagonist, and to emphasize his courage. For Crane, “war represented the ultimate test of manhood; it was something terrible and frightening but still a means of proving one’s worth” (Lundberg 376).

Henry Fleming fits into the definition of a hero in the myth of regeneration through violence. However, the manifestation of this myth of regeneration through violence is different in *The Red Badge of Courage* from its manifestation in earlier war literature. Crane’s hero experiences fear and is aware of the fact that war is a horrible experience during which death is a likely possibility. However, Henry Fleming learns to face his fear in pursuit of fighting and, if necessary, dying with honor.

*The Red Badge of Courage* epitomizes the traditional view of war as a necessary part of a man’s life and being a good soldier as an honorable thing. The novel preaches honor, loyalty and courage, all of which the hero eventually achieves through battle. Henry Fleming goes through a journey of violence and witnesses many battles out of which he emerges a better man, with a “red badge of courage” to prove it. The last few lines of the novel describing the hero’s state of mind after his journey of violence illustrate the regeneration though violence myth implicit in the narrative:

He had rid himself of the red sickness of battle…He turned now with a lover’s thirst to images of tranquil skies, fresh meadows, cool brooks—an existence of soft and eternal peace. Over the river a golden ray of sun came through the hosts of leaden rain clouds (Crane 169).
Henry Fleming’s loyalty to the army and his courage to carry out acts of violence in war against an evil enemy help him to regenerate himself and achieve a sense of peace.

Young American soldiers had Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage* in mind when they first entered the fighting in World War I. For these young men, the war was “a call to adventure enveloped in and sanctioned by idealism” (Cooperman 46). They imagined the war in terms of the traditional heroism portrayed in Crane’s novel. When they first entered the fighting in World War I, American soldiers still believed, like Henry Fleming, that “war was an heroic, worthy undertaking. None was prepared for the carnage that took place” (Lundberg 377). The young men soon discovered that there was an immense difference between the glory depicted in *The Red Badge of Courage* and the actual experience of World War I. This contrast disillusioned the soldiers and rendered the World War I experience “all the more psychologically damaging precisely because of Crane’s influence” (Cooperman 47).

F. Regeneration through Violence and the Hero Myth in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and *A Farewell to Arms*

Despite the vast number of novelists who have written about war, the first American author of the genre of war literature that comes to mind is always Ernest Hemingway. The far reaching influence and almost mythical status of Hemingway on war writers in general is expressed in *Soldiers Once and Still* by Alex Vernon when he states that “every post-Hemingway American war veteran who has attempted to write serious fiction about war and the military has had to contend with Hemingway’s looming shadow” (23). Hemingway’s writing definitely breaks with the traditional “Cranian” view of war and the ostensibly glorious experiences of a soldier. Hemingway’s novels have repeatedly been characterized as “anti-war” novels, and in a
certain respect they are, since violence is not glorified and the protagonists of his novels are plagued by their experiences in battle. However, according to Dickstein, World War I “gave a central place to the Hemingway themes of courage and risk in situations of testing and crisis” (24). Hemingway believed that war “was not only inevitable but, all too often, necessary, especially in fighting the forces of evil, such as worldwide fascism” (Deats 198). In his war novels, he did indeed treat war as “a test of masculinity and courage, of manhood under stress” (Dickstein 51).

One regenerative aspect of Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* is the love story of Frederic Henry and Catherine Barkley in the midst of the violence of war, as is their continuation of some form of happy life in neutral Switzerland. In addition, the fact that Frederic Henry feels extreme guilt for his abandonment of the army is reminiscent of Henry Fleming’s guilt for his initial desertion in *The Red Badge of Courage*. The difference however, is that Fleming goes back to the fighting while Hemingway’s Henry does not. The dilemmas faced by Henry Fleming and Frederic Henry when they leave the army are also manifested in Remarque’s World War I novel *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Paul, the protagonist and narrator of Remarque’s anti-war novel, though he does not desert the army like Fleming or Henry, feels the difference war has made in him when he goes home on leave. He observes that he has become a man in the army, just as the army has made men of other soldiers. He keeps telling himself that he is home “but,” he says, “a sense of strangeness will not leave me…I find I do not belong here anymore, it is a foreign world” (Remarque 161-170). By the end of his leave, he feels that he should never have come back home. However, the reasons behind Paul wishing he had never left the army are different from the pursuit of honor of Henry Fleming or the feeling of guilt that plagues Frederic Henry. Paul wishes he had never
gone home on leave because it simply makes it so much harder to go back, but at the same time he can not stay.

Despite the general “anti-war” sentiment that is prevalent in Hemingway’s works, Slotkin’s model of the myth of regeneration through violence and the logic of the frontier myth still apply in his novels. According to Slotkin’s reading of Hemingway’s novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Hemingway “uses the Frontier Myth as a way of redefining America’s relation to the struggle against fascism…Hemingway makes his war resonate with American history by continually discovering and comparing cognate features in loyalist Spain and the idealized America of the Frontier Myth” (*Gunfighter* 316). For Jordan, the hero of the novel, the Spanish Civil War is a new frontier where he can attain what Slotkin calls a “spiritual regeneration” that he cannot find in the U.S. (*Gunfighter* 317). Hemingway makes implicit comparisons between the Spanish Civil War and the heroic wars of American history by establishing an analogy between them. The past American wars, especially the Indian Wars, and the Spanish Civil War were fought, Hemingway suggests, in order to prevent the progress of a “savage enemy” (*Gunfighter* 317-18).

In *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Jordan also finds regeneration in his love affair with Maria, which becomes “a complex mystical union” (Bradbury 102). Despite Jordan’s assumed death at the end of the novel, his final act is a selfless act that is regenerative in that it saves his friends’ lives. At the end he is grateful for the fulfillment he achieves in his final days and for everything he has learned:

I have fought for what I believed in for a year now. If we win here we will win everywhere. The world is a fine place and worth the fighting for and I hate very
much to leave it…I wish there was some way to pass on what I’ve learned, though. Christ, I was learning fast there at the end (Hemingway 467).

The novel’s ending is a tragic one, though it is still hopeful, since the hero dies a self-sacrificing, honorable death. Hence, the myth of regeneration through violence was still very much in existence after World War I, as can be seen in Hemingway’s novels.

G. World War I vs. World War II in American culture and literature

In an essay about the Second World War, Eric Homberger states that “students of literature are apt to exaggerate the impact of anti-war novels and memoirs of the Great War” (Klein 181). Homberger also notes that despite the anti-war character of novels similar to Hemingway’s novels after World War I, novelists like Mailer, Heller and Vonnegut after World War II constantly felt that they were required to “debunk the fantasies of heroism which have so long cast an aura around militarism” (Klein 177).

What this means is that despite the anti-war sentiment of post-World War I novels, there was still an element of regeneration, and an element of glory in confronting the new frontier, wherever it was. The novels did incite some anti-war feelings but no real deep change at the mythic level occurred in Post- World War I war narratives. One of the main reasons for the persistence of the myth of heroism is that Americans entered the Great War late and so did not see as much fighting as the Europeans did. For Americans during World War I the war seemed far away. To them, “American patriotism was abstract” (Cooperman 48); it was not the violent, bloody reality of the battlefield. Dickstein explains the difference between the First and Second World Wars in the eyes of Americans:

Even more than World War I, in which American participation had been brief and casualties relatively light, the Second World War was a watershed, a turning
point in the social history of the nation. In the second war there were five times as many Americans dead, over half a million in a period of almost four years. This was a total war effort that mobilized virtually every segment of American society (21).

According to Paul Fussell, World War I was probably the “last war to be conceived as taking place within a seamless, purposeful ‘history’ involving a coherent stream of time running from past through present to future” (21). This change in the perception of history was caused by the industrialization of warfare, the mass mechanized killing and the horrors of the trenches in World War I, which made the Great War an historical event that was so “shattering that it required new forms of expression” (Norris 99). The “new forms of expression” that did emerge from World War I in the works of great American writers like Ernest Hemingway, Gertrude Stein and John Dos Passos led to it being described as a “quintessentially literary war” (Norris 99). However, David Lundberg in an article entitled “The American Literature of War” states:

the psychological and economic impact of the war never fell as heavily upon the United States as it did on Europe…Consequently it [World War I] was described as a dirty, bloody affair, but also as a righteous, noble undertaking that bestowed honor on those who fought…These descriptions evoked the spirit of the Civil War literature (378).

Perhaps it is due to the fact that Europeans had a different experience than Americans did during the First World War that a work such as Erich Maria Remarque’s novel All Quiet on the Western Front came out of Germany. All Quiet on the Western Front, published after the end of the First World War, in 1929, represents war as
“cruel, dirty and ultimately futile” (Gunfighter 314). The alienation experienced by the protagonist Paul, a theme which is very evident in later American works, can be seen in the following quote when he is contemplating his circumstances in the war: “We were all at once terribly alone; and alone we must see it through” (Remarque 12).

The Second World War was even more horrendous than the First. World War II was a war that “exceeded all boundaries…By 1945, over sixty million had been killed, as many as half of them civilians” (Dawes 157). When the violence started to wipe out civilians and entire populations, “art—like the world itself—stood aghast” (Norris 99). James Dawes, in The Language of War, states that artists who survived the war, “sought a literary style equal to the task of witnessing to the unbounded and unprecedented” (Dawes 157). Margot Norris in her book Writing War in the Twentieth Century quotes Paul Fussell, who says that “conveying an adequate idea of the Second World War is close to impossible because, as war correspondent Robert Gorlaski said, ‘what we did to each other is almost beyond human conception’” (2). After World War II, a new style was required to render the soldiers’ experiences into some artistic literary form. A new narrative form that could incorporate a new mythology was needed. The new narrative would be one that did not consist of regeneration through violence or new and exciting frontiers or archetypal heroes. New narrative forms, which were products of a new consciousness, is what Mailer, Heller and Vonnegut achieved in their respective novels that dealt with their experiences in the Second World War. However, these new narrative forms and new mythologies were not easy to manifest. For instance, it took Kurt Vonnegut more than twenty years to successfully write something about his experiences in the Second World War (Dawes 158).
Young men entering the Second World War did not have as many illusions as did the soldiers entering combat in World War I. Stanley Cooperman in *World War I and the American Novel* tells us that the Second World War “was a long cry from either Crane’s ‘ennobling experience’ or the bold journey into World War I” (Cooperman 221). According to Fussell, World War II “was never like the First, imaginable as romantic. Even the air war had lost most of the chivalric magic attending it in 1914-1918” (Vernon 104). The loss of the “chivalric magic” associated with the air war is illustrated in Heller’s novel *Catch-22*, in which he uses an air base as a setting to show the absurdity and meaninglessness of war. Because the U.S. was attacked at Pearl Harbor, patriotism was no longer abstract for Americans during World War II. However, due to events like the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the experience of fighting in this war generated in Americans “a sense of bewildered disillusionment with previously unquestioned cultural assumptions now revealed to be constructed artifacts” (Dawes 196).

There is a unifying trend that seems to run through American wars: the identification of war and the personal involvement in war as “the supreme expression of American values, in which society “as one man” assumes the moral burden of a struggle (on the grandest scale) for justice and against a great evil” (*Gunfighter* 500). The Indian Wars were fought against “savages,” The Civil War was a war waged against the evil of slavery, World War I was described by one critic as “a call to glory against the hosts of darkness” (Cooperman viii) and World War II targeted the evils of fascism. This language of the elimination of evil describes every war waged by the United States. The rationale is that after the violence and the defeat of the evil enemy, there is a form of regeneration: the evil is defeated so the good can thrive, and the ultimate goal is “an
existence of soft and eternal peace” (Crane 169). The Second World War has been termed “the good war” and “the just war” since the reasons behind American intervention in the war seemed virtuous. The U.S. joined in the war effort in order to help defeat the ostensible incarnation of evil, Adolph Hitler, and, perhaps more importantly, the U.S. was attacked by the Japanese at Pearl Harbor, which made fighting a necessity (Giannone 5). In The Novels of Kurt Vonnegut, Donald E. Morse states that the Pearl Harbor attack and the fight against evil, to American citizens:

appeared to eliminate ambiguity from national and private morality, because the enemy was portrayed as terrible, inhuman and evil. But moral ambiguity resurfaced when those who participated in the war…found themselves in predicaments that forced them to ask difficult questions about their own and their country’s actions (67).

There are a variety of reasons for such a deep questioning of cultural assumptions, especially by veteran novelists, that occurred after the Second World War and not after the First. One reason is that there was greater American involvement in the Second War in general, and, secondly, American writers were involved in the actual combat experience. Mailer, Heller and Vonnegut fought in the war and had actual combat experience, unlike World War I novelists, who were mostly on the sidelines (for example, Hemingway and Dos Passos were ambulance drivers—they did not fight on the front lines and they never carried a gun (Lundberg 380)). Another reason for the questioning of cultural assumptions after the Second World War was the mechanized horror on a newer and grander scale that was witnessed in World War II (such as the Dresden massacre). There were more technologically advanced weapons, which were more extensively used. There were better machine guns, tanks, planes and chemical
weapons. Soldiers were no longer killed in trenches while waiting to fight; they killed and died while engaged in actual combat. During the Second World War, it was as dangerous to be a civilian behind the front lines as it was to be a soldier fighting on the front lines since the violence of World War II and the technology used in that war “obliterated the difference between civilians and soldiers” (Lundberg 385). The obliteration of the differences between civilians and soldiers, which was shocking to the world, undermines the myth of the hero and the myth of the frontier. The enemy as a clearly defined ‘other’ is a necessary component in the definition of the hero. The blurring of these lines between enemy, civilian innocents and hero subverts the traditional image of the myth-hero.

The major “technological advancement,” which is another reason for the change in myth and narrative format after World War II, was the introduction of nuclear weapons and their use by the American military on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The advent and use of nuclear weapons has been mythologized and incorporated into American consciousness, and it has contributed a great deal to changing the myth of regeneration through violence into a myth of un-regenerative violence. The atomic bomb, claims Morse, has “altered abruptly and profoundly the nature of the United States” (58). In her book War and Words, Sarah Deats asserts that “wars… systematically degrade combatants on both sides, and the reliance on war machinery only accelerates that degradation” (Deats 140). The final reason for the change in narrative format after World War II is the recognition of the depth of psychological wounds caused by veterans’ experiences in war. In pre-World War II war novels, little or no attention was given to the psychology of the soldiers portrayed in the novels. Frederic Henry from Hemingway’s A Farewell to Arms, for example, is simply plagued
by memories and his feelings of guilt for leaving the army. The protagonists of World War II novels, on the other hand, have more profound psychological scars. Signs of psychological trauma are evident in the characters of the war novels of Mailer, Heller and Vonnegut. Mailer’s characters in *The Naked and the Dead* suffer from deep psychological traumas, some of which result in a numbing of their senses towards violence. In Heller’s novel, *Catch-22*, the trauma is manifested in the inability of the main character, Yossarian, to articulate the violence of death in war as he witnesses it in the death of one of his friends. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Billy Pilgrim, the main character, is a deeply disturbed character who has been diagnosed by some literary critics as schizophrenic and by others as suffering from a severe form of post-traumatic stress disorder (Vees-Gulani 176).

**H. Un-regenerative Violence in Three Post-World War II Novels: The Naked and the Dead, Catch-22 and Slaughterhouse-Five**

In order to explore the un-regenerative violence of the new narrative format in post-World War II novels, I will discuss three of the most influential war novels of the era. What is particularly noteworthy is that the authors of the three novels I have chosen are all veterans of the Second World War. War brings out the worst in human nature; it is, writes Jeffrey Walsh, “demonstrably the most pointless and destructive of all human activities” (3). Due to the fact that war is so destructive and meaningless, Walsh believes that “it frequently inculcates in the front-line writer a feeling of existential loss and disorientation, a dawning awareness that the exemplary sacrifice of troops is meaningless and utterly futile” (Walsh 3). Each of the three novels I will discuss expresses the same feelings of “existential loss and disorientation.” They do so, however, in very different ways. The feelings of “existential loss and disorientation” are
exacerbated by the fact that the characters, like the authors, are forced into dangerous, violent situations in which they must face the possibility of their own deaths. In The Mourner’s Song, James Tatum states that “to witness the death of others in war is to realize that the same thing can happen to you” (130). The characters in all three novels are witnesses to other people’s deaths, and these experiences force them to come to terms with their own mortality.

The first novel discussed at length in this study is Norman Mailer’s The Naked and the Dead (1948), which is to a certain extent a darker and more realistic reworking of the war novels of Crane and Hemingway. The Naked and the Dead is a novel in which Mailer tries to realistically depict the ugliness and the un-regenerative violence of war by telling the almost nihilistic story of how men behave in war and the extent of human waste and suffering it causes. Mailer captures the brutal aspects of war by convincingly portraying the soldiers in the novel as human beings, not heroes, and by realistically depicting war scenes. This novel differs from the other two novels I will be discussing in that it is written immediately after the war, and Mailer employs a very realistic, descriptive style of writing. However, The Naked and the Dead, with its new narrative elements, forms a basis for the subsequent novels of Heller and Vonnegut, which are the subjects of the second and third chapters of my thesis respectively. In the novel The Naked and the Dead, there are elements of un-regenerative violence combined with the philosophy of existentialism through which Mailer questions heroism, God and reality.

Catch-22 and Slaughterhouse-Five have been grouped together by Dawes, who believes that they are two “key” pieces of literature to emerge from World War II. They both employ the use of what he calls the “grotesque” (160). In his book Leopards in the
Temple, Morris Dickstein states that there is an “essential continuity of the postwar decades,” and the counter-culture of the 1960’s from which Catch-22 and Slaughterhouse-Five emerge has its roots in the post-World War II period of Norman Mailer (Dickstein 5). Mailer, Heller and Vonnegut found themselves looking “inward…to explore the existential dilemmas of selfhood” after the Second World War when they, like many other Americans in the post-war period, “lost their faith in the promise of American life” (Dickstein 51-53). Consequently, these writers sought after new philosophies that would articulate this lack of faith—particularly the philosophy of existentialism, which informed their narratives. “The cultural mood, influenced by the horrors of war,” writes Dickstein, “grew receptive to European existentialism” (Dickstein 84). Hence, American writers, influenced by existentialism, rejected “earlier traditions of American optimism” (Dickstein 143). In doing so, they also rejected the myth of regeneration through violence.

Paul Fussell believed that it was not possible to “describe war in traditional literary ways” after the “heaping of violence upon violence” in the Second World War (Cacicedo 34). In an attempt to express what Cacicedo refers to as the “inexpressible horrors” of the Second World War, Mailer, Heller and Vonnegut incorporated various new elements into their narratives, including journalistic realism, absurdism, black humor and fantasy. In doing so, these writers, especially Kurt Vonnegut, created new and different war novels and introduced new narrative forms into American Literature.
CHAPTER II

NEW NARRATIVE ELEMENTS IN NORMAN MAILER’S

THE NAKED AND THE DEAD

A. The Naked and the Dead: Origin and Influences

Norman Mailer is considered one of a number of “post-apocalyptic” novelists because of his first novel The Naked and the Dead, which he wrote after his experiences fighting in the Second World War and which was published in 1948 (McConnell xi-xii). Mailer had decided to become a writer while he was still a student at Harvard, and World War II was his opportunity to be a chronicler who would “capture the spirit of the times, and see in the war a paradigm for human experience” (Gutman 3). Mailer had no political interest in the war and did not seem to have an opinion about U.S. intervention in it. Instead, he saw the war as “a possible mine for writing material” (Dearborn 34). He did not enlist in the army, like his other Harvard friends did; he was drafted a year after he graduated. Mailer was sent to the Pacific, as he had hoped, since the Pacific was a “fresh slate” for writing about, unlike Europe, which was a familiar setting for war novels (50). In writing his first novel, Mailer drew on his own and others’ army experiences. His friends from his basic training unit, for example, found themselves represented in the novel (39-40).

Mailer was extremely influenced by previous writers, especially Hemingway, who was his “symbolic father” (Adams 6). However, Mailer made a point of breaking away from such influences in an attempt to create a new narrative in which to write about the new experiences of World War II. He wanted to be known as an American thinker, not just an American writer or stylist (Dearborn 36). One of Mailer's objectives in writing The Naked and the Dead was to create a myth of the Second World War. This
myth, writes McConnell, would be created through the use of a new narrative style (McConnell 71-2). Mailer is quoted as saying that he, as a writer and thinker, “will settle for nothing less than making a revolution in the consciousness of our time” (Adams 3).

According to a 1948 review in The New York Times, “Mailer’s soldiers are real persons, speaking the vernacular of human bitterness and agony. It gives off a sky glow that is quite faithful to the spectrum of battle, and exposes the blood, if not always the guts, of war.” The novel, acclaimed by The San Francisco Chronicle as “perhaps the best book to come out of any war” because of its realistic portrayal of men at war, depicts a battle in the Pacific campaign of World War II, which is set on the fictional island of Anopopei. The Naked and the Dead may be considered an epic novel since it is of epic length, and in it Mailer seeks to present a new myth and a particular view of life. The traditional epic has been defined as “the genre that articulates the political and military virtues associated with the world of men. In other words, epic, which rests at or near the top of our literary canon, valorizes war” (Deats 43). In The Naked and the Dead, Mailer subverts this definition of an epic. In the novel, he uses certain elements of the epic genre, for example, the scope of the themes he deals with, the fact that the novel is about the military world of men, the use of “epic symbols” like Mount Anaka (Adams 38) and the length of the work. However, he does not focus on the virtues of these elements and in no way does he valorize war. Instead, Mailer presents a bleak, nihilistic, absurd and un-regenerative view of war and a military in which there are no heroes.

The ironic tone of the omniscient narrator of the novel, who tells the story from various points of view, conveys the existential message that no final knowledge is possible (Adams 29). The plot in the novel is not central; what is important is the
experience of the men in the war. *The Naked and the Dead* consists of characters who are pessimistic and dehumanized soldiers, and are unwillingly “placed in a situation and reacting to it” (34-37). This diminution of the role of the plot and highlighting the importance of the situation reinforces Mailer’s belief that life is “constructed on an existential plane from a series of moments” (6).

Robert Langbaum, in *The Modern Spirit*, argues that Mailer’s novel not only portrays the war and the men fighting it, it also reveals an accurate description of “the American society behind it” (148). In the novel, each character was “simply emblematic of his background and the whole mix was America” (Dickstein 161). In *The Naked and the Dead*, Mailer triumphs in creating a new narrative style to convey the then relatively uncommon subject of the horrors of war. This new narrative form used in the novel has a realistic as well as a journalistic quality which had previously been used in fiction but never in a war narrative. “Mailer’s new style,” as Langbaum calls it, was created in part by using this form to write about new subject matter (148).

The novel goes beyond being just a realistic description of a group of soldiers’ struggle to fight and survive at war. It taps into the American consciousness at the time by, for example, showing the reader parts of the soldiers’ lives before going into combat. Mailer links American society to the events taking place in Anopopei by intertwining the novel with the “Time Machine” episodes, which tell the reader the background of the soldiers and the America they come from. The men in the novel are almost stereotypes of men in American society, and each character personifies a certain type. Croft, for example, is the hunter type, who is very patriotic and blindly ambitious. Goldstein may be considered a stereotype of the Jewish character in American society. Red is of the lower socioeconomic class, Martinez is Hispanic and Hearn is the
educated man whose book-smart skills prove useless in military life. The characters and the vignettes of their civilian lives portrayed in the Time Machine episodes make the novel a part of and essentially embody the process of myth making in America. Cotkin describes these vignettes as a tool through which Mailer shows us the “illusions under which each of the soldiers was raised, the hurts they have absorbed and nourished, and the numbing sense of limitation they cannot shrug off” (189). Who they were before the war dictates who they are in the military and what they will be after the war is over and they go back home. General Cummings, for example, is the figure of a ruthless calculating dictator. The reasons behind Cummings’ behavior in the military are linked to his past, which is narrated in the Time Machine episode that tells of his pre-war life. We are told of his doting mother who lets him sew and of his controlling father who slaps him and tells him to stop acting like a woman. Mailer links Cummings’ early relationships to the relationships he forms later on in the military. It can be argued that the confusion caused by Cummings’ childhood relationships with his parents is linked to the ambivalence he later feels towards Hearn—he sometimes feels the need to love and protect Hearn while at other times he feels compelled to dominate him.

B. American Existentialism

In Mankind in Barbary, Stanley Gutman argues that Mailer uses war as one of his “basic metaphors for existence” since he sees life in general as a “martial struggle in a divided universe” (5). The war in the Pacific on the fictional Island of Anopopei is, according to Gutman, “in a large sense the creation of a myth that describes and perhaps explains the nature of reality” (5). In creating this myth, Mailer’s new style incorporates ideas from existentialism, the philosophical system which had been imported from France and was gaining popularity in the United States in the post-war period.
In *Existential America*, George Cotkin claims that “the very notion of America as bereft of anguish is absurd. Death and despair appear…in the American collective consciousness” ¹(2). In that statement, he is disagreeing with the French existentialist philosophers Sartre, De Beauvoir and Camus who believe that Americans “lacked a sense of anguish about the problems of existence, authenticity and alienation” since, in Beauvoir's words, Americans had no “feeling for sin and for remorse” (Cotkin 2). The United States as a country is founded on anguish; death, war and violence have been present throughout its history. The violent history of the United States started with the persecution of the Puritans, which forced them to travel to North America. There they were met by the Native Americans, which led to the Indian Wars. The history of the U.S. also includes a Civil War, two World Wars, Vietnam, the Cold War and, most recently, the so called “war on terror.” The literature produced by these wars portrays the anguish, death and despair present in the American collective unconscious.

However, as discussed previously, there had always been some form of regeneration that followed these textual representations of violence. In the post-World War II novels discussed in this study, beginning with *The Naked and the Dead*, however, there is no regeneration through violence.

After World War II, the anguish, death and despair led to feelings of alienation, impotence and meaningless all of which are essential elements in an existentialist perspective. According to Cotkin, “in the shadow of the Second World War, the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the Cold War, a sense of death had become pervasive, part of the anxiety that confronted the [American] culture” (53). This anxiety,

¹ The word anguish, as used in existential philosophy, is a translation of the German word angst. Anguish is originally a Kierkegaardian term often understood as “the experience of an utterly free being in a world with zero absolutes” (“Anguish”). The fact that there are no absolutes implies that everything is arbitrary—this recognition of the arbitrariness and absurdity of our actions, combined with an awareness of mortality, leads to what the existentialists call anguish/angst (Luper 7).
which was experienced in a general sense subliminally by Americans and on a much more conscious level by Norman Mailer in *The Naked and the Dead*, was caused by the realization that life is absurd. “We nevertheless experience life as absurd,” believes Camus, “when we face the fact that all humans are ultimately condemned to death” (Gordon 103).

In *Leopards in the Temple*, Morris Dickstein asserts that Mailer saw the violence and the “genocidal cruelties” of the Second World War as:

- a leap into the irrational, a challenge to the bland lies of civilization…For him the holocaust and the bomb are not pointers toward the moral abyss so much as they are prototypes of the modern form of collective death, death by technology, that robbed death of all personal meaning or heroism (Dickstein 147).

American culture after World War II experienced a sense of existential anguish; the anxiety they were confronted with was filled with fears of annihilation, with no hope for regeneration.

**C. Mailer’s Existentialism**

Cotkin specifically defines being existential as having “those dark nights of the soul when the loneliness of existence becomes transparent and the structure of our confidence lies shattered around us… [It] is to wrestle most fully with the jagged awareness of one's own finitude, with the thunderbolt fact that I will die and that my death will be my own, experienced by no one else” (3). This definition of being existential can be accurately applied to many of the characters in Mailer’s novel when they contemplate and come to terms with their own mortality. They realize that they are mortal, that death is imminent and that when they die they will die alone.
George Cotkin considers Norman Mailer to be one of many American writers who made existentialism central to their work (7), and he quotes Mailer as saying “everything in the scheme of things will drive us to seeing things as absurd” (184). Sartre, considered by many to be the father of existentialism as a result of the philosophical ideas set forth in his book *Being and Nothingness*, represented a “philosopher hero” to Mailer (Dearborn 59). Mailer saw Sartre as the “public intellectual who altered the course of events through his work and through his actions…and he, in effect, saw himself as no less than his country’s Sartre” (59). Thus, Mailer declared himself an existentialist and *The Naked and the Dead*, which revolves around Mailer's concern with the existential problem of evil, can be seen as his American existential treatise. Mailer has a “self-developed” existentialism which is very American in nature and origin (Adams 5). In the novel, we are presented with a nihilistic and absurd world set in World War II and marked by the soldiers’ collective sense of disillusionment, alienation, isolation and the extensive and indiscriminate use of power by the almost totalitarian powers present in the closed society of the army (Cotkin 187-89).

Mailer’s fascination with power, ego and will is evident in his first novel (Dickstein 18). Violence and power had a powerful appeal for Mailer and his ambivalence towards the two themes is obvious and it motivates some of the greatest conflicts in the novel (Dearborn 38). The best example of this can be seen in the conflict between General Cummings and Lieutenant Hearn, in which Cummings, using the power of his military rank, crushes Hearn by sending him on a futile reconnaissance mission. The themes of the weakness and insignificance of the individual human being,
the human will and the lack of hope form a setting of impotence and gloom in *The Naked and the Dead* (Cotkin 191).

According to Cotkin, the Second World War “presented a mirror to the human condition which blinded everyone who looked into it” (92). In this mirror, what people saw were new forms of mass destruction, genocide and annihilation—violence that was necessarily un-regenerative. Looking into this mirror caused people to suffer “from a collective failure of nerve” (Cotkin 192). From all of this violence, exercise of power, killing and the new and improved weapons used by supposedly heroic soldiers whose goal was to fight the evil of fascism, nothing emerged but death, destruction and a collective feeling of impotence.

In describing *The Naked and the Dead*, Gutman points to “the reader’s overwhelming impression… of the impotence and insignificance of human beings” (6). The insignificance of human beings is clearly portrayed in the futility of the goals of the war, which the soldiers in the platoon are aware of and about which they constantly complain. Gutman describes the image the soldiers have of themselves and the attitude projected by them as “thwarted and powerless” (9). Even though Gutman sees Croft as the exception to this projected attitude, Croft’s actions are in the end inevitably futile and insignificant. Hence, Croft does fit into the general idea of the “impotence and insignificance of human beings.” Croft fails to achieve his most important personal goal: reaching the top of Mount Anaka.

**D. The Absurdity of Life and Death in *The Naked and the Dead***

Mailer, according to Gutman, believes that “death is the ultimate parameter of human existence and therefore essential to any process of human self-definition” (10). In *The Naked and the Dead*, death is essential to the self definition of the soldiers of the
platoon but their death, like their life, is ultimately meaningless. In the novel, several soldiers end up dying alone and without reason. For example, the deaths of the soldiers Hearn, Wilson, Roth and Hennessey are portrayed by Mailer as “pointless and wasted, a squandering of human life in the military wasteland of modern society” (Gutman 10). Mailer sees death as the result of the “catastrophic conditions of war”; this recognition becomes the most crucial factor in Mailer's attempt to “portray and understand the human condition” (Gutman 7). Death is an un-regenerative and usually violent event in the novel, and it is the fate of many of the soldiers in the platoon. Death is the end. There is no mention or hope for an after-life, which forces the soldiers to come to terms with their finitude.

When the soldiers contemplate the situation they are in, they realize the absurdity of the world; how fragmented and nonsensical things are. The soldiers find themselves at war, fighting in a remote, far-away island. The reasons behind the war—fighting the Nazis, defeating Hitler and defending their country—all seem to be viable theoretically. However, the soldiers’ presence on Anopoei seems to be pointless and unrelated. When the soldiers reflect on their own mortality and the imminence of death, their actions—such as pushing guns, climbing Mount Anaka and defeating the “Japs”—do not seem to be so important.

Lieutenant Hearn is one of the central characters who realizes early on in the novel that the world he lives in is fragmented and that events do not seem to fit together in any discernible pattern. Hearn is a highly educated man, but he has not found a belief system that is compatible with the world he observes around him. Hearn has not found existentialism and so he becomes very cynical during war (Adams 38). He cannot understand how he can kill someone or be killed by someone and everything will end so
easily. Hearn contemplates the circumstances under which he may potentially kill or be killed while observing an event taking place in front of him. Hearn cannot make sense of the apparent contradictions in the scene taking place in front of him. He is unable to integrate the world around him (Gutman 13). It is important to note that Hearn does not make mention of anything taking place after death. His death will simply be “the end of his petty history” while the death of an enemy will be the end of “a particular envelope of lusts and anxieties and perhaps some goodness” (Mailer 108). Hearn in the following scene is unable to reconcile the different and apparently contradictory thoughts going through his head—there is death and war, and at the same time, there is life and singing:

Their jeep would round the bend, be hit by a dozen bullets at once, and that would be the end of his petty history of unfocused gropings and unimportant satisfactions…Or, obversely, he might kill a man himself…Everything was completely out of whack, nothing of the joints fitted. The men had been singing in the motorpool, and there had been something nice about it, something childish and brave…And somewhere else a battle might be going on…None of it matched. The night had broken them into all the isolated units that actually they were (108).

The isolation Lieutenant Hearn feels at this point is apparent. He realizes the absurdity of the events taking place in front of him. He is aware of how fragile, insignificant and alone he is as a human being. His musings of his death early on in the novel become a reality when the easy end to his “petty history” finally takes place towards the end of the novel. The death of Lieutenant Hearn comes as a surprise and is related in a very matter of fact manner. We are told that it is a warm new day during which Hearn is feeling hopeful as he assumes the lead of the platoon in an attempt to
take them through a pass that would lead them away from Mount Anaka. The next thing we are told is that, “a half hour later, Lieutenant Hearn was killed by a machine gun bullet which passed through his chest” (602). It is very easy and simple. He is killed by a single Japanese soldier’s bullet. There is a contradiction between the way he feels on the morning of his death and the actual outcome of the day; it does not “match.”

Another vivid example of the “squandering of human life” is the death of Hennessey, who is one of the younger soldiers in the novel and is the first soldier in the novel to die. He appears only in the first few pages of the novel since he dies on the beach where the platoon lands. Although Hennessey’s role as a character is short, his presence and the effects of his death so early on have a strong impact on the reader. Through narrating this death, Mailer makes a strong existential comment about the absurdity and futility of war. Hennessey comes to the island with a wide-eyed naïveté that Red, an older soldier who has seen plenty of combat, finds repulsive. Hennessey has never seen combat, which compels Red to avoid becoming his friend since he senses that the young soldier’s ignorance towards the harsh reality of war will result in his death. Red, a cynical and experienced character, does not want to get emotionally involved with anyone since it will make life in the platoon much harder for him. Hennessey’s perception of the reality of war is not accurate. He sees the war through the young eyes of someone immersed in popular culture who valorizes war and whose only reference for combat is war propaganda.

When the men land on the beach, they fear a Japanese attack. One of the soldiers tells Hennessey that they have to stop the “Japs.” Hennessey thinks to himself that the whole scenario he is living through is just “like a movie…Vague images overlapped in his mind. He saw himself standing up and repelling a charge” (36). Hennessey imagines
himself as a hero in a Hollywood movie, in which he bravely stands up and shoots the evil enemy. However, his reverie is not the reality of war and it is not what happens to Hennessey. Mailer here uses a sample of older Hollywood-like war narratives with the traditional image of the hero fighting a just war and contrasts it with the reality of war in order to create his own new war narrative. Only moments after Hennessey’s movie-like fantasy, the Japanese attack on the landing site starts. He finds himself “sobbing in the hole, terrified and resentful…and realized with both revulsion and mirth that he had emptied his bowels” (37). Hennessey becomes preoccupied with changing his pants and feels abandoned, so he leaves the safety of the hole where he is hiding and runs deliriously across the beach, where he is killed. Hennessey dies a violent and utterly un-heroic death that is not reminiscent of any pre-World War II war narrative and which was certainly not present in movies or war propaganda. Hennessey’s death and the way it is described in detail is a part of the “post-apocalyptic” new style of narrative that Mailer employs:

Hennessey started, and then began to babble. “I’m going to get the others. It’s important, I got my pants dirty.” He began to laugh…Abruptly, he realized that something was sliding about in the pocket his pants made…In a little frenzy, he pulled his trouser loose, let the stool fall out, and then began to run again…Then he heard the terrible siren of the mortar shell coming down on him. He pirouetted in a little circle, and threw himself to the ground. Perhaps he felt the explosion before a piece of shrapnel tore his brain in half (38).

Mailer describes Hennessey’s death in minute detail, as if writing a journalistic reportage of the event and leaves nothing to the imagination. His description is very realistic and does not flatter the character in any way. Mailer does not try to hide
Hennessey’s fear or shame; he stresses the point that Hennessey soils his trousers and
dies on the beach where the soldiers first land, while running and babbling incoherently
trying to change his dirty pants. There is nothing heroic or regenerative about the way
Hennessey dies, and Mailer does not try to turn his death into a tragic story of a hero
killed in battle while bravely defending his country. Nothing comes out of Hennessey’s
death; it is meaningless and pointless, definitely not regenerative in any way. He is just
“cannon fodder” (51) for the Army machine as many soldiers feel they are. Hennessey
is dead, and that is the end of the story. Hennessey is never mentioned again in the
novel. The fact that Hennessey disappears as a character ties into the existential
absurdity of the novel in that it embodies the notion that there is nothing after death and
there is a vague being “watching over their shoulder…and laughing” (39) but never
interfering.

The absurdity of life and death is also exemplified in the story of Roth, who is
forced to confront his own fragile human existence. When Gallagher strikes him and
shouts “get up, you Jew bastard,” Roth, because of the punch and these five words is
forced “to a point of existential nakedness, a point where he comes face to face—not
with the cosmic void—but rather with the conditional, fragile, mortal nature of his own
mind and his own body” (Mc Connell 66-67). Roth at this point in the novel realizes his
weakness and his inability to do anything about it.

Roth’s death is especially absurd and pointless. Croft, the leader of a small
group of men on a mission to reach the beach on the other end of the island, has just
decided to climb Mount Anaka instead of finding a way around it. The men are
exhausted before they even start climbing the mountain because of the Japanese ambush
that had killed Hearn. Roth is especially weak; both physically because of the marching
and mentally because of the violence. Everything he has endured during the war is bearing down upon him, and he can barely stand up, let alone climb a mountain. The degenerative effects of the war are apparent on all the soldiers but especially on the weakest of them, Roth, whose movements are almost unconscious: “After a half hour he could no longer get up without assistance, and each step he took was doubtful, uncertain, like an infant walking alone across a room. He even felt like an infant, his feet folding under him while he sat blankly on his thighs, a little bewildered that he was not still walking,” (660). Roth returns to a state of infancy under the extreme pressures of war. The physical exertion of marching for days, fighting the “Japs” and the mental abuse he has received from the men in the platoon for dragging so far behind renders Roth incapable of performing even the simplest actions.

Roth’s death is a useless one, like all other deaths in the novel, but his is especially pointless since just prior to his demise, the narrator informs the reader that the mission of the American Army on the island of Anopopei is over. However, Croft and his men, who have just decided to climb up Mount Anaka, do not know that they do not need to proceed with the reconnaissance mission they have been assigned. The narrator tells us that “by that evening, the campaign was over except for the mopping up…In the excitement, everyone forgot about recon” (657). Croft's mission has lost all purpose and all meaning; Roth did not have to die. He died a violent death. His weak body could not make the jump from one ledge on the face of the mountain to the other: “in his fall Roth heard himself bellow with anger, and was amazed that he could make so great a noise. Through his numbness, through his disbelief, he had a thought before he crashed into the rocks far below. He wanted to live. A little man tumbling through
space” (666). The other men, who have already made the jump and were taunting Roth for being a “useless bastard” (665) make no comment about Roth’s death.

Roth absurdly tries to hold onto his life, but he ends up clutching onto nothing and so falls to his death. It seems as if it was useless for Roth to try to save himself anyway; his life was meaningless and trying so desperately to hold on to it is also meaningless. The language Mailer uses to describe the way Roth feels before he makes the jump over the mountain precipice reminds the reader of Mailer's belief in the philosophy of existentialism and its preoccupation with mortality. Roth feels a combination of “dread” and “anxiety”\(^2\) due to his awareness of his imminent death. Despite his awareness that jumping will certainly cause his death, Roth resigns himself to his feeling of dread and makes the leap anyway.

While Croft and his men continue the futile climb up Mount Anaka, Wilson, another soldier on the mission, who has been shot in the stomach, is being carried to the beach in an attempt to save his life. Wilson dies a slow and painful death while being “carried along like some intolerable human burden…a continuous reminder of the softness of mere flesh, the fragility of human life” (Dickstein 36-37). The details of Wilson’s un-regenerative death are described in detail, including the blood, sweat and excrement:

A pinkish spittle had dried at the corners of Wilson’s mouth…He seemed smaller somehow, the flesh over his large frame had settled…without realizing it he was smelling himself. Forty hours had elapsed since he was wounded, and in that period he had soiled himself frequently, bled and sweated, had even

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\(^2\) Anxiety is a word used by existentialists to describe a state “experienced in boundary situations, such as death,” while dread refers to a state of despair/ loss of hope (Gordon 10).
absorbed the dank moist odors of the damp ground they had slept on the night before (666-67).

Wounded Wilson is carried by four soldiers who risk their own lives to save him, but he dies before they reach the beach where he may or may not have been saved. Not only was his death unnecessary, since their mission was meaningless, the effort that his fellow soldiers put into trying to save him was also useless. It was wasted effort.

Mailer makes it a point to tell us that the American soldiers are not the only ones who think about the existence of man and how absurd it is, especially during times of war. Mailer attempts to humanize the enemy, something which was done in Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front*. One of the times when an American soldier concedes that “Japs” are human beings is when Red Valsen contemplates the headless corpse of a Japanese soldier and has an existential revelation. He realizes, “with surprise and shock, as if he were looking at a corpse for the first time, that a man was really a very fragile thing” (216). This realization is especially important to him since he is actually disintegrating on the inside; he suffers from several health problems, and he feels as if his insides are rotting away (Gutman 5).

The most significant existential insight is portrayed in the thoughts of a Japanese soldier. Wakara, an American soldier/translator of Japanese origin, translates the diary of a Japanese soldier. The hopelessness and despair he experiences the night before he dies is described in his diary, and it embodies the existential philosophy of Mailer present throughout the novel. The Japanese soldier Ishimara writes:

> I think, I am born and I die. I am born, I live and I am to die… I am going to die.

> I am born, I am dead. I ask myself—WHY? I am born, I am to die. WHY? WHY? What is the meaning? (247).
Wakara reads the soldier’s words and reflects upon them. He thinks that the soldier is a poet, but like many other soldiers “they died like anything but poets, died in mass ecstatic outbursts, communal frenzies…he had gone out and been killed in the river on the night of the big Japanese attack. He had fallen, shrieking, no doubt, a unit in an anonymous exalted mass. Who could comprehend it fully?” (247). Mailer, similar to most existentialists, believes that alienation “may be evoked by an absurd universe… as religious, cultural, and social paradigms fail and begin to disintegrate” (Gordon 5). The Japanese soldier feels as alienated and confused as anyone else. He looks for answers to the absurd reality he sees around him but can not find any except that he is born to live and then to die for no apparent reason.

**E. Power and Violence**

The military as portrayed in the platoon in the novel can be considered a closed society, and in that closed society all the characters have violent relationships, which are characterized by competitiveness and struggles for power (Gutman 4). This violent contest can be clearly seen in one of the most important relationships in the novel—the power struggle between General Cummings and Lieutenant Hearn.

General Cummings is described by Mc Connell, in *Four Postwar American Novelists*, as a “self-conscious denier of life” because Cummings is homosexual and, therefore, “sterile.” Moreover, he is abstinent since practicing his homosexuality would jeopardize his military career (74). Cummings is one of the most powerful characters in the novel because of his position as a General. Ultimately, he is responsible for most of the violence in the novel since he makes all the major decisions. Cummings is the representation of power and fascism (Dearborn 47) and can be described as a “fascist warring against fascists” (Mc Connell 74). The reason behind the symbolic importance
of Cummings being homosexual is that Cummings, who is a violent, fascist military leader, is also incapable of reproduction. He may thus be seen to represent the un-regenerative aspect of violence in the novel. Cotkin sees General Cummings as “a sadistic proto-fascist” (188). However, despite the power bestowed upon him by his military position and his tactical intelligence, the absurd reality of war interferes with his plans.

The great stand-off between General Cummings and Lieutenant Hearn occurs when Hearn throws a cigarette stub in the otherwise impeccably neat room of Cummings. Cummings then retaliates by showing Hearn that he is the one with power. He humiliates Hearn by forcing him to pick up a half smoked cigarette off the floor. Cummings threatens Hearn and tells him that if he does not comply, he will have him court-martialed, which is obviously a drastic punishment for such a small offense. Cummings justifies his severe punishment in a strong statement about power: “if punishment is at all proportionate to the offense, then power becomes watered. The only way you generate the proper attitude of awe and obedience is through immense and disproportionate power” (Mailer 324). The reason behind Hearn’s powerlessness in front of Cummings’ power is Hearn's constant hesitation. He enters Cummings’ tent determined to stand up to him, but when the moment comes, Hearn hesitates. Cummings takes Hearn’s hesitation as an opportunity to use even more power, which leaves Hearn devastated and powerless. “Hearn continually vacillates, and his vacillations lead him to impotence” (Gutman 14).

Cummings and Croft are the representations of power rather than conscience (Dickstein 33). However, while Cummings represents the power of the mind and reason and of a certain position in society, Croft is the personification of primitive physical
power in the novel (Cotkin 189). Croft is “a purely instinctive, almost animal version of the cerebral Cummings” (Dickstein 35). He is equally violent and can be described as “a victimized and victimizing destroyer of a life he cannot possess, cannot fully comprehend” (Mc Connell 74). An ideal example of how he destroys a life he “cannot possess” or understand is a scene in which he crushes a bird. While he is cutting poles for Wilson’s stretcher, Roth finds a wounded bird and he feels great compassion for it. Croft is irritated and baffled by Roth’s and the rest of the men’s attention towards the bird when they can be doing something more productive, so Croft takes the bird away from Roth and crushes it despite being aware that his doing so will anger the rest of the men in the platoon (530).

Another event that highlights Croft’s lust for power and lack of morality is Hearn’s death, which he causes. Hearn is temporarily in control of Croft’s men—as a result of his higher rank, Hearn is in the position of making the decisions and thus usurps Croft’s rightful position as leader. Croft, with a “superhuman, Ahab-like drive” is determined to climb Mount Anaka (Dickstein 33). Hearn, on the other hand, prefers taking the easy way, which is a narrow pass which will take them away from the mountain. In order to achieve his goal, Croft hides the fact from Hearn and the rest of the soldiers that there are Japanese soldiers in the narrow pass and lets Hearn lead the men through the pass, where Hearn is killed. With Hearn out of the way, Croft can assume the lead again. Instead of feeling a sense of guilt or remorse for causing a fellow American soldier’s death, Croft is relieved: “Hearn was lying on his back, the blood spurting softly from his wound, covering his face and body slowly and inevitably. Croft felt a sense of relief again. No longer was there that confusion, that momentary internal
pause before he gave an order” (Mailer 603). Croft finds himself back where he rightfully belongs, at the top of the hierarchy, in a position of power.

However, Croft’s position of power is useless in the face of the mountain. Croft’s power allows him to push the men to climb the mountain, but only up to a certain point after which he is forced to retreat. Croft, like Sisyphus, is the ultimate “absurd hero” (Camus 390). Sisyphus, in the Greek myth written about by Camus, is condemned to ceaselessly roll a rock up a mountain when it falls over the other side because of its weight. Croft is similarly condemned to push his men up Mount Anaka in a futile attempt to reach the top. Croft is vaguely aware of the futility of his goal, but he keeps trying anyway; he cannot accept being defeated by a mountain. Croft’s perseverance is even more tragic because of his consciousness of the absurdity of his goal. Like Sisyphus he is “powerless and rebellious [and] knows the whole extent of his wretched condition” (390). In his narration of Croft’s struggle with the mountain, Mailer appears to agree with the Greek gods that “there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labor” (389). However, it is hard to imagine Croft happy, as Camus believes “One must imagine Sisyphus happy” (391). Mailer leaves no room for that interpretation since he leaves us with the image of Croft on a ship sailing away from Anopopei, still looking at the mountain lost in thought: “Croft kept looking at the mountain. He had lost it, had missed some tantalizing revelation of himself. Of himself and much more. Of life. Everything” (Mailer 709).

Croft continues to lead the men up Mount Anaka, pushing them forward despite their protests and despite the fact that many of his men have died on the mission. Croft does not care about the lives of his men, and before the end of the novel, all the characters who are under his power imagine his death. Croft is the main reason behind
much of his platoon’s misery, and he is the direct reason behind Roth and Hearn’s violent deaths. “War is the ideal sphere of action for a man like Croft, since it allows him to exercise his baffled violence without fear of retribution or the threat of having to face his own moral responsibilities” (McConnell 74). In the chaotic and absurd world of war, Croft does not have to take responsibility for any of his actions, and the consequences of his abuse of power are only felt by those weaker than him.

Croft and Cummings are the only two characters in the novel who try to make a difference in the world and in the lives they lead. They try to give meaning to life and to the actions they perform in the novel. Both men are figures of power and both try to use this power in order to make meaning out of and give purpose to their actions. However, Cummings’ use of power is “bureaucratic and nihilistic…thus, in a sense, it is empty, devoid of values or of greater ends” (Cotkin 190). In the end, Cummings’ work of capturing Anopopei is accomplished by Major Dalleson who is a “blundering fool” (Dickstein 33).

Croft, on the other hand, tries to find a purpose for his power. He uses his power in order to keep pushing the soldiers up the mountain with the purpose of reaching the top, thus symbolically defeating nature. Croft seems to believe that reaching the top of the mountain will give his life and actions as a military leader some meaning. However, nature and time work against him in accordance with the philosophy of existentialism; his failure to climb the mountain reinforces the meaninglessness behind his existence. Croft remains a trained soldier, so his power is “eclipsed” both by the bureaucracy and military power of Cummings (Cotkin 190) and by the overpowering nature of Mount Anaka. This “ironic twist” by which Cummings and Croft are defeated is typical of the existentialism of the postwar period. The expectations of the men throughout the novel
are never met, and the novel ends with an “ironic conclusion” that “deflates heroic
designs and points to the forces of history and chance over which people have no
control. As the novel ends, brilliantly but anti-climactically, a postwar sense of the
absurd displaces the prewar social consciousness” (Dickstein 33).

Mailer is concerned with the conflict he sees between morality and power
(Langbaum 151). As can be seen in the power struggles and relationships the characters
have in the novel, Mailer presents us with a “power dilemma” in which the characters
need to exert control over their lives and the environment, they find themselves.
However, according to Gutman, the characters’ attempts at exerting control “lead to
totalitarian structures and attitudes” (3-4). Mailer developed a strong dislike for
authority during his time serving in the military and this attitude toward power
developed into a kind of philosophy portrayed in the characters of Croft and Cummings
(Dearborn 43). The attempts the characters make at controlling their lives lead to
frustration since they are never in control, and so the soldiers end up questioning the
meaning of their existence, which seems to be consistently futile. No matter how
powerful the character is or how much violence he is capable of, the decisions he makes
to achieve his decided goals are met with meaninglessness and futility.

Croft seems to need to exert control over everything around him, and he enjoys
the power he has. He is frightened during the big Japanese attack, but the fear he feels
brings him shame, and all his actions are based on hiding and conquering the fear he
experiences at the realization of his mortality. Croft finds a sadistic joy in violent action,
as can be seen in the following passage in which Croft and other soldiers come across
and fight Japanese soldiers:
Something moved on the river and he fired a flare. As it burst, a few Japanese soldiers were caught motionless in the water. Croft pivoted his gun on them and fired. One of the soldiers remained standing for an incredible time. There was no expression on his face; he looked vacant and surprised even as the bullets struck him in the chest. Nothing was moving now on the river. In the light of the flare, the bodies looked as limp and unhuman as bags of grain. One soldier began to float downstream, his face in the water. On the beach near the gun, another Japanese soldier was lying on his back. A wide stain of blood was spreading out from his body, and his stomach, ripped open, gaped like the swollen entrails of a fowl. On an impulse Croft fired a burst into him, and felt a twitch of pleasure as he saw the body quiver (153-154).

F. The Unreality of War

The violence experienced by the soldiers shatters the boundary between reality and unreality. In *The Naked and the Dead*, Mailer portrays an absurd world in which there is no such thing as an objective, “transcendent reality” (Gordon 70). This confusion between what is real and what is not is mostly perceived by Red Valsen. At one point during the novel, Red, Croft and Gallagher, while on an errand to bring rations to the rest of the platoon, come across four Japanese soldiers. The three men decide to kill the “Japs.” Red is intensely aware of the details of the situation. He can clearly see the face of one of the men, which “added to the unreality” of the situation since Red knows that this face belongs to a man who is about to die a violent death caused by him. Croft throws a grenade at the soldiers, two of them die instantly: “one of them reposed on his back with his hands clawed over the bloody mash of what had once been his face, and the other was crumpled on his side with a great rent in his chest”
The two other Japanese soldiers lie on the ground, at which point Red goes down, on command from Croft, to “finish them off” (190). Red shoots one of the bodies but his gun jams as he tries to shoot the other one, and so the Japanese soldier, who had been feigning death, attacks Red with his bayonet. Gallagher and Croft stop the soldier before he does any harm to Red, and they take him prisoner. Croft tells Red to leave since he and Gallagher will “take care” of the prisoner. As he leaves the scene of the fight, Red looks at the dead men and Mailer describes the scene through Red’s eyes: “Red looks at the bodies lying limp in the green draw. Already a few insects were flying over the corpse who had lost his face. Everything that had happened to him seemed unreal again” (192). Red has the same reaction whenever he faces combat. He panics and feels as if he is unable to move. However, he always does manage to move and fire his rifle, but every movement seems disjointed from his body, and the situation seems unreal. The line between reality and appearance is distorted because of violence. This distortion is consistent with existential philosophy, in which the existence of reality itself is called into question.

Croft has a different reaction to the situation. He is disappointed when Red’s gun jams, not because he is afraid for Red’s life, but because he wants to see the Japanese man die: “he had been anticipating the quick lurching spasms of the body when the bullets would crash into it, and now he felt an intense dissatisfaction” (193). He toys with the prisoner, who continually begs for his life, and he leads the imprisoned soldier to believe that he will not be killed. He gives him a cigarette to smoke, followed by a chocolate bar and some water. The “Jap” shares pictures of his wife and kids with his captors, and Gallagher starts to truly feel sympathy for the captured man since he makes him think of his own wife and new-born. For Gallagher, the shared experience
with the Japanese soldier reminds him of his “reality” back home with his wife, and this shared experience transcends, for a moment, the unreality of the violence of war. Croft, on the other hand, has a very different set of thoughts and emotions running through his mind. There is a “natural ‘high’ that violence induces in those exposed to it” (Tritle 56), and that is exactly what this violent situation does to Croft. For Croft, violence gives him a sense of excitement and of being alive:

    Croft felt his head pulsing with an intense excitement. There were tears in the prisoner’s eyes again, and Croft looked at them dispassionately. He gazed once about the little draw, and watched a fly crawl over the mouth of one of the corpses. The prisoner had taken a deep puff and was leaning back now against the trunk of the tree. His eyes had closed, and for the first time there was a dreamy expression on his face…abruptly he [Croft] brought up his rifle and pointed it at the prisoner’s head. Gallagher started to protest as the Jap opened his eyes. The prisoner did not have time to change his expression before the shot crashed into his skull. He slumped forward, and then rolled on his side. He was still smiling but he looked silly now (195).

One of the most shocking scenes in the novel and one that stays with the reader long after the novel is read is the scene in which the soldiers come across a site scattered with Japanese soldiers’ rotting and maggot-infested burnt dead bodies. The scene is horrific and the stench of death hangs over everything. What the American soldiers decide to do, however, is look for souvenirs. As the soldiers walk into the field, before they see the dead Japanese soldiers’ bodies, they can smell the “familiar stench” of death and decay (210). Mailer then spends a great deal of time describing in minute
detail employing journalistic style, the gruesome scene that lies before the American soldiers:

“Jesus,” Red swore. He stepped around the dead body of a Japanese soldier that lay crushed on the road…A litter of wreckage lay all over the field. There were the dead bodies of Japanese soldiers everywhere…In the grass they could see the twisted bodies of a few dead men, and they lay far from repose, their bodies frozen in the midst of an intense contortion…The bodies of the Japanese had not been carried away, and the driver of the half-track had almost fallen out of his seat. His head was crushed from his ear to his jaw and it lay sodden on the runningboard of the vehicle as if it were a beanbag. One of his legs was thrust tensely through the shattered glass of the windshield and the other one, which had been lopped off at the thigh, lay at right angles to his head. It seemed to have a separate existence from him. Another Japanese lay on his back a short distance away. He had a great hole in his intestines, which bunched out in a thick white cluster like the congested petals of a sea flower. The flesh of his belly was very red and his hands in their death throes had encircled the wound. He looked as if he were calling attention to it. He had an anonymous pleasant face with small snubbed features, and he seemed quite rested in death. His legs and buttocks had swollen so that they stretched his pants until they were the skin-tight trousers of a Napoleonic Dandy…At an angle to him lay a third soldier, who had received a terrible wound in his chest. His thighs and torso had been burned…and he was stretched out on his back with his legs separated and his knees raised. The singed cloth of his uniform had rotted away and it exposed
his scorched genitals. They had burned down to tiny stumps but the ash of his pubic hair still remained like a tight clump of steel wool (210-11).

Mailer goes on to describe the rotting bodies very graphically:

The Japanese had been dead for a week, and they had swollen to the dimensions of very obese men with enormous legs and bellies, and buttocks which split their clothing. They had turned green and purple and the maggots festered in their wounds and covered their feet. Each maggot was about a half inch long and it looked like a slug except that it was the color of a fish’s belly. The maggots covered the dead bodies the way bees cluster over the head of a beekeeper… (212-13)

The first comment made by one of the American soldiers after seeing this horrific scene is, “they done stripped ‘em of all the souvenirs” (211). While the men are looking around for souvenirs, one of the soldiers sees a corpse with gold teeth which he feels an intense lust for. So the soldier, Martinez, smashes a rifle butt against the corpse’s mouth and the teeth fall out, which he pockets while making sure that nobody notices what he has done. He is not ashamed of it; he simply does not want to share his loot. This and the other extreme situations which the soldiers face often result in a deadening of the soldiers’ feelings. Gutman, in his discussion of this particular scene, attributes the behavior of the soldiers to the “extremities of war” during which “brutalization is the price the psyche pays for the continued existence of the individual” (5). Indeed, when the Army’s mission on Anopopei is over, and they are “mopping up,” the violence continues as if it has become a normal part of the men’s everyday lives. The “mopping up” consists of the American soldiers finding new and inventive ways of killing any “Japs” (who were mostly unarmed and mal-nourished by this point). Though
the killing, and especially the method, used to kill Japanese soldiers would be disturbing to most readers, to the soldiers, the killing “lost all dimension, bothered the men far less than discovering some ants in their bedding” (Mailer 718).

The scene of Japanese dead soldiers strewn all over the piece of land on the Pacific island of Anopopei is reminiscent of scenes in early American literature of Native American bodies strewn all over their native land after having been killed by the invading Anglo-Americans. The Japanese during this war are seen as an “other” like the Native Americans before them during the Indian Wars and the Vietnamese after them during the Vietnam War. Especially in modern America, “race and racism exert a powerful and profound influence…the ideology of race has shaped societal attitudes generally” (Tritle 102-3). This viewing of the “Japs” as an “other” allowed American soldiers to distance themselves from the Japanese soldiers they were killing and allowed them to view them as sub-human. This, in turn, gave way to actions such as “souvenir hunting of Japanese skulls and bones, the mutilation of Japanese dead” (Tritle 48) and the events occurring in the scene quoted above.

G. The Power of Nature

In Existential Battles, Laura Adams asserts that nature and its power play a very important part in the novel in which Mount Anaka, which is “Mailer’s White Whale” (38), and the Jungle become “epic symbols” (24). Conquering nature would be a great victory for the men of the platoon since it would prove that they do have at least some control over their lives, which are perhaps not as insignificant as they seem. A typhoon hits the island of Anopopei a few nights after the men have set up their tents and equipment and settled on the island. The typhoon is a very strong and destructive force of nature, which the soldiers can do nothing to prevent; clearly they can not fight
against it. The storm tears down their tents, which allows the water and mud to get into their guns. The men struggle against the storm; they desperately hold on to their tents to keep them from being torn away by the wind, and they wrap their guns with their clothes in an attempt to keep them dry, but these efforts are pointless. The soldiers cannot control the forces of nature, which make all their actions seem absurd. One of the characters thinks of fighting against the storm as “holding on to a door which a much stronger man was trying to open from the other side” (Mailer 98). As a result of the futility of their actions against the storm, one of the characters gets “the giggles” and laughs helplessly at the state they are in. This state of “the giggles” and laughing helplessly at the absurdity of life points forward to Joseph Heller’s war novel *Catch-22*, where humor and absurdity take on a much larger role in the narrative. Heller even creates a character called Orr who frequently suffers from cases of “the giggles.”

The storm and the inability of the men to control it or fight against it and the futility and absurdity of their actions in the face of nature clearly represent the futility and absurdity of war. This is not the only instance in the book in which the men’s actions are futile; there are many examples throughout the novel. In fact, the entire Anopopei campaign on which the novel is based is not productive in any way; it only causes more destruction.

Nature in the novel is also represented by the jungle, which is a constant obstacle in the way of the soldiers and which continually hinders them from performing their tasks. While the soldiers are transporting big guns from one place to another, the terrain of Anopopei proves to be the biggest problem, and the absurdity of their actions in the face of nature is very evident:
The trail was only a few feet wide. Huge roots continually tripped the men, and their faces and hands became scratched and bleeding from the branches and thorns…By the time an hour had passed, nothing existed for them but the slender canon they had to get down the track. The sweat drenched their clothing and filled their eyes, blinding them. They grappled and blundered and swore, advanced the little guns a few feet at a time with no consciousness any longer of what they were doing…The air was unbearably hot under the canopy of the jungle, and the darkness gave no relief from the heat of the day; if anything, walking the trail was like fumbling through an endless closet stuffed with velvet garments (Mailer 131-32).

The jungle terrain portrayed in this quote, like other passages in The Naked and the Dead, is reminiscent of the wilderness encountered by the early Americans in the New World.

The most potent symbol in the novel is Mount Anaka, which represents the greatest challenge to Croft: “he stared up at Mount Anaka as if measuring an opponent. At that moment he hated the mountain too, considered it a personal affront” (527). Eventually, the men turn their anger and hatred towards the mountain too: “they hated the mountain, hated it with more fervor that they could ever have hated a human being” (698). Mount Anaka becomes a constant reminder of the insignificance of man and the absurdity and futility of men’s efforts in the face of nature.

H. Absurd Missions and Futile Goals: Psychological Effects of War

Some very powerful and persistent effects of the war on the soldiers in Mailer’s novel, as highlighted by Gutman, are: disorientation, meaninglessness and powerlessness. They also suffer from “anxiety, boredom, and physical and emotional
exhaustion” (5). Throughout the novel there is “a basso continuo of boredom, exhaustion, meaninglessness, [and] unfulfillment” (Gutman 9). An example of these effects of war on soldiers is evident in the character Gallagher, who is unable to cope with a string of problems he encounters while at war. Gallagher finally loses his ability to cope completely when he hears the news of the death of his wife. The characters in the novel spend most of their time “watching and waiting to act” (Mc Connell 75). Unlike previous war novels, the scenes in which there is any real action in the novel are few; there are no real battle scenes or strong scenes of confrontation with the enemy, and there is a general sense of tedium. Most scenes in the novel focus on the characters trying to grasp and cope with the unfamiliar situation they find themselves. Watching and waiting are by nature un-regenerative acts since there is no real action taking place. When action is forced upon the characters, it is also fruitless and results in an absurd and meaningless death or a frustrated goal or ambition.

Mailer emphasizes the futility and the absurdity of the war by showing the soldiers’ failure to control anything in their lives. The soldiers act according to what nature and war throw their way. They often find themselves thinking of their past lives without control over their thoughts. Their thought processes are disjointed and often seem absurd and pointless since they certainly do not have control over what happens in their lives back home. All of these factors contribute to and suggest an “existential focus” in which even an attempt at taking control and making a difference through heroism (as in the case of the attempted rescue of Wilson) ends up being just another absurd venture (Cotkin 189).

There are two major objectives that the platoon has set for their mission and which the characters spend the entire span of the novel struggling to achieve. The first is
the transportation of guns to the front line; the second is the climbing of Mount Anaka. The platoon fails to accomplish both these goals. The first goal is not met because one of the big guns is lost, and the guns that do end up making it to the front line are not used which renders the effort exerted by the soldiers useless.

The second goal is not met because while climbing the mountain, the men are attacked by a swarm of hornets, whose nest Croft unsuspectingly disturbs, and they are forced to retreat down the mountain. This scene is based on a real experience Mailer had during the war. Mailer was assigned to go on a reconnaissance mission to “destroy” one hundred Japanese soldiers, who had infiltrated the American lines (Dearborn 42-3). Mailer’s squadron never found the Japanese soldiers but they did climb an “enormous hill with a mean, slimy trail,” which became Mount Anaka in the novel (42-43). One of the men kicked over a hornets’ nest, which caused the men to run away, much like Croft kicks a hornets’ nest in the novel causing his men to abandon the mission (43). This was a “quintessential army experience: a futile mission, the men defeated by something other than the expected enemy, decidedly anticlimactic” (43).

I. Criticizing the Hero-Myth and the Military

The frustration the men feel in their military (as well as civilian) lives causes them to think about the absurdity of their existence, which, in turn, destroys their dreams. They think about their preconceived notions of war and of the lives they are supposed to lead upon returning from war. While pursuing the first futile goal of pushing the guns, Wyman, one of the soldiers in the platoon, becomes acutely aware of the stench of his clothes and the exhaustion from which he is suffering, and he remembers how he dreamed of becoming a war hero, a myth that has been completely destroyed for all the characters in the novel. Wyman’s worries show the first signs of a
developing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in which, if he survives, he will have to “live with his survival and what is to be done with the life that has been left to him” (Tritle 9-10). Even in what has been generally conceived by Americans as the “Good War” or the “Just War” against fascism, returning home will not be a “simple matter” for the soldiers (Tritle 48). Wyman’s disillusionment is described in the following passage:

He had had vague dreams about being a hero, assuming this would bring him some immense reward which would ease his life and remove the problems of supporting his mother and himself. He had a girl and he wanted to dazzle her with his ribbons. But he had always imagined combat as exciting, with no misery and no physical exertion. He dreamed of himself charging across a field in the face of many machine guns; but in the dream there was no stitch in his side from running too far while bearing too much weight (134).

In the novel, we hear voices that criticize the army as an American institution, which is not something that was seen in literature before World War II. Mailer criticizes the squandering of human life and the “petty indignities of daily existence” in war (Deadborn 48). Mailer’s “indictment” of the military in *The Naked and the Dead* was new and surprising, especially because the novel was published so soon after the Second World War, when the military propaganda machine was still raging. In the genre of war literature during the time the novel was written and published, war “was still considered, in 1945, an exalted sphere, and the epitome of normative masculine experience” (48). Mailer was afraid of the public’s reception of *The Naked and the Dead* since it “was a nearly poisonous anti-war novel” set during the Second World War, which was supposed to be the “Good War” fought to “combat fascism and spread
democracy” (48-55). However, Mailer, who was deeply affected by his experiences as a soldier, saw that “the whole endeavor was futile, a joke…He was coming to see the whole war machine and the entire armed forces as an exercise in fascism” (48).

Red is one of the characters who voices Mailer’s criticisms of the army. Red regards the army with disdain and does not keep his opinion to himself: “As far as I’m concerned, it’s been a goddam mess ever since they put Washington on a horse” (Mailer 127). Toglio feels insulted by Red’s statement and accuses him of having the “wrong attitude.” Red reacts with sarcasm to Toglio’s defense of the army and takes his criticism of the Army even further:

Red slapped his knee. ‘You’re a regular Boy Scout, ain’t you, Toglio? You like the flag, huh?...The only thing that’s wrong with this Army is it never lost a war…What have I got against the goddam Japs? You think I care if they keep this fuggin jungle? What’s it to me if Cummings gets another star?...There ain’t a good officer in the world…They’re just a bunch of aristocrats, they think. General Cummings is no better than I am. His shit don’t smell like ice cream either’ (128)

Red recognizes the absurdity of the war they are being forced to fight. He has nothing against the Japanese, he has no claim to the land they are fighting on, he has no moral obligation towards this war and, by his own admission, he is “no hero” (129). Red refuses to accept the traditional notion of a war hero and he offers his opinion again later in the novel in response to the question, “Goddam Army, why don’t they let a guy sleep? Ain’t we done enough tonight?” His sarcastic reply is simply, “We’re heroes” (141). None of the men are fighting the Japanese because they believe it is the right thing to do; each character has his own reasons behind being in the army. They may
have joined the army with dreams of returning home as heroes like men who had fought in wars before them, but this war was different.

The shift in attitude that soldiers had towards their missions in war during World War II is made clear in a comment Brown makes to Stanley during a discussion they have about what they expect when they get back home. Brown is very pessimistic about what will be waiting for him back home. He is certain of his wife’s infidelity and bitterly asks the less pessimistic Stanley:

“What do you expect? Do you think you’re going to go home a hero? Listen, when you get home folks are going to look at you and say, ‘Arthur Stanley, you been gone a long time…Well, things’ve been pretty rough here, but I guess they’re going to improve some. You’re sure lucky you missed it all’” (16).

This quote demonstrates the fact that the archetype of the hero coming home from battle to great celebrations and festivities in his honor and in honor of his victories no longer exists for the soldier in World War II. The soldiers in Mailer’s novel are far more realistic and have grim expectations about what they will find upon their return home.

Most soldiers share Brown’s fear that their wives are being unfaithful and they all are afraid of being forgotten.

**J. Mailer’s Influence**

Mailer’s novel can be considered “revolutionary” for various reasons. One reason is that Mailer wrote this epic anti-war novel very soon after the end of the Second World War, when war propaganda was still in high gear and there was a danger of a patriotic backlash against Mailer’s criticism of the military. Another reason is that. As he set out to, Mailer manages to create a new myth. By using the serious tone and language of older war novels but refashioning them in a darker tone by including
elements of the absurd and of existentialism, Mailer rejects previous myths such as regeneration through violence and in doing so creates a new kind of narrative. *The Naked and the Dead* becomes the standard against which following war novels will be measured. He becomes, for writers who follow him, as Hemingway was for him, an influence with which they will have to contend. The absurdism that is even more obvious in the novels of Heller and Vonnegut has its roots in the existential view of war that “informs Mailer’s novel and…creates a feeling of bottomless sadness and futility” (Dickstein 36). Dickstein asserts that in *The Naked and the Dead*, there are “moments of riveting absurdity or keen political insight…that look forward to the war novels of the sixties” (Dickstein 145). Hence, Mailer’s World War II novel becomes the foundation for future war novels and specifically for *Catch-22* and of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. 
CHAPTER III

JOSEPH HELLER’S ABSURD NARRATIVE: CATCH-22

A. Catch-22: Origin and Influences

*Catch-22*, by Joseph Heller, is the most widely read novel about World War II and is considered by many critics to be the most influential World War II novel written by an American. Heller was a veteran of sixty combat missions as a bombardier in the U.S. Air Force, which gives the story authenticity (Meredith 5). Heller had some experiences that were very similar to those Yossarian has in *Catch-22*, the most significant of which was a mission to Avignon in which a soldier in his plane was injured. This experience in Avignon forms the basis of *Catch-22* (Craig 40). According to David Seed, the Avignon mission provided for Heller “in highly compressed form his essential subject, human mortality” (Meredith 5). Heller admits that he was influenced by the prevailing myths surrounding war at the time he entered the war as a bombardier and had a romanticized vision of war before the Avignon mission (Craig 41). In describing his pre-war expectations he says: “I wanted action, not security. I wanted a sky full of dogfights, daredevils and billowing parachutes. I was 21 years old. I was dumb” (Craig 41).

Heller’s early notes for *Catch-22* show that he was influenced by several canonical literary works of the war novel genre, including Norman Mailer’s *The Naked and the Dead* (Seed 23). Though Heller’s work is different from and satirizes some of the narrative procedures of earlier war novels, their influence upon his own work is clear (23). Heller actually uses parody and satire in order to overcome the anxiety of
influence\(^3\) of “prototexts” such as *The Naked and the Dead* and *A Farewell to Arms* (26). Although Heller does not, like Mailer, work in a realistic mode, in *Catch-22* he displays a constant awareness of the reality of war and makes clear that in such a reality, death is imminent (26). In *Catch-22*, Heller burlesques the ethnic types that are presented in *The Naked and the Dead* by turning them into stereotypes (25). For example, Mailer’s power-driven hunter type, Sam Croft, can be seen in the character of the patriotic Texan from the first chapter of Heller’s novel (25). Clevinger in *Catch-22* is described as “one of those people with lots of intelligence and no brains,” which makes him a parody of Mailer’s Lieutenant Hearn, whose Harvard education proves to be useless (Dickstein 45). Another example of how Heller rewrites Mailer’s influential novel is in the section in which Yossarian is wounded in the thigh (25). After his leg partially heals and he realizes that he might not get sent home just because of a leg injury, he decides to fake madness by copying a genuinely disturbed soldier—the soldier who sees everything twice. The soldier who sees everything twice dies, at which point Yossarian decides that “he had followed him far enough” and so quits his act (Heller 209). Minetta is a character in *The Naked and the Dead* who goes through a very similar experience to that of Yossarian: he is wounded in the thigh and then decides to feign madness by pretending to be suffering from hallucinations until he suffers from a bad case of shell-shock that he is desperate to recover from.

Ernest Hemingway’s war novels are also “prototexts” that Heller has to contend with in his war narrative *Catch-22*. Scheisskopf (the German translation of the word “shit-head”) is a lieutenant in the U.S. Army, whose wife announces to Yossarian every

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\(^3\) The anxiety of influence is a concept posited by the American deconstructionist Harold Bloom who believes that “writers have to wrestle with the writers who come before them in a sort of Oedipal mixture of love and rivalry” (Peck 163). In the genre of the war novel, the anxiety of influence Heller has to contend with ranges all the way back to the very first war related writings in the United States—the Indian war narratives and especially the more recent canonical works of Hemingway and Mailer.
month that they are going to have a baby, to which he repeatedly replies “You’re out of your goddam head” (Heller 80). This constant exchange between Yossarian and Lieutenant Scheisskop’s wife with whom he and other men in his squadron are having affairs is reminiscent of Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* when Catherine Barkley tells Henry Fleming of her pregnancy (Seed 24). Another element in *Catch-22* that recalls *A Farewell to Arms* is Nurse Cramer’s disapproval of Nurse Duckett’s affair with Yossarian. A similar situation occurs in Hemingway’s war novel, in which Catherine Barkley’s companion Helen Ferguson disapproves of her affair with Frederic Henry (Seed 26). In *Catch-22*, romance is considered to be a “case of self-delusion,” which is opposed to the view of love as a “refuge” from the violence of war, as it is in Hemingway’s novels (26). Thus, on one level, Heller may be seen to be rewriting and satirizing one of the most acclaimed and best known war novels as one strategy to overcome the anxiety of influence that all novelists after Hemingway have had to contend with.

**B. Organized Violence**

World War II was marketed as a fight for survival, as Major Danby reminds Yossarian: “this is not World War One. You must never forget that we are at war with aggressors who would not let either one of us live if they won” (Heller 510). However, bureaucracy and the continuation of the capitalist system is what are really being defended. In his book *The Language of War*, James Dawes asserts that there was a “rationalized organization of violence” in World War II in which violence became institutionalized in the “centralizing bureaucracies of the military-industrial complex”\(^4\)

\(^4\) The military-industrial complex is a term coined by President Eisenhower which refers to “a close and symbiotic relationship between a nation’s armed forces, its arms industry, and associated political and commercial interests. In such a system, the military is dependent on industry to supply materiel and other
There was a more industrial and amoral approach to war; a “just war” and “manly combat” were replaced by capitalist mass production killing (Gray 136). This industrial, amoral, institutionalized approach to war can be seen in *Catch-22* when Colonel Cathcart openly admits that the smooth running of the bureaucracy is what matters, saying: “I don’t give a damn about the men or the airplane. It’s just that it looks so lousy on the report” (Heller 159). This concern with bureaucracy and total disregard for human life are taken to absurd extremes when we find out that most of the missions the soldiers are sent on have the purpose of creating aesthetically pleasing bomb patterns that will look good in aerial photographs.

The institutionalization of violence and the bureaucratic machine that is behind the war are major themes that are explored at length in Heller’s novel *Catch-22*. Language, according to Dawes, is “shattered” because of this new form of violence (23), and so Heller searches for and finds a new way of narration by which to tell his story of World War II. Heller’s new narrative makes extensive use of the absurd, in which humor and irony often turn to despair that becomes “blackly comic” (Gray 260). There is a gap between our awareness and what Fussell calls “the apparent absurdity of contemporary actuality” (260). *Catch-22* makes that gap clear and makes use of that gap to create the absurdly humorous effect in the novel. The violence of World War II was unique because of the advanced use of technology and the development and use of nuclear weapons, which “changed the parameters of lethality forever” (128). The uniqueness of this war created a space between our “sensibilities” and the “realities of postmodern war,” which underlies the absurdity of Heller’s *Catch-22* (260).

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support, while the defense industry depends on government for a steady revenue stream” (“Military-Industrial Complex”).
C. Language and Reality in *Catch-22*

Silence, for Heller, is equivalent to death, so he and his protagonists use words to defy the military machine and bureaucracy, to delay the inevitable death/silence and to confirm existence, even if only briefly (Craig 11-12). Yossarian consistently plays verbal games to express defiance of the military and its bureaucracy’s rules, to which he is constantly subjected (Seed 29). A clear example of this defiance through language can be seen when he plays games with the enlisted men’s letters, which he is supposed to censor as part of his “job” as an officer when he is hospitalized. He starts by deleting all modifiers from the letters, then “he began *attacking* the names and addresses on the envelopes” (Heller 8; emphasis added). Yossarian here performs his job of censorship, but at the same time his method of censorship is an act of defiance. Heller uses military language (attacking) to describe Yossarian’s absurd form of censorship, which accentuates the satirical perspective Heller and his protagonist have towards military bureaucracy.

Language in *Catch-22* has somehow lost its meaning for the characters amid the violence which surrounds them; most of the dialogue in the novel is incoherent, which results in a great deal of miscommunication. Language ceases to perform the task of communication; it becomes self-referential and circular, like the double bind of catch-22. The dialogue in the novel often reflects futility of communication, absurdity of language in war and its loss of meaning. Language during times of extreme violence becomes un-regenerative and unproductive, which is evident, for example, in the mission in which Aarfy can not hear Yossarian even though he is yelling as loud as possible, which creates a sense of chaos and confusion. The characters talk at or past
each other more than to each other, as can be seen in the following absurd exchange between Yossarian and Orr about why Orr has crab apples in his cheeks:

“Why did you walk around with crab apples in your cheeks?” Yossarian asked again. “That’s what I asked.”

“Because they’ve got a better shape than horse chestnuts,” Orr answered. “I just told you that.”

“Why,” swore Yossarian at him approvingly, “you evil-eyed, mechanically-aptitided, disaffiliated son of a bitch, did you walk around with anything in your cheeks?”

“I didn’t,” Orr said, “walk around with anything in my cheeks. I walked around with crab apples in my cheeks. When I couldn’t get crab apples I walked around with horse chestnuts. In my cheeks.”…

Yossarian found it pretty hard to understand him then…Yossarian decided not to utter another word. It would be futile (Heller 26-27).

The novel implies that what would, under normal circumstances, be considered bizarre or absurd, has become the norm in the World War II setting of the novel in which “the real and the illusory blur together” (Seed 50-52). Yossarian is completely “at the mercy of circumstances” in an unpredictable and manic world (50), just as the reader is completely at the mercy of Heller’s unconventional narrative form which, according to Gary W. Davis, “exposes the meaninglessness of our conventional understanding of discourse and its processes” (53). The reader of Catch-22 is “caught” in the catch because of a presumption on the part of the reader of a relationship between words and their referents that does not exist in the text. This creates the sense of absurdity in the novel where, in the face of war and violence, language breaks down and
words may become absurd and lose their meaning (Craig 61). *Catch-22* exemplifies society’s limited perception of reality (68) since in the novel the characters’ self-perceptions and their actions are shaped by their belief in catch-22. Yossarian is aware of the fact that catch-22 is not real but that it shapes “reality”:

Catch-22 did not exist, he was positive of that, but it made no difference. What did matter was that everyone thought it existed, and that was much worse, for there was no object or text to ridicule or refute, to accuse, criticize, attack, amend, hate, revile, spit at, rip to shreds, trample upon or burn up (Heller 469). A clear example of the blind belief in catch-22 is when Yossarian goes to the “whore’s” apartment in the chapter entitled “The Eternal City” and has a conversation with the only person left there, an old woman who believes in the rule of catch-22. The old woman keeps repeating the word “gone” and the question “who will take care of me?” (a case of echolalia⁵), and when Yossarian inquires why they are gone, the following dialogue occurs:

“No reason,” wailed the old woman. “No reason.”

“What right did they have?”

“Catch-22.”

“What?”…

“Catch-22,” the old woman repeated… “Catch-22 says they have the right to do anything we can’t stop them from doing.”…

“Did they show it to you?” Yossarian demanded, stamping around in anger and distress. “Didn’t you even make them read it?”

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⁵ Echolalia is defined as “the often pathological repetition of what is said by other people as if echoing them” (Merriam-Webster).
“They don’t have to show us Catch-22,” the old woman answered. “The law says they don’t have to.”

“What law says they don’t have to?”

“Catch-22” (Heller 466-7)

Heller perverts and manipulates language (Meredith 51) in order to create a new narrative format which subverts expectations and creates “a structure of illusion” (Dickstein 42). Heller’s subversion of expectations and the creation of a “structure of illusion” in Catch-22 are reminiscent of the method used by Norman Mailer in The Naked and the Dead. In his novel, Mailer, writing so soon after the end of the Second World War, also manipulates language and the traditional structure of the war novel in order to subvert expectations and point out the volatility of what is traditionally perceived as reality. In doing so, Mailer sets the stage for ensuing writers like Heller and Vonnegut, who borrow and reformulate elements from Mailer’s narrative so as to subvert expectations and create their own distinctive and innovative narrative forms.

D. Verbal Games and Narrative Strategies

In Heller’s World War II novel, all verbal games lead back to catch-22 (Craig 67), and they all convey a sense of “existential absurdity” (Dickstein 45). His use of word play and black humor shatters existing social and moral boundaries and taboos (127). It also traverses the boundaries of the war novel. Discourse is an essential part of the story itself—the narrative act is a part of the story as well as its means of transmission (Craig 47). Heller makes extensive use of various types of “utterance” in order to achieve the new absurd narrative which he uses to tell of the war (Seed 51). Seed points out a few: 1) Heller uses inverted propositions; for example, he writes “it took months of hard work and careful misplanning” 2) Self-canceling propositions
which are made clear in the following sentence: “Yossarian had stopped playing chess with him because the games were so interesting they were foolish” 3) Echolalia is also used often, as is evident, for example, in the repetition of the word “crazy.” The use of repetition is a means of expression of Heller’s absurd humor as well as an expression of the inability of language as a means of communication. This repetition brings out the “grotesque horror” that underlies the “absurd comedy” of the situations presented in the novel (Craig 280). 4) Paradox is used, for example, in the rule stating that the only people who can ask questions during briefings are the people who never asked questions anyway. 5) Discontinuity is also used and is clearly present in the following succession of questions posed at an educational session when the soldiers are asked if they have any:

‘Who is Spain?’
‘Why is Hitler?’
‘When is right?’
‘Where was that stooped and mealy-colored man I used to call Poppa when the merry-go-round broke down?’” (Heller 39)

For the characters in Catch-22, there is no release from the madness and absurdity of their world. They are stuck in an ever-lasting catch of “bureaucratic double-talk and twisted logic” (Meredith 4) in which they can only be sent home when they accomplish the ever rising number of missions they are required to complete. There is no end in sight and no conceivable escape from bureaucracy, and so the characters find themselves “trapped” in the rhetorical circular logic of catch-22, which becomes a rationalization for any official action in the novel (Seed 56-57). The circularity is pervasive in the novel (58), so that almost every detail, from the smallest conversations
to the entire structure of the novel, in which some events can be understood only in retrospect, all point back to the circular logic of catch-22. Heller uses “delayed decoding of details,” which is a narrative method that depends on presenting details in a way such that they only become comprehensible when what occurs later in the narrative is taken into account (Craig 34). For example, we are told throughout the novel that Orr is really good at crashing planes, which is why Yossarian refuses to go on any missions with him, but Orr always manages to survive. Only until later do we find out that he has been crashing planes on purpose as practice for the final crash when he will survive and run away to Sweden. This style of writing, in addition to being perfectly fit for the theme of circularity, also creates a sense of absurdity, where the reader sometimes does not know what is going on or the reasons behind certain events. Readers are required to “process” the story in a fashion similar to that used to process events in real life, continually adjusting and reevaluating information according to new events (35). Heller also uses a narrative strategy that may be called “narrative by delay” (Craig 71), in which certain events are hinted at throughout the novel but not told until later. An example of this process is the manner in which the chapters are titled—the mission to Bologna is continuously mentioned, and there is a whole chapter, Chapter 12, that is entitled “Bologna,” but the chapter tells us nothing about the actual mission. Heller delays the telling of Bologna just as Yossarian and the rain actually delay the mission. “Narrative delay” as a narrative strategy differs from foreshadowing in that the delays retard the plot rather than advance it (71). The most obvious example of “narrative by delay” is Snowden’s death. The first mention of Snowden occurs very early in the novel when Yossarian asks the absurd question: “Where are the Snowdens of yesteryear?” but we are only told the full story in the second-to-last chapter. This delay in narrative in this
example occurs because of Yossarian’s inability to process the violence of Snowden’s death. One reason Heller uses this technique may be because of his own inability to narrate directly the most violent incident in his own war experiences (the mission to Avignon), an avoidance process which is typical of people who have experienced extreme trauma (Tritle 36). However, this “narrative by delay” has a kind of “hopeless logic” (71) since the mission to Bologna will be flown just as the story of Snowden will be told.

E. Challenging War and Hero Myths

Common sense is confronted with an absurd counter-logic, which eventually collapses so that, according to Seed, alienation becomes the final effect of Heller’s war narrative (196; 69). In a conversation between Dunbar and Dr. Stubbs, the “[existential] vast sense of isolation” (Heller 126) the characters experience can be felt, and more than a trace of nihilism is evident:

“Turn on the light,” Dunbar suggested.

“There is no light. I don’t feel like starting my generator. I used to get a big kick out of saving people’s lives. Now I wonder what the hell’s the point, since they all have to die anyway.”

“Oh, there’s a point, all right,” Dunbar assured him.

“Is there? What is the point?”

“The point is to keep them from dying for as long as you can.”

“Yeah, but what’s the point, since they all have to die anyway?”

“The trick is not to think about that.”

“Never mind the trick. What the hell’s the point?”

The characters are alienated in a violent world that seems to go around in circles with no way out, and the reader is somehow alienated by an unfamiliar text with unfamiliar narrative strategies and an unfamiliar approach to war in general. According to Heller, human beings are “talented self-deceivers who mythicize their history in order to protect themselves from painful truths” (Craig 17). *Catch-22* attempts to de-mythicize war and challenges the existing American myths about war and regeneration through violence. Heller uses defamiliarization in the absurd narrative of *Catch-22* in order to “challenge American readers to justify their cherished national slogans” (Seed 85). Heller is very critical of already existing myths and slogans in American society like the nationalistic sentiment of having the honor of dying for your country: “boys on every side of the bomb line were laying down their lives for what they had been told was their country, and no one seemed to mind” (Heller 18 emphasis added). The boys in Heller’s novel, just as in Mailer’s *The Naked and the Dead*, do not know the reality of war. They are naïve and full of hope and nationalistic catchphrases when they first join the army. For example, many of the men in *The Naked and the Dead* are extremely enthusiastic about the prospect of killing “Japs” just as in *Catch-22* many of the aviators are, at least at first, anxious to kill Germans. Yossarian’s roommates who replace Orr, for example, can not wait to see combat. Yossarian’s new room mates, who remind him of Donald Duck’s nephews:

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6 An idea created by the Russian formalist Victor Shklovsky. The effect of defamiliarization in a text is that the text “can be said to challenge our normal way of thinking about things, restructuring our perceptions” (Peck 153). *Catch-22* defamiliarizes or “makes strange” in that it presents the world in a “strange” and unfamiliar way through the use of an abundance of narrative strategies that emphasize absurdity, such as paradoxes, circular logic, echolalia, etc.
were having a whale of a good time…they were frisky, eager and exuberant, and they had all been friends in the states. They were plainly unthinkable. They were noisy, overconfident, empty-headed kids of twenty-one… They were obtuse; their morale was good. They were glad that the war had lasted long enough for them to find out what combat was really like (Heller 398).

The only way the roommates are accepted by Yossarian is when they have experienced war. He has to wait “until one or two were killed and the rest wounded, and then they would all turn out okay” (Heller 402). These roommates are prototypes of what Kurt Vonnegut in *Slaughterhouse-Five* would call the soldiers of the Children’s Crusade—they are just “babies” who do not really know what they are fighting for or why. Heller undercuts nationalistic sentiment through the words of Colonel Cargill, who says: “You’re American officers.” This sounds like a typical statement of national pride, but it is immediately followed by: “the officers of no other army in the world can make that statement. Think about it” (Heller 31).

The old man from the “whore’s” apartment, who reminds Nately of his father, also poses some questions to Nately which cause Nately, as an American, to try to justify and defend his national myths and slogans. The old man insists that dying for your country is absurd since a country in itself is an unnatural and absurd creation. Moreover, since there are approximately sixty countries fighting in World War II, they can not all possibly be worth dying for. Nately refutes this assertion with a canned and unconvincing response: “There is nothing so absurd about risking your life for your country!...Anything worth living for…is worth dying for” (Heller 283). Nately declares that “America is the strongest and most prosperous nation on earth…And the American fighting man is second to none,” to which the old man replies, “Italian soldiers are not
dying anymore. But American and German soldiers are. I call that doing extremely well. Yes, I am quite certain that Italy will survive this war and will be in existence long after your own country has been destroyed” (Heller 278). The old man’s insistence on undermining the myth of America and saying that frogs, who have been around for billions of years, will outlive the United States, sounds like blasphemy to Nately’s ears. Nately, who has never been exposed to such traitorous though logical assertions, wonders why G-men do not suddenly appear to lock the old man up. He feels defeated when the only response he can come up with is a passionately shouted “America is not going to be destroyed!” (279).

F. A Satirical Attack on the Capitalist Military

On one level, Milo may be seen as a representation of capitalism in the novel and his development as an entrepreneur in the text traces the development of capitalism (Seed 66). Milo symbolizes modern warfare as “a form of corporate capitalism” (Bradbury 212). Milo is amoral; his only goal is to make a profit by any means necessary. Heller achieves an ironic effect by using the language of military heroism when talking about Milo’s business transactions, thus mocking the absurdity of Milo’s sole motive, which is profiteering. The planes that Milo uses to transport goods around the world are “decorated with squadron emblems illustrating such laudable ideals as Courage, Might, Justice, Truth, Liberty, Love, Honor and Patriotism” (Heller 290). However, those ideals, of course, become empty slogans. Milo’s business grows to become a very powerful, international establishment, and under the capitalist system of “M&M Enterprises,” violence and war becomes a “commercial transaction” similar to other commodities, in which the one and only objective is profit. Heller exposes the danger of violence under such a profit-oriented powerful capitalist system when Milo
bombs his own squadron as part of a lucrative business deal he has made with the German army. Milo’s reason for bombing his own squadron is simply that he has made a profitable contract with the Germans, which may, on the surface, seem absurd. However, when, for example, compared with participating in war to fulfill the terms of a treaty then, “Milo’s justification by contract is no more absurd than the justification-by-treaty of war” (Hauck 12). We are never clearly told the reasons behind the war, and none of the soldiers seems to have any idea what he is fighting for or why. Heller purposely sets the events of *Catch-22* towards the end of the war, when Germany is practically defeated, so as to highlight the absurdity of the continued threat of mortality that hangs over Yossarian’s head (Meredith 50). Yossarian is aware of the fact that the continued threat of death is absurd when he says: “the country is not in danger anymore, but I am.” The Germans, nonetheless, are clearly the enemy, and the only way that cooperating with them and bombing your own men, as Milo does, becomes acceptable is when the justification is capitalism, a system in which the only “good” is profit.

**G. Violence, Death and the Absurdly Comic**

Violence in war leaves no room for soldiers’ individuality or even for “the smallest measure of humanity” since such values as individuality and humanity will not change what happens to them (Dickstein 46). Characters are reduced to “non-entities” by war, and Heller emphasizes this by creating characters that are basically two-dimensional “cardboard cutouts” who live in a comic world of “sheer lunacy and brutality” (44-46). Major Major, for example, is a cartoon-like character who “never sees anyone in his office while he’s in his office” (Heller 123) and keeps jumping in and out of his office window in order to avoid people. He becomes a meaningless and useless, albeit comic, part of the war machine (Dickstein 46).
Heller says of *Catch-22* that it is “a very serious novel, using humorous satire and irony as part of the techniques in making the novel effective...[It] is an irreverent novel, it is disrespectful, it is iconoclastic,” (Meredith 50). Despite the absurdity of the events in the novel and the comedy present throughout, Heller and most critics of *Catch-22* assert that it is a serious novel with profound and important themes. The comic and dismissive attitude towards death is a perfect example of how “irreverent,” “disrespectful” and “iconoclastic” the novel is. Heller insists that he has used a comic and dismissive attitude towards death on purpose as a stylistic device. He does so in order to avoid sentimentality since “the proximity of death is bearable only when defused by the comic” (Craig 76). The second and more significant reason he uses this comic tone is to make the horror of death even more explicit by “dismissing the seriousness of death briefly” (Meredith 50). The world of *Catch-22* is saturated with death, and Heller makes this topic more poignant by dismissing it and joking about it (Dickstein 47). The deaths of Hungry Joe, Nately and Kid Sampson are told almost as asides, but the suddenness and brevity with which we are told of their mortality does leave an impression. The horrific in the novel is viewed “through the lens of the comic,” where the sense of absurdity grows out of the war itself (Craig 69-70).

The fragility of man is a theme that runs throughout World War II novels, and it is a major focus in *Catch-22*, just as it is in *The Naked and the Dead*. There is a “sense of fleshly human vulnerability” that is so essential to *Catch-22* that it becomes, as Dickstein claims, the “very principle of existence” in the novel (39-47). The military machine sees the soldiers not as human beings but, like the soldiers in Mailer’s novel, as dispensable “cannon fodder” that can and should be exploited to the maximum degree (Mailer 51). The enactment of this belief in *Catch-22* occurs when Yossarian is in the
hospital being treated for his leg injury and he tries to disobey the doctor’s orders but Nurse Cramer stops him: “‘it certainly is not your leg!’ Nurse Cramer retorted. ‘That leg belongs to the U.S. government. It’s no different than a gear or a bedpan” (Heller 335).

Through the rivalry-filled mechanism of bureaucracy and war, and because of the forceful threat of violence which is present throughout the novel (Seed 64), the human body is converted into “mere matter” and can be assimilated into the non-human” (41). Heller, like his protagonist Yossarian, is opposed to “senseless slaughter” (Meredith 4), but, pointless death is, paradoxically, a necessary consequence of war and violence. In the novel, each death that occurs is violent and converts the body of the deceased into something non-human and is described as such (Seed 41). Kraft becomes a “bleeding cinder” when his plane is shot down during a mission, and Kid Sampson becomes “a poor, bare, forked animal” when he is sliced in half by McWatt’s plane. McWatt, after accidentally killing Kid Sampson, purposely flies his plane into a mountain, killing himself and everybody on board, including Doc Daneeka, at least on paper, since he is supposed to be on the plane, though he is in reality alive. Kid Sampson’s remains are never gathered; they are left where they land in the water since nobody can bring himself to retrieve them and Snowden is reduced to the ripe tomatoes he has eaten for lunch.

Yossarian is very aware of his own mortality and the omnipresence of death in war, and he vows to himself to avoid violent death for as long as he can through whatever means necessary. He recognizes the fact that death is a natural part of life, and immortality is not his goal. Yossarian’s goal is to avoid a violent, absurd and circumstantial death: “That men would die was a matter of necessity; which men would die, though, was a matter of circumstance, and Yossarian was willing to be the victim of
anything but circumstance. But that was war” (Heller 77). The constant fear of the
mission to Bologna, which is repetitively delayed for several reasons, shows how death is always present since the men are convinced that they will die on that mission. Constant rain, which symbolizes the hopelessness of war, constantly delays the mission to Bologna. This ever-delayed mission, which the soldiers dread, becomes an “intense experience of mortality” (Craig 53). This presence of death at all times makes Yossarian sound like a paranoid hypochondriac at various points in the novel. He can be described as having a disease-phobia and is convinced that everyone is trying to kill him:

There were too many dangers for Yossarian to keep track of. There was Hitler, Mussolini and Tojo, for example, and they were all out to kill him. There was Lieutenant Scheisskopf…Appleby, Havermeyer, Black and Korn. There was Nurse Kramer and Nurse Duckett…There were lymph glands that might do him in. There were kidneys, nerve sheaths and corpuscles…There were so many diseases that it took a truly diseased mind to even think about them as often as he and Hungry Joe did (Heller 197-98).

Yossarian even experiences death vicariously when he pretends to be the already dead soldier Guiseppe for the benefit of the soldier’s visiting parents who wanted to see their son before he dies so he does not die alone (Craig 52). During the meeting with the parents Yossarian seems to have lost his identity and confuses it with the dead man’s. He becomes unable to tell the difference between reality and the role he’s playing. He takes on the role of the dying soldier fully, and in an absurd and comic twist, the dead soldier’s parents become convinced that maybe they made a mistake and their son’s name really is Yossarian. Heller plays with the name confusion and interchanges Yossarian and Guiseppe in this scene to emphasize the fact that death makes all people
equal, and identity makes no difference in the face of mortality. As Heller writes, “What
difference does it make?...He’s dying” (213). Death has become a part of Yossarian’s
“moral landscape” (Craig 53). Yossarian comes closest to death during the mission to
Leghorn in which he is wounded in his thigh. This experience causes Yossarian to have
“an experiential awareness of personal mortality” (Craig 55). He is initially under the
impression that he has been wounded in the groin, which has symbolic resonance since
a groin-wound would be “life-denying” (54).

Craig asserts that “for Heller, death situates human life, the grave controlling
existence as inexorably as gravity controls motion” (255). The theme of mortality is so
important in the novel, and it preoccupies the mind of the characters so pervasively, that
death becomes a character itself. Death is personified at one point in the novel when
Yossarian reflects upon the absurdity of death and tries to control it by attempting to
distinguish between death inside the hospital and death outside of it. To him, dying in
the hospital represents a civilized death, while dying outside the hospital in the violence
of war is absurd, pointless and almost barbaric:

There was a much lower death rate inside the hospital than outside the hospital,
and a much healthier death rate. Few people died unnecessarily. People knew a
lot more about dying inside the hospital and made a much neater, orderly job of
it. They couldn’t dominate Death inside the hospital, but they certainly made her
behave. They had taught her manners. They couldn’t keep Death out, but while
she was in she had to act like a lady…There was none of that crude, ugly
ostentation about dying that was so common outside the hospital (Heller 191).

By the end of the novel, most characters are dead; they die the unnecessary ugly
death Yossarian so desperately tries to avoid. Heller represents death (especially in war)
as “violent, certain and inevitable,” yet Yossarian does not silently give in to death (Craig 48), he fights against it, especially when it is unnecessary and violent. The novel’s discourse is the expression of this struggle to avoid death, or, at least, to attempt to control and “civilize” it. The same struggle to avoid or control death also exists in Mailer’s The Naked and the Dead. An example from the novel of this struggle is when Wilson, who is obviously going to die because of the gravity of his wounds, is carried all the way back to the beach in an attempt to get him to a hospital. Croft’s futile Sisyphean struggle to climb Mount Anaka can also be seen as an attempt to control life, which in turn allows him to control death since achieving his goal of climbing the mountain will mean that he is in control of his own existence.

Snowden’s death is at the “core” of Catch-22 (Dickstein 37); it “controls” Catch-22, and it becomes the central motivation for Yossarian’s actions and for his vow “to live forever or die in the attempt” (Craig 15). The final revelation of Snowden’s death marks a “turning-point” for Yossarian. When he finally acknowledges Snowden’s much hinted at death and comes to terms with and understands Snowden’s secret, Yossarian decides to break his deal with the colonels (Seed 49). The colonels promise to glorify Yossarian and send him home a hero, but heroism means nothing to him, and the only thing that appeals to him in the colonels’ deal is the promise of staying alive. However, for Yossarian, taking the deal would mean a different kind of death; it would mean a loss of identity, and he would be betraying himself and the rest of the men in his squadron. The fact that Nately’s whore managed to stab him when he initially agreed to the deal shows that taking the deal would mean death. Only after rejecting the colonels’ traitorous deal can the events surrounding Snowden’s death be narrated in detail, and only then does Yossarian unlock the secret of Snowden’s entrails, which he had known
all along on some level but could never fully verbalize. In his attempts to solve the mystery of Snowden’s secret, Yossarian examines the meaning of death (Craig 41) and reaches his own conclusion. He understands his own mortality through reflecting upon Snowden’s death and reliving his memory of the mission to Avignon (29). The essential theme of mortality is concealed in Snowden’s entrails, which become an “ironic omen” of Yossarian’s recognition of the fragility of man (Seed 49). Snowden’s entrails seem inhuman and remote from Snowden and death becomes a “mysterious otherness” (Craig 58). In death, the body loses its human attributes and becomes matter—just garbage:

Man was matter, that was Snowden’s secret. Drop him out a window and he’ll fall. Set fire to him and he’ll burn. Bury him and he’ll rot, like other kinds of garbage. The spirit gone, man is garbage. That was Snowden’s secret. Ripeness was all (Heller 504).

The diction used to describe Snowden’s wounds is “hard and violent,” reflecting the magnitude of the wounds themselves (Craig 59) and reflecting the magnitude of the trauma of this event on Yossarian. Yossarian struggles to help Snowden, who was only an acquaintance before the mission, but he is helpless, and his efforts to ease Snowden’s pain are further frustrated when he finds out that the morphine in the first aid kit has been stolen and replaced by a note from Milo’s M&M Enterprises. Snowden softly repeats the words “I’m cold,” to which Yossarian finds himself only able to say “there, there” (Heller 501). Yossarian feels “inarticulate and enfeebled” in response to Snowden’s violent and unnecessary death (Craig 54). Snowden’s death haunts Yossarian’s consciousness throughout the novel, and his blood and nakedness reveal/symbolize Yossarian’s guilt (Craig 46). Upon his return, Yossarian, in an attempt to escape his responsibility for Snowden’s death, removes his clothes since they are
covered in Snowden’s blood. He remains naked for a long time afterward, refusing to wear his uniform for the funeral or for his medal ceremony. Nevertheless, “removing his clothes neither cleanses Snowden’s blood from Yossarian’s consciousness nor allows him to retreat from the knowledge of death” (Craig 55).

Hennesey’s death in the first part of The Naked and the Dead functions in almost the same way as Snowden’s death in Heller’s narrative. Hennessey is an “innocent” in that he has never before seen combat, just as Snowden can be seen as an “innocent,” something symbolized both by his name and by the fact that he is never developed as a character. We know nothing about him except his death. The rest of the men feel responsible for Hennessey, just as Yossarian feels responsible for Snowden. However, Yossarian does not abandon Snowden; he tries desperately to help him, unlike the soldiers in The Naked and the Dead who abandon Hennessey when they first land and leave him alone in a trench where he panics, soils himself, and dies while trying to run back to some form of safety. Hennessey’s death has a huge impact on the rest of the soldiers. Brown considers the extent of his responsibility, asking himself if he should have left Hennessey behind. Toglio tries to reassure himself by repeating that he yelled for Hennessey to come back to the safety of the trench. Red has an existential moment when he questions the role of God, and thinks that someone or something may have been watching them and laughing. Although Hennessey is never mentioned again, his death hangs over the rest of the narrative of The Naked and the Dead just as Snowden’s death hangs over the narrative of Catch-22. Hennessey’s death forces the men to confront their own mortality. The significance of the violent and un-regenerative first death in The Naked and the Dead is comprehended by Croft, who realizes with a
“numb throbbing excitement…that his life was changed to some degree and his life would never be the same” (Mailer 40).

Despite the fact that both Heller and Mailer have very similar, existential attitudes towards death, they deal with the subject of mortality in very different ways in their respective narratives. Mailer’s novel, although it is significantly different in thematic content from the traditional war narratives of Stephen Crane or Ernest Hemingway, may still be considered a traditional narrative, especially when compared with the narratives of Heller or, as will be discussed in the following chapter, Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Mailer writes in chronological order and tries to create his un-regenerative, existential war myth by presenting the reader with a realistic, journalistic and detailed account of the violence of war. Heller, on the other hand, completely departs from and inverts the traditional narrative, and in *Catch-22* chronology is not necessary, reality does not exist and humor is a necessary ingredient.

**H. Satirizing Religion**

Humor and satire are used extensively in *Catch-22* when Heller deals with the subject of God. Seed believes that in the novel, “predestination turns into a practical joke” when Yossarian consistently makes “inverted religious allusions” which defeat the notion of a just God (34). There are several examples of religious satire, such as Colonel Cathcart’s attempted publicity stunt when his desire to get his picture in the *Saturday Evening Post* leads him to want to hold prayers before missions. In order to ensure the success of these prayers, he makes the absurd request that the chaplain hold prayers that are “humorous” and that avoid the subjects of God and religion since those subjects are too depressing. There are two other prominent examples: the death of Kraft
on the seventh day, “while God was resting” (Heller 62), and the conversation between Yossarian and Scheisskopf’s wife (Seed 34).

Kraft is killed “on the seventh day” during the “debacle of Ferrara,” when Yossarian is still brave and goes over the target twice since he might have missed it the first time (Heller 157). Yossarian feels responsible for the death of Kraft and the others but at the same time realizes that there was not much he could do, “for they had all died in the distance of a mute and secluded agony at a moment when he was up to his own ass in the same vile, excruciating dilemma of duty and damnation” (Heller 158 emphasis added). During this event, Yossarian’s heroic bravery, which alludes to the pre-World War II image of soldiers in combat, makes him choose duty, and so he is haunted by the death of Kraft and the others. It is important to note that in this scene, Yossarian feels a sense of alienation since he is “secluded” while making this decision since it is the seventh day and God is resting. This God lets Yossarian make the decision of flying over the target twice, resulting in Kraft’s death, whereas an omnipotent and just God might have helped him. The mission to Ferrara becomes for Yossarian “a permanent locus of fear” in his consciousness since he cannot forget the sounds of flak or the sounds of the pieces of Kraft’s plane falling on his (Craig 53).

The central incident in the novel that deals directly with the subject of God is the conversation Yossarian has with Scheisskopf’s self-declared atheist wife. Yossarian breaks his oath to spend all Thanksgivings in the hospital and instead spends this Thanksgiving in bed with Scheisskopf’s wife. They get into a heated discussion about God, in which Yossarian argues that there are two things to be “miserable about” for every one thing there is to be thankful for. Yossarian’s argument to support this is the following:
“Don’t tell me God works in mysterious ways…There’s nothing so mysterious about it. He’s not working at all. He’s playing. Or else He’s forgotten all about us. That’s the kind of God you people talk about—a country bumpkin, conceited, uncouth hayseed. Good God, how much reverence can you have for a supreme being who finds it necessary to include such phenomena as phlegm and tooth decay in His divine system of creation? What in the world was running through that warped, evil, scatological mind of His when He robbed old people of the power to control their bowel movements? Why in the world did He ever create pain?” (Heller 206-207).

God, in Yossarian’s eyes, is at best an incompetent supreme being who has nothing to do with the little lives of little men. To him, creation seems to be an evil practical joke. The chaplain, who is the representative of God and the church in the novel, is aware of the absurdity of life and the helplessness of man in this world. He reflects upon his own situation and that of others and the feelings of helplessness and desperation in his thoughts are striking: “there was so much unhappiness in the world, he reflected, bowing his head dismally beneath the tragic thought, and there was nothing he could do about anybody’s, least of all his own” (Heller 239). The chaplain eventually questions his faith and rationalizes his actions by coming up with the conclusion that “telling lies and defecting from duty could not be sins” (417).

Heller poses a series of existential questions in absurd situations throughout the novel, to which nobody seems to have an answer. A vivid example of this process is when Yossarian wonders why the nurses can not just hook up the two jars of liquid running in and out of the soldier in white directly to each other and just “eliminate the middle man” (Heller 195). The soldier in white, through no desire of his own, is caught
in a “circular process which somehow makes him so irrelevant that the suggestion of
‘eliminating the middle man’ and simply linking the jars together…is more a wry
glance at human dispensability” (Seed 57). A malaria patient wonders what the soldier
in white did to deserve the situation he is in, and another patient’s response to this
question is “he went to war” (Heller 196), as if that answer clarifies the situation. The
world of meaningless war, violence and death in which Yossarian lives makes no sense;
there is no apparent logic to this world except the absurd logic of the rule of catch-22, in
which nobody seems to get what they deserve, nothing can be predicted and danger
seems to lurk in every corner. This lack of faith in God or logic or justice in the novel
highlights the lack of a constant, stable and objective reality (Seed 34). The only
unchanging reality is death (Craig 39). The reader’s expectations are constantly
undermined and subverted so that tragic situations suddenly turn to comic and reality,
drama, faith, narrative and even the stability and seriousness of the text itself are all
called into question and are all denied (Seed 39-40).

I. Yossarian the Anti-Hero

Yossarian can be described as an anti-hero in the sense that he is solely devoted
to survival and has no other allegiances—neither to country nor army nor duty (Seed
27). All these things mean nothing to him, whereas traditionally in the genre of war
literature, the hero has, or at least pretends to have, some qualities of courage, duty and
patriotism. Yossarian refuses to play the role ascribed to him by war and the military,
and so he abandons all military values, which is clearly symbolized in the repetitive
scenes in which he appears nude. “Nakedness,” Seed asserts, “has traditional
connotations of disengagement from society in American Literature” (29). Yossarian
becomes a “voice of sanity amid the prevailing mania” of war, despite the fact that he is
frequently called crazy by other characters in the novel (28-29). Yossarian recognizes
the insanity of war and the military from the very beginning of the novel. However, he
only recognizes his complicity in that insanity after he completely recollects Snowden’s
death (Craig 277). He is one of the few characters who seems to overcome the reality-
obscurring military bureaucracy and remember that he is in the army fighting a war in
which there is a high probability of encountering the horror of death and the only
rational option is “to live forever or die in the attempt” (Heller 29). Yossarian faces a
sanity vs. insanity dilemma in which “the sanity of recognizing the insanity of war
subjects one to the very sanity that one recognizes, and insanity merely leads to
unknowing cooperation in the war—and within the novel, to almost certain death”
(Craig 62). Yossarian is constantly surrounded by death, but he does not know its reality
until he deciphers Snowden’s secret by reliving it towards the end of the novel. When
Yossarian realizes Snowden’s secret, he makes the choice to abandon the army and
dedicate himself more fully to survival (53).

David Seed argues that the ending of the novel is not as hopeful as it might seem
at first, since Yossarian’s escape “remains a matter of nuance and ambiguous
suggestion” (32). We are simply told that “he took off,” which does not necessarily
guarantee a happy ending for Yossarian. According to Seed, “almost any discussion of
the ending makes it sound more positive than the text would warrant” (32). Yossarian’s
decision to run away from the violence of war and desert the army seems to counter the
often nihilistic messages scattered throughout the novel. However, Yossarian’s decision
is not a truly life-affirming ending—it does not “express a decisive assertive act on
Yossarian’s part” (51). Yossarian’s decision to “pursue survival by desertion…remains
an absurd possibility” (Bradbury 213). Yossarian running away is a response to the
absurdity of war. It is very probable that the absurdity and the circular logic of the all-encompassing catch-22 in which Yossarian is trapped in the novel will continue to haunt him; he has not (and probably cannot) escape the catch. Moreover, in the end, running away does not seem to be a positive, affirmative, constructive decision. However, Yossarian does delay death temporarily by rejecting the chance to return home a hero (Craig 12). The fact that Yossarian deserts the army, without any feelings of guilt or apprehension is a subversion of the actions of Henry Fleming in Stephen Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage*. Yossarian dedicates his life to avoiding “the red badge” while Henry Fleming is honored by its pursuit.

**J. Escape as the Solution to the Un-regenerative Violence of War**

In going AWOL to Rome, Yossarian takes his first steps toward turning away from violence while at the same time taking his first steps “toward finding life” (Craig 56). “Eternal City” is a very significant chapter in the novel, in which Yossarian journeys through “the land of death” while AWOL in Rome (56). On this journey, which resembles Dante’s inferno, Yossarian encounters death everywhere: he remembers his dead friends, learns of the death of the old man in the “whore’s” apartment, sees various scenes of dead and decaying people and sees Aarfy murder a maid he has just raped. During the visit to Rome, Yossarian finds the city “eternal only in its continuous and chaotic agonies, for God too has created a universe of catch-22, a lousy world filled with unnecessary suffering” (Bradbury 213).

During this journey, and as a result of it, Yossarian openly thinks about and reflects on his own mortality. Yossarian internalizes all the violence he sees around him while on this final trip to Rome, which makes him even more desperate to escape from the war. This desperation to escape becomes a catalyst for his initially accepting the
deal the Colonels offer him, and it thus inevitably pushes him even further toward
catch-22, “the life-denying paradox that controls the world of the novel” (Craig 57). The
catch this time is that Yossarian can basically have what he has wanted throughout the
novel (going home without flying any more missions) but not the way he has wanted it
(he would have to sell-out and say good things about Cathcart and Korn).

Yossarian decides to desert the army in order to stay alive, so running away
from violence is the more regenerative decision since it will prolong his life even if only
for a short while, and it may prolong the lives of other soldiers who he, by rebelling,
may have inspired to do the same. Taking the deal, though it would also save his life,
would actually result in more violence since his army friends would give up all hope
and succumb completely to the violence of the military. Yossarian becomes aware of
the danger of making the wrong decision when Nately’s whore manages to stab him
when he first agrees to the deal proposed by Cathcart and Korn. Yossarian changes his
mind after he recovers from the stabbing, and although Nately’s unnamed whore is still
present when Yossarian decides to run away, the difference is that this time her knife
misses him by inches. Another effect of Yossarian taking the deal would have been the
“extinction of the self,” a denial of identity (Craig 57). In taking the deal, Yossarian
would have defeated the purpose of his actions throughout the novel, and he would
simply have become another meaningless cog in the vast bureaucratic machine of the
military.

In *Existential America*, George Cotkin asserts that in an out-of-control world,
where existentialism seems to be the only rational system of beliefs, “all individuals,
ultimately… [become] responsible for what they made of themselves” (4). Yossarian
tries to take on that responsibility by attempting to run away from the circle of violence
and away from the myth of regeneration through violence. Seed asserts that “the narrative line in *Catch-22* assumes a forward motion only towards the end of the book when Yossarian decided to desert” (50). The significance of the linear progression of the narrative only at the end of the novel is that it shows us that away from war, violence and unnecessary death, things go back to “normal” and sanity returns, and life may not seem as absurd as it does under the control of the bureaucratic military machine. Only towards the end is there some kind of order to the narrative—chronology is restored and the dialogue is not as absurd.

In *Catch-22*, Heller uses various narrative strategies in order to achieve his comic rejection of war. These strategies include a non-linear narrative, humor and burlesque, which combine to form a very satirical novel and form “a vision of breakdown” (Walsh 190). He builds on previous war narratives and inverts and parodies them to achieve his aim of presenting the reader with an absurd and chaotic world. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Kurt Vonnegut, who is a contemporary of Heller and also wrote his novel during the Vietnam War era, uses some of the same narrative strategies as Heller does. However, Vonnegut takes these strategies to even more extreme levels and thus presents the reader with a text that, though showing the same general anti-war message of the novels of Mailer and Heller, is in formal terms completely unprecedented.
Chapter IV

BEYOND BOUNDARIES: KURT VONNEGUT’S
SLAUGHTERHOUSE-FIVE

A. Slaughterhouse-Five: Origins and Influences

Kurt Vonnegut bore witness to more violence during the Second World War than either of the two war veterans, Norman Mailer and Joseph Heller, whose novels have been discussed in the previous chapters. Vonnegut was captured by the Wermacht when most of his battalion was killed during the Battle of the Bulge, and he was then held in Dresden, Germany as a prisoner of war (Kurt Vonnegut 30). During his imprisonment at Dresden, the Allies destroyed the city by firebombing. In Vonnegut in America, Jerome Klinkowitz writes: “On the night of February 13, 1945, American and British war planes used modern science and technology to create a literal firestorm, conceived as an act of terror to break the German spirit” (13). One hundred and thirty-five thousand people died in Dresden; more than the number of people who died in Hiroshima or Nagasaki (Cacicedo 363). Kurt Vonnegut was one of the few survivors. Dresden was an undefended city with no strategic value. The Allies later justified the bombing by saying that it was done with the honorable purpose of hastening the end of the war and thus limiting the loss of human life. Vonnegut returned to the United States after the life-altering experience of World War II and tried to resume ordinary life as a civilian. However, Vonnegut was “haunted by this abrupt violent initiation into contemporary reality” (The Vonnegut Statement 16).

Vonnegut was born into an upper middle-class family. His father was an architect, and his mother came from a well-to-do family. However, they, like most Americans, were deeply affected by the Great Depression. According to Morse,
Vonnegut and his family went through a “loss of will and belief” caused by the Great Depression as most Americans at the time did (98). In addition to the general malaise caused by the Depression, Vonnegut, along with the rest of the country, also had to confront “the loss of moral certainty originating in America’s being implicated in the massacre of Dresden and in the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki; the loss of certainty in America’s invincibility occasioned by the defeat in Vietnam; and the loss of belief in a safe society caused by the breakdown in law and order and the parallel breakup of the nuclear family” (98). These shared experiences of traumatic events, Morse asserts, may qualify Vonnegut as “the representative American writer of the latter half of the twentieth century” (1).

Upon returning to the United States, Vonnegut decided to write about his experiences of the destruction of Dresden in World War II. Vonnegut writes that he originally believed that: “all I would have to do would be to report what I had seen” (2). He spent twenty-three years writing his “famous book about Dresden,” on which he kept telling people he was working (Vonnegut 14). The book, which, obviously, he eventually finished, was *Slaughterhouse-Five*. It took him so long to write the book because, as he tells us in the novel, “not many words about Dresden came from my mind then—not enough of them to make a book, anyway. And not many words come now, either” (Vonnegut 2). Vonnegut’s experiences in Dresden “had been blocked for years; each time he tried to write about it, he hit a blank wall” (*Vonnegut in America* 24). Vonnegut could not even think about what he saw in Dresden, let alone write about it—to him, Dresden was “beyond words, even beyond thought (merciful memory had blotted it all out)” (*Kurt Vonnegut* 63). Vonnegut later explains his process of writing about his Dresden experience in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, saying: “massacre on such a
scale simply does not register with the mind’…[such] atrocities are simply too large for the human imagination to grasp” (Vonnegut in America 29).

However, Vonnegut was determined to write his book about Dresden for two principal reasons. The first was that he was horrified by the fact that the event was unknown by the general public in the United States, a country which was again at war in Vietnam as he completed the novel. His sense of indignation at the ignorance of the nation comes through in the novel when he tells the reader in his deliberately low key tone: “It wasn’t a famous air raid back then in America. Not many Americans knew how much worse it had been than Hiroshima, for instance. I didn’t know that, either. There hadn’t been much publicity” (Vonnegut 7). Next to nothing was said of Dresden in the American media, and to Vonnegut, “the absence of horror was itself a horrible indictment of our moral sense that made him feel responsible in conscience to say something” (Giannone 5). The second reason Vonnegut was determined to write *Slaughterhouse-Five* was that he felt a certain compulsion to write it as means of processing what he had experienced. He tells us in his introductory chapter: “I would hate to tell you what this lousy little book cost me in money and anxiety and time” (2). Nevertheless, Dresden remains a subject that is very “tempting” to write about and he compares the compulsion to write about Dresden to a circular, repetitive song, the kind of song that sticks in a person’s subconscious mind and keeps nagging and turning in their head all day:

> My name is Yon Yonson,
> I work in Wisconsin,
> I work in a lumbermill there.
> The people I meet when I walk down the street,
They say, ‘What’s your name?’

And I say,

‘My name is Yon Yonson,
I work in Wisconsin…’

And so on to infinity (2).

When Vonnegut finally wrote *Slaughterhouse-Five*, it “turned out to be his first bestseller, catapulted him to sudden national fame, and brought his writing into serious intellectual esteem” (*Kurt Vonnegut* 63). This famous book also highlighted the previously unpublicized Dresden massacre, and it forcefully brought to light an event in American history that was “never officially acknowledged” (Morse 91-92). In his narration of the story, Vonnegut “brought the disquieting message that the United States was complicit in the destruction of an unarmed city and the massacre of thousands of civilians” (Morse 15). Even worse than its complicity in this horrendous event was the fact that, as Vonnegut insinuates in his novel, “the United States Air Force tried to transform the Dresden fire-bombing from an atrocity to something almost heroic” (Schatt 94-95).

**B. De-Mythycizing War: *Slaughterhouse-Five* in Comparison with *The Naked and the Dead* and *Catch-22***

Vonnegut sets out to dispel such illusions and myths about heroism in war. One of the effects achieved by Vonnegut in *Slaughterhouse-Five* is that the absurdity of war is emphasized since the novel is set during the Second World War—the “good war,” which was seemingly fought for virtuous reasons against the evil of fascism. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut uses the “‘good’ war to question all war” (Dickstein 44). Through the voice of the former infantry captain Eliot Rosewater talking to a
psychiatrist, Vonnegut implies that “given the horrors of the twentieth century, human beings need a whole new mythology,” or, in Rosewater’s terminology “lies” (Cacicedo 365). “I think,” writes Vonnegut, “you guys are going to have to come up with a lot of wonderful new lies, or people just aren’t going to want to go on living” (73). For Billy Pilgrim and Eliot Rosewater, the “reinvention” of “themselves and their universe,” becomes a way of adapting to their postwar lives and the meaninglessness made obvious by the war. In order to accomplish this reinvention, Billy and Rosewater resort to science-fiction (Vonnegut 73). Science fiction for them becomes “a desperate attempt to rationalize chaos” (Vees-Gulani 179).

*Slaughterhouse-Five*, like *Catch-22* and *The Naked and the Dead*, is at its core, an anti-war novel. Vonnegut, like Heller and Mailer, “envisioned war as manic incoherence” (Walsh 45). World War II was, in the ways described earlier in this study, unlike previous wars, and so the experiences of these three war veterans were unlike previous war writers. In order to tell their stories of World War II, they needed new forms of writing. The violence and the “illogic” of the Second World War “demanded a formal enactment commensurate to its madness: language and form must be shaped in new and seemingly disruptive ways” (Walsh 45-6). Though Mailer had less first-hand violent war experiences than both Heller and Vonnegut and wrote his war novel much earlier than either, for the three writers, the Second World War became “a static war, a war in which nothing happens. This is reflected in the fictional structures they develop—and the individual characters who fail to develop” (Dickstein 42-43).

Mailer, whose main aim in writing *The Naked and the Dead* was to chronicle his time, was writing a historical novel. The events in Mailer’s novel “had beginnings, middles and ends; they were microcosms of the war as a whole and sometimes of the
whole society that was waging war” (42-3). Mailer’s narrative was new in 1948, and he introduced into the American war novel genre elements that influenced Vonnegut’s and Heller’s war novels. Mailer’s *The Naked and the Dead* was the first American novel about World War II to show the un-regenerative and absurd aspects of war in general and of World War II in particular. Moreover, in the text, he criticizes the United States Army immediately after the so-called “good war.” Heller and Vonnegut, like Mailer before them, “offered a critique of American institutions and assumptions, all recognized the absurd and “phony” excuses of those in power” (Cotkin 229).

However, Vonnegut and Heller’s works differ from Mailer’s in that in their respective war novels, “there is no real sense of unfolding history, no sequential pattern, and little relation between causes and consequences” (Dickstein 43). Heller and Vonnegut’s novels further develop the elements of absurdity and the emerging existentialism and anti-war sentiment in Mailer’s narrative, adding satire and humor to their novels. Dickstein describes the novels of Heller and Vonnegut as “circular rather than developmental; they are antihistorical novels” (43). The characters of both *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* are “pawns rather than agents. No longer hoodwinked by our official war aims, they look to survival, not mastery or heroism, and they are constantly being overwhelmed by larger forces they scarcely understand” (43). Both *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* “exhibit a profoundly new satiric exploitation of war which finds expression through innovatory formal patterning and the fabrication of new myths” (Walsh 188).

**C. Trauma and Narration**

The massacre at Dresden, which Vonnegut miraculously survived, has been described as “one of the most horrendous examples of unmitigated violence in history”
It was, writes Shaw, “the end result of modern, technological violence” (110). The firebombing of Dresden, a cultural city with no military significance—“the Florence of the Elbe”—was “inexplicable” to Vonnegut (Giannone 86). The trauma Vonnegut experienced made finding the words to write his Dresden novel almost impossible. Vonnegut “failed again and again to find the right words with which to describe the massacre, its aftermath, and its meaning—if any” (Morse 80). What Vonnegut had to do in order to be able to write about Dresden was to come up with a new narrative, a new language with which to write about the trauma.

Lawrence A. Tritle, a Vietnam War veteran, attributes veterans’ inability to cope with the traumatic experiences of war to the psychological disorder PTSD: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. This syndrome can be traced all the way back to the war heroes of the ancient Greek world (Tritle 54). During World War I, PTSD was known as “shell shock;” in World War II it was termed “battle fatigue;” and during the Vietnam War it came to be labeled PTSD (Tritle 50). PTSD, asserts Tritle, occurs from traumatic memories that form when a person is exposed to extreme violence that result in fear or pain. Billy Pilgrim, the protagonist of Slaughterhouse-Five, who experiences Dresden as Vonnegut did, experiences two obvious symptoms of PTSD: his inability to forget the trauma and the reliving of his experiences through dreams/flashbacks/images (Tritle 9-10). The veteran, according to Tritle, may also experience loss of authority over memory and perception, substance abuse along with “suicidality, despair, isolation [and] meaninglessness” (58).

Susanne Vees-Gulani, in an article that takes a specifically “psychiatric approach” to Slaughterhouse-Five, actually diagnoses Billy Pilgrim with PTSD, using evidence from the novel to support her diagnosis. First of all, Billy has an “altered
perception of time” (177-8). Billy starts seeing events in the Tralfamadorian sense of time in the fourth dimension—meaning that time is not linear, and events do not occur in chronological order. The Tralfamadorians believe that “it is just an illusion we have on Earth that one moment follows another one like beads on a string, and that once a moment is gone it is gone forever” (Vonnegut 19-20). Billy is “spastic in time;” he “pays random visits” to different events in time (17). Being “spastic in time,” according to Vees-Gulani, is “a metaphor for Billy’s repeatedly re-experiencing the traumatic events he went through in war… Psychologically, Billy has never fully left World War II; instead…he lives in a “continual present”” (177). It is important to note that we are told that “Billy first came unstuck while World War Two was in progress” (Vonnegut 22). The fact that Billy first experiences being “spastic in time” during World War II indicates that there is a connection between the stressful situation of war and Billy’s time travel. Billy also has a “diminished responsiveness to the world around him,” his “range of affect is severely restricted,” and he has a “passive and emotionless reaction to tragedy and death” (Vees-Gulani 177-78). A clear indication of Billy’s disturbed state of mind is his habit of weeping silently by himself but never consciously knowing why. The best example of Billy’s passiveness is the repetition of the refrain “so it goes” after every death, from the champagne losing its fizz to his wife dying “accidentally of carbon-monoxide poisoning” (Vonnegut 53; 18). Death in the novel is described as non-existence: “it is simply a violet light and a hum. There isn’t anybody else there. Not even Billy Pilgrim is there” (Vonnegut 31).

Billy also experiences the “suppression of parts of the trauma” and “evading the trauma,” which are typical symptoms of PTSD (Vees-Gulani 178). Vonnegut, according to Stanley Schatt, “links the fire-bombing of Dresden with…man’s seemingly
unbounded proclivity for evil,” and so Billy represses the destruction of Dresden through time travel (88). Whenever Billy comes close to remembering the night of the firebombing, he goes on a time trip to another experience and refuses to fully re-experience the event. Billy, like Yossarian in *Catch-22* “constantly circles around that central traumatic moment, almost recollecting it but, as is typical of traumatic memories, not quite managing to seize on the event” (Cacicedo 363). The narration of Snowden’s death in *Catch-22* is constantly delayed and Yossarian, though hinting at it throughout the novel, refuses to fully re-experience the violent death of Snowden until the very end. We are “distanced” from the violence in the novels although we are aware of the presence of violence in both (Shaw 102). The actual narration of that violence, however—the story of Snowden’s death and the story of the night of the Dresden massacre—are delayed. We hear about the bombing and the corpse factory, but we are not witness to the events until the very end when the barbershop quartet at Billy’s eighteenth wedding anniversary remind him of four German soldiers who were guarding the American prisoners of war in the meat locker of slaughterhouse number five in Dresden. Billy remembers and fully re-experiences the night of the firebombing: “he did not travel in time to the experience. He remembered it shimmeringly—as follows: He was down in the meat locker on the night that Dresden was destroyed…” (Vonnegut 129). This is one aspect in which *Slaughterhouse-Five* is constructed in a manner that is similar to *Catch-22*: just as Snowden’s death is always present just beneath the surface in the story of Yossarian, who is compelled to think about the violent death of Snowden but cannot fully relive or remember the experience until very late in the narrative, Billy Pilgrim frequently finds himself traveling back to the moment just before Dresden but cannot fully relive the night of the firebombing until near the
end of the narrative. Both Heller and Vonnegut delay the narration of the trauma. The narration of the night of the Dresden firebombing is, like the narration of Snowden’s death, the climax of the novel since “it is only after Billy has faced the past that he is able to return to Dresden and live through the holocaust once more” (Schatt 82-83).

Billy, like Vonnegut, is trying to find a way to reconcile his Dresden experience with his everyday life as a civilian, and they both have the urge to forget Dresden but at the same time have an obsessive need to tell the story. The violence of the Dresden experience was, for example, too traumatic for Vonnegut to write about directly in an autobiography, just as in the novel it is too difficult for Billy to re-experience Dresden. As Tritle tells us of war survivors: “the violence itself has inflected such trauma that, in order for the survivor to cope, the event must be reflected on obliquely rather than directly” (Tritle 127). Norman Mailer is the only novelist discussed who goes into a direct, realistic and gruesome description of the details of the violence of the war, and this narrative strategy may be attributed to the fact that in the Second World War, he “saw little real action” (Dearborn 43). According to James Tatum, “the closer a poet or writer or thinker gets to war, the less pressing it seems to be to follow a chronological order. In between, it is not chronology or the sequence of events that is driving the creation of the story, but urgency, and mortality” (1).

For Vonnegut, though, the violence of the destruction of Dresden is “too far removed from normal experience to be easily reported,” so the experience of Dresden “can neither be completely fictionalized nor simply repeated through an eyewitness account” (Vees-Gulani 180). Because Vonnegut experienced so much violence first hand, he deals with the trauma indirectly by using a narrative “mask.” Vonnegut creates Billy, who is “a shell-shocked simpleton, the last in a long line of innocent nobodies
caught in the swirling currents of history, politics and warfare” (Dickstein 43). Through Billy Pilgrim and his dilemma of being “unstuck in time,” Vonnegut finds a way to write about the destruction of Dresden, which releases Vonnegut from the traditional approach to space, time and character development (Dickstein 43). Vonnegut may be said to gain some degree of control over the violence by narrating it through Billy (Giannone 90). Similarly, Billy gains some control over the violence of Dresden by “ignoring” the unpleasant moments (90). This technique is one that Billy learns from the Tralfamadorians: “ignore the awful times, and concentrate on the good ones” (Vonnegut 85). Moreover, Slaughterhouse-Five, mixes facts from Vonnegut’s life with the fiction of Billy’s life. The first chapter is actually narrated by Vonnegut, the author, and the story of Billy is then told by an anonymous narrator. This layering of narrative voices “simultaneously binds Vonnegut to and distances him from the text and its implications” (Vees-Gulani 180). In this way, Vonnegut attempts to cope, through form, with the trauma. His narrative “adapts” to the post-Dresden reality since language has to adapt and change “to conform to the transformed reality that the survivor of that event has experienced” (Tritle 133).

D. A New Mythology

Vonnegut, like other post-World War II writers, felt that there was a need for a new mythology to come to terms with the new reality that existed in the United States after the Second World War, so he “constructed his own personal mythology”7 to cope with the post-war world (Vonnegut in America xii). On the title page of the novel, Vonnegut undermines the reader’s expectations when he declares that his novel is “somewhat in the telegraphic schizophrenic manner of tales of the planet Tralfamadore.

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7 Personal mythology refers to a “particular set of explanations and expectations” created by a certain individual that justify “his or her circumstances and actions,” as opposed to collective/national mythology, which is propagated by popular culture and “belongs to no one individual” (Vernon 37).
where the flying saucers come from.” Therefore, from the very beginning of the novel, there is a hint that Slaughterhouse-Five, or, The Children’s Crusade, A Duty Dance with Death is in fact a “new novel” or “anti-novel” (The Vonnegut Statement 212). Vonnegut rejects all “outmoded forms and structures of fiction,” including the typical war genre movies and novels since they are, for him, a dishonest representation of what war really is (Kurt Vonnegut 68). Vonnegut sees war as “the great destructive moment shaping the emptiness and psychic disorder of the times” (68). This perspective is amplified since the novel was written and published during the Vietnam War.

From Vonnegut’s perspective, war is purely destructive; there is no regeneration in war and violence. Klinkowitz asserts that Vonnegut realized that in order to write a truly innovative “anti-war” book, he needed “the arts of defamiliarization” (65). Moreover, Klinkowitz states that Vonnegut needed to shock his readers by presenting a drastically new narrative—in effect, he has to “reinvent the novel and its methods” (68). If one accepts that Vonnegut succeeded in his stated project, Slaughterhouse-Five may be seen as remaking the war genre tradition of Hemingway and Mailer. It does so by not focusing on the fighting or the military operations of war; instead, “its controlling image is… the devastation of a beautiful undefended city and the mass death of its innocent citizens” (Walsh 196).

Vonnegut believes that the greatest problem in the twentieth century is self-deception (Vonnegut in America 146). Therefore, in Slaughterhouse-Five, he sets out to challenge pre-existing war myths that contribute to this self-deception, including the myth of regeneration through violence described by Slotkin. The reality-obscuring myths that are so pervasive in pre-World War II culture are summed up in the novel by
O’Hare’s wife. Her fear is that Vonnegut will write a novel that is influenced by such myths, which portray war positively:

You’ll pretend you were men instead of babies, and you’ll be played in the movies by Frank Sinatra and John Wayne or some of those other glamorous, war-loving, dirty old men. And war will look just wonderful, so we’ll have a lot more of them. And they’ll be fought by babies like the babies upstairs (11).

Thus, Vonnegut presents us with Billy Pilgrim; an “unheroic hero” (Schatt 83), who is “an unremarkable, passive individual” (Morse 85). The story of Billy Pilgrim is conveyed in a satirical, humorous, science-fiction style, new narrative that denies any previous myths of war as glorious, heroic, noble or just (Vonnegut in America 145-6). The novel works against institutional history and the process of myth-making represented by the character Rumfoord, the U.S. Air Force official historian who omitted the firebombing of Dresden from his “twenty-seven-volume Official History of the Army Air Force in World War Two…even though it had been such a howling success” (Vonnegut 139). The novel criticizes the myth-making processes of popular culture when Vonnegut, while still speaking in his own voice as the author in the first chapter mockingly writes: “we went to the New York World’s Fair, saw what the past had been like, according to the Ford Motor Company and Walt Disney, saw what the future would be like, according to General Motors” (13). We are presented with characters that are not fully characters, such as the sadistic and hugely unpopular Roland Weary or the parasitic and violent Paul Lazzaro. In the absence of any substantive characters, in the novel, death becomes the central character (Schatt 81). Vonnegut’s new narrative allows him to give some sense of the actual experience of modern war and its effects on the individual and what Giannone calls the “disjointed...
fragments” (94) a person becomes after witnessing such violence. In the novel Vonnegut writes that:

There are almost no characters in this story, and almost no dramatic confrontations, because most of the people in it are so sick and so much the listless playthings of enormous forces. One of the main effects of war, after all, is that people are discouraged from being characters (119).

Vonnegut questions and manipulates the genre of the novel from the very beginning by giving us three different titles for the novel and then providing us with an unusual introduction telling us that the novel is “telegraphic schizophrenic.” Vonnegut undermines the reader’s expectations at every point in the novel. By giving us three titles he, in effect plays with language and gives the reader the message that one title is not enough to encompass the novel, just as language is not enough to narrate the horrors of war. So, instead of a title, Vonnegut provides us with “a deepening attitude toward the violence of war” (Giannone 83). Each title signifies violence, death and meaningless loss. The first title, Slaughterhouse-Five refers to the meat locker in which Vonnegut in reality and Billy Pilgrim in the novel were sheltered and saved during the Dresden firebombing. Ironically, the slaughterhouse, which is usually a “house of death,” during the destruction of Dresden, turns into a “house of salvation” (Morse 91).

The second title, The Children’s Crusade, refers to an event in history. The Children’s Crusade started in 1213 when two monks decided to raise armies of children to sell as slaves. Thirty thousand children volunteered, thinking they were going to Palestine. Half of the children drowned in shipwrecks, while the other half were sold into slavery in North Africa (Vonnegut 12). By giving his novel this second title, Vonnegut links the Children’s Crusade, “one of the most futile, exploitive, cynical
events in all of Western European history” to “the great war to end all wars” (Morse 87). The parallel between the Children’s Crusade, the Second World War and Vietnam implies that wars are fought by “babies” who do not know the real reasons for which they are fighting. Billy, writes Morse, is the symbol of the “innocent child playing at war” (158). The third title, *A Duty-Dance with Death*, refers to the certainty of death, especially violent death in the case of war; we are all in some sort of “duty-dance with death” and “we owe God a dying” (Shaw 101).

**E. Vonnegut’s New Narrative**

Vonnegut also undermines the genre of the war novel by using a “deceptively simple” writing style (Schatt 10). In the first chapter, he speaks in the voice of the author and in doing so delays the story of Billy until the second chapter. Walsh believes that in chapter 1, Vonnegut tells the reader what is going to happen in the novel “in order to dispose right away with the fixities of sequential narration; henceforth…he is released from any obligations to comply with conventional notions of genre” (Walsh 196). The reason Vonnegut employs this technique is to focus the attention of the reader on the meaning behind the story rather than on the story itself (*Vonnegut in America* 144).

Vonnegut’s new narrative style is meant to “defamiliarize” the reader—meaning that it is meant to alter our perceptions and challenge the reader’s way of thinking (Peck 153). In order to achieve this effect of defamiliarization, Vonnegut includes various non-novelistic forms and devices such as songs, limericks, poetry, fantasy, science fiction, lengthy quotations from other texts, biography, stream of consciousness, interior monologue and occasionally a drawing (144). Vonnegut “abandons the direct mimetic devices” such as chronology, a clear climax, meaning and moral since such conventions
of the novel, in the historical narrative sense, “no longer appear applicable to a world
where behavior has outstripped all the measures of nineteenth century order and
realism” (Kurt Vonnegut 68). Since large-scale massacres in modern war “defy
explanation,” and old narrative forms are not sufficient to talk about such a violent
event, Vonnegut presents us with a new narrative in which “old forms are shattered. The
world is cuckoo” (Giannone 84).

Chronology and time are as important in Slaughterhouse-Five as they are to
Catch-22. In both these novels, unlike in Mailer’s The Naked and the Dead, the
sequence of events is not in order and time is distorted. These narrative devices
contribute to the novel being “antihistorical” as described by Dickstein (43). In Heller’s
Catch-22, there is no sequential or chronological order to events, which distorts the
reader’s sense of time in the novel. In Slaughterhouse-Five, on the other hand, the
relationship between past, present and future is completely shattered (Dickstein 50).
According to Dickstein, Slaughterhouse-Five “splinters the relationship between past
and present, as if no sequential treatment could do justice to the surreal feeling of the
war” (50). Slaughterhouse-Five completely abandons the conventional notion of linear
time and opts for a “Gestalt approach” to time that asks readers “to observe a series of
unrelated episodes and then to share Vonnegut’s view of both war and death” (Schatt
81).

In their satirical new narratives, Heller and Vonnegut both “combine the comic
with the horrific” (Dickstein 51). In Slaughterhouse-Five there are certain “cartoonish
elements” (41) (for example the little green aliens from the far away planet of
Tralfamadore) that can also be found in Catch-22 (the character of Major Major Major
Major jumping in and out of his office window). These “cartoonish elements”
contribute a humorous and bitingly satirical aspect to the serious topic of war while at the same time providing comic relief. Instead of detracting from the novelists’ serious message, the “humor sharpens the grimness without canceling it” (Hauck 237). Vonnegut admits that in real life as in his fiction, humor was a kind of defense mechanism and it was “only a way of coping with horror” (Vonnegut in America 274). “Joking,” he said in an interview, “was my response to misery that I can’t do anything about” (The Vonnegut Statement 175). Vonnegut, paraphrasing a critic, says: “I’d found in laughter an analgesic for the temporary relief of existential pain” (108). Alongside his use of comedy in his new narrative, Vonnegut uses the genre of science fiction to transcend boundaries of time and space that had previously controlled the novel as a narrative form. “Vonnegut’s criticism of ideas is shaped by two correlative literary forms, science fiction and comedy” (Vonnegut in America 70). Vonnegut has fused and manipulated literary techniques and narrative forms “in order to answer a plea for a “new fiction” (The Vonnegut Statement 153).

Science fiction in Slaughterhouse-Five has various narrative functions. One function is that it is used as a “satiric lens” through which Vonnegut can comment on the violence of war (Walsh 198). Science fiction provides him with a certain freedom whereby he is not restricted by either time or space (198). So the narrative is free to be as spastic in time and space as Billy is. Through science-fiction, Vonnegut “unhinges traditional narrative form” in order to allow the narrative to be consistent with Billy’s experience in Dresden (Meredith 7). The novelistic form of science fiction becomes “equated in the book with the task of writing about Dresden” (Giannone 82). Another important function that science fiction serves is that it provides “comic commentary” on the serious problems of war and violence (Schatt 90). The type of science fiction used
by Vonnegut is called space opera, and he uses it to “lighten things up” when matters in
the novel get too serious or “heavy” since this type of science-fiction is, in his own
words, “of an obviously kidding sort” (Vonnegut in America 70-71).

**F. Vonnegut Attacks American Exceptionalism**

In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, there is a sense of shock and outrage at what man is
capable of doing in the name of a “worthy cause” (Schatt 84). There is a certain sense of
“moral confusion” caused by the “brutal, excessive destruction” during the “good/just
war” (Morse 80). Billy’s Tralfamadorian adventures emphasize the horror of his
experience in Dresden and raise the question: “until World War II, who would have
thought that the militaries of the United States and the United Kingdom, two democratic
countries, would be capable of the utter destruction of a city like Dresden long after its
strategic value has disappeared? No one, as Vonnegut’s novel makes clear—not even
someone from outer space” (Meredith 7).

Since *Slaughterhouse-Five* was published during one of the lowest points of the
United States during the Vietnam War era, it inevitably poses the same questions and
raises the same objections regarding the Vietnam War. *Slaughterhouse-Five*, described
as “a work of bleak black humor and considerable resignation,” because of its new
narrative form, abandons the “easy assumptions of national innocence and intrinsic
American worth” (*Kurt Vonnegut* 20). This American myth of “innocence and intrinsic
American worth” is an essential part of Slotkin’s myth of regeneration through violence
since it is an essential part of the justification of the violence done in the name of justice
and the defeat of evil which will engender a rebirth. This myth was essential during the
Indian Wars when, according to Slotkin, “the threat of Indian cannibals evoked the
strongest emotion” (*Regeneration* 38). The Native American, a symbol of a dark and
dangerous nature, had to be defeated by the “moral” Puritans so that they would be able to build their “city on a hill” (38).

The myth of American “innocence” and “worth” are a part of the theory of American exceptionalism, a term first used by Alexis de Tocqueville in 1831 (“American Exceptionalism”). According to Slotkin, “[the] revelation of American moral and economic strength in the victory of 1945 and our emergence as the dominant political and economic power in the world…produced a new form of American exceptionalism” (Gunfighter 421). This “new form of American exceptionalism,” which was fully developed during the 1960s, “suggested that something in our politics, culture, and circumstances was indeed historically exceptional,” and it suggests a certain amount of moral superiority (Gunfighter 491). This theory of American exceptionalism is frequently utilized in American war rhetoric. It was used during the Indian Wars, just as it was used in subsequent wars including the Second World War and the Vietnam War. According to Slotkin, “the American experience of Indian wars is not taken as a special historical case but as a representative of a general and universal principle. Native resistance to the imposition of a “progressive” regime is presumed to be irrational and hence not subject to negotiation” (Gunfighter 492). The Vietnam War was based on guerilla warfare, reminiscent of the warfare of the Native Americans and, according to Dawes, “guerilla fighters disrupt the international laws of war because, lacking a ‘distinctive emblem,’ they cannot be identified as combatants and thereby distinguished from the civilian population” (138). Guerilla warfare was portrayed as “savage war,” thus evoking Indian War myths. The treatment of guerilla fighters as savages was, therefore, justified (Gunfighter 111). Since the fighters could not be distinguished from the civilians, and their resistance to the “progressive” regime of the U.S. was “irrational
and hence not subject to negotiation,” the killing of all Vietnamese, as in My Lai, was a justified solution.

Vonnegut recognizes the myth of “innocence and intrinsic American worth” and attacks it in *Slaughterhouse-Five* when it is satirically depicted by Howard W. Campbell, an American turned Nazi. Campbell explains the colors of the American flag saying:

Blue is for the American sky…white is for the race that pioneered the continent, drained the swamps and cleared the forests and built the roads and bridges. Red is for the blood of American patriots which was shed so gladly in years gone by (119).

Another repudiation of this myth is when Billy brings up the topic of war with the Tralfamadorians, expecting them to be troubled by the violence on Earth since all the violence and “weaponry might eventually destroy part or maybe all of the innocent universe” (Vonnegut 83). The Tralfamadorians think Billy is being stupidly egocentric since they know that the universe will end when a Tralfamadorian blows it up. In a prediction of the future, Billy sees the future of the United States of America which “has been Balkanized, has been divided into twenty petty nations so that it will never again be a threat to world peace” (Vonnegut 103; emphasis added).

**G. Reality vs. Fantasy**

In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, science-fiction thus becomes a satirical mode, one element in a new narrative strategy in which Vonnegut attempts to represent the horrors of the destruction of Dresden. Time and space travel, however, become markers of the absurd: “time travel, and other science fiction motifs as well, have become in
Vonnegut’s work a sign of the absurd universe which lies about us and which Vonnegut is determined to call to his readers’ attention” (The Vonnegut Statement 154).

Vonnegut, along with Heller and a few other post-World War II writers, “took a generation’s consciousness on a sharp left turn down the crooked road to the absurd” (35). Klinkowitz asserts that realism in fiction is regarded as futile in Slaughterhouse-Five (210), where reality and fantasy are placed “side by side, as if both are equally fantastic and equally real” (205-6). Through the time travel adventures of Billy Pilgrim, Slaughterhouse-Five brings the existence of an objective reality into question. For example, Billy learns from the Tralfamadorians to close his eyes to the events in life that are unpleasant. Billy takes the Tralfamadorian advice so seriously that on his epitaph he wants the following statement to be written: “Everything was beautiful, and nothing hurt” (Vonnegut 88). So Billy can, in theory, choose the reality he wants to live in at any particular moment. The reader’s understanding of truth and reality is undermined, however, when the protagonist has memories of the future and goes through time warps and windows (Walsh 198).

Hence, for Vonnegut, reality is not absolute; it is “impermanent and essentially unreal” (Vonnegut in America 30) and, Slaughterhouse-Five reminds us of “the fictitious aspect of our own existence” (The Vonnegut Statement 206-7). Vonnegut believes that humans have a distorted view of reality, and therefore, the fact that Billy, the “unheroic hero” who is “spastic in time,” is an optometrist whose job is to correct peoples’ vision is ironic. People have a very limited definition of reality since, according to Shaw, our “perceptions have been obstructed by history, philosophy, psychology, anthropology, fairy tales, literature, theology, and an endless list of similar obstructions” (107). Our understanding of reality is as limited as Roland Weary’s, who
at one point in the novel sees things “through a narrow slit between the rim of his helmet and his scarf from home” (Vonnegut 30). Weary’s vision is literally obscured by the scarf and the helmet, which symbolizes his metaphorical obscuring of reality, since he sees things through his own very narrow perspective. He believes, for example, that he and two other survivors are very close friends and that they call themselves “The Three Musketeers” because they are traveling together and trying to survive. In reality, the two other men can not stand Weary and repeatedly try to leave him behind.

The narrator satirically describes Weary as he “dilated upon the piety and heroism of ‘The Three Musketeers,’ portrayed, in the most glowing and impassioned hues, their virtue and magnanimity, the imperishable honor they acquired for themselves, and the great services they rendered to Christianity” (Vonnegut 37). The Narrator here uses an exact quotation that was used to describe the Children’s Crusade from a book Vonnegut quotes earlier in the novel called Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds, by Charles Mackay. The language of romantic myth and heroism, used to describe one of the most pointless, un-regenerative endeavors in history, is used to satirize Weary’s delusions of heroism in war. In this situation, Weary resembles Billy when he is trapped in the zoo on Tralfamadore as a specimen Earthling. What the Tralfamadorians see when they look at Billy is:

This poor Earthling, and his head was encased in a steel sphere which he could never take off. There was one eyehole through which he could look, and welded to that eyehole were six feet of pipe…All Billy could see was the little dot at the end of the pipe. He didn't know he was on a flatcar, didn't even know there was anything peculiar about his situation…Whatever poor Billy saw through the pipe, he had no choice but to say to himself, ‘That’s life’ (Vonnegut 83).
H. Existential Absurdity in *Slaughterhouse-Five*

In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut investigates various existential problems (*The Vonnegut Statement* 223). Because of his tendency to explore the “particularly American brand of isolation and loneliness” (Morse 1) in his work, he has been classified as a novelist who is “essentially philosophical” (*Vonnegut in America* 274). However, his use of the philosophy of existentialism in his narrative differs greatly from the use of existentialism by Mailer in *The Naked and the Dead* and Heller in *Catch-22*. In *The Naked and the Dead*, Mailer incorporates existential discourse into his narrative. He wants to *inform* the reader, through the plot and characters in the novel that life is absurd, and war is a part of that absurdity. Mailer creates an existential treatise through his use of heavy symbolism and realistic, journalistic writing. Heller’s novel, on the other hand, *conveys* a sense of “existential absurdity” (Dickstein 45). Heller, unlike Mailer, does not set out with the goal of being *the* American existentialist. Existential absurdity is a very important thematic element in both these novels, although the authors employ it in different ways in their narratives. *Slaughterhouse-Five*, however, is a textual *enactment* of the absurdity. Existential absurdity, fused with humor, is a main element in *Slaughterhouse-Five* in which the narrative itself is absurd. Vonnegut explains how *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a culmination of experiences and how he became an existential pessimist:

> Scientific truth was going to make us *so* happy and comfortable. What actually happened when I was twenty-one was that we dropped scientific truth on Hiroshima. We killed everybody there. And I had just come home from being a prisoner of war in Dresden, which I’d seen burned to the ground. And the world was just then learning how ghastly the German extermination camps had been.
So I had a heart-to-heart talk with myself. “Hey, Corporal Vonnegut,” I said to myself, “maybe you were wrong to be an optimist. Maybe pessimism is the thing.” I have been a consistent pessimist ever since, with few exceptions (*The Vonnegut Statement* 13).

This pessimism is reflected in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, in which history appears to have no purpose and to be out of anyone’s control (Morse 84). Billy finds himself “guided by dread and the lack of dread. Dread told him when to stop. Lack of it told him when to move again” (Vonnegut 52). The dread experienced by Billy is the kind of dread described by the proto-existentialist philosopher Soren Kierkegaard. In Kierkegaardian terms, dread is the realization that “Man is free; but his freedom does not look like the glorious liberty of the enlightenment; it is no longer the gift of God. Once again, man stands alone in the universe, responsible for his condition, likely to remain in a lowly state, but free to reach above the stars” (Kaufmann 47). Though Kierkegaard sees a possibility for salvation through Christian faith, Vonnegut sees no such possibility. Billy experiences pure dread; the insecurity, despair and loneliness of his existence.

In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, there is frequent meaningless repetition of phrases such as “mustard gas and roses,” “so it goes” and the colors “blue and ivory,” as if we are doomed to repeat the history of pointless and ironic death and mass destruction. This view of recurring history is consistent with the theory of cyclical history put forward by the German historian and philosopher Oswald Spengler in his book *The Decline of the West*. Spengler claims that “expression-forms of world-history are limited in number, and that eras, epochs, situations, persons, are ever repeating themselves true to type” (Spengler 4). Spengler rejects the linear progress of history and believes that every
culture goes through a cycle, which he divides into four stages—spring, summer, autumn and winter. At the end of each cycle, the culture simply fades away, only to be repeated in the form of a different culture. This cycle, according to Spengler, is what forms world history.

The military and military bureaucracy in *Slaughterhouse-Five* are portrayed as absurd, as they are in *Catch-22*. An example from *Slaughterhouse-Five* that is very similar to Doc Daneeka’s official death on paper in *Catch-22* is the passage in which the narrator sarcastically informs us that until the names of the American prisoners of war are written in the German's ledger, they are considered “missing in action and probably dead” (Vonnegut 66). Another example is when the British prisoners of war at one of the concentration camps in Germany have an absurd over-supply of food because of a “clerical error” (Vonnegut 68). The various elements in the novel, the absurdity of certain events and the pervasive meaninglessness leads Klinkowitz to believe that in the novel, “there is no discursive message, for its structure and theme are identical; no meaning exists beyond the book’s own being” (*Kurt Vonnegut* 17). The reader cannot identify any real meaning or message behind the text. At the end of the novel, “the reader is left with an image of twittering unintelligibility summing up what the dispersed narrative momentum anticipated in many ways—refusing to reach a crisis or resolution, refusing, in fine, to clarify itself or its intention for the reader” (Giannone 84).

There is an emphasis in the novel on how everything comes from and eventually turns back to waste. When the American prisoners of war are kept in boxcars before being transported to Dresden, the narrator describes the waste producing process: “in went water and loaves of black bread and sausage and cheese, and out came shit and
piss and language” (Vonnegut 51). This emphasis on everything becoming waste, which is recurrent in the novel, makes the world seem even more pointless and ridiculous so that trying to find “fine patterns of meaning” in existence becomes “doubly ridiculous” (Shaw 115). The traditional view of a purposeful life is seen as absurd, and organized religion, because of its insistence on meaning and purpose, is perceived to be futile.

I. Religion, Heroism, Death and Free Will

Along with rejecting and transforming the traditional form of the novel, Vonnegut, a “rational atheist” (Morse 83), rejects Christianity “with its insistence on God’s acts in history” (The Vonnegut Statement 209). In the novel, the narrator proclaims that “the Son of God was dead as a doornail” (Vonnegut 148). There is no meaning or purpose in life, and there is no order in the universe; God is simply not interested in our history. In Slaughterhouse-Five there is a realization that God “is probably…too busy with other projects to concern Himself with his earthly children” (Schatt 27). Through the voice of Kilgore Trout, the science fiction writer in the novel whose writing helps Billy to “re-invent” himself through science fiction, Vonnegut rewrites the bible. Trout believes that “Christians found it so easy to be cruel” because the bible gives them the message that it is acceptable to kill people who are not well connected: “before you kill somebody, make absolutely sure he isn’t well connected” (Vonnegut 78). Trout’s revision of the bible in his novel The Gospel from Outer Space advocates the following message: “from this moment on, He will punish horribly anyone who torments a bum who has no connections!” (79).
Kurt Vonnegut’s “tragedy and laughter are based on the absurd recognition that life means death” (Hauck 244). The narrative voice of Kurt Vonnegut in the novel dryly makes the statement early on in the novel that even if people were not killed by wars, “there would still be plain old death” (Vonnegut 3). Along with the end of form (Giannone 86), the end of human life is therefore also a major focus in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, which has been described as “a litany for the dead and dying” (*The Vonnegut Statement* 208). The novel starts out with the ironic death of poor old Edgar Derby, who was meaninglessly shot by a firing squad after a regular trial for taking a teapot after the massacre in Dresden. Derby was influenced by heroic war myths and pulled a lot of strings to get into the army since he was too old to fight. He was reading *The Red Badge of Courage* right before the destruction of Dresden, and the heroic story of Henry Fleming made him “mournfully pregnant with patriotism and middle age and imaginary wisdom” (Vonnegut 109). Derby is immersed in the myth of the hero, not realizing that the myth does not reflect the reality of war. He imagines himself to be Henry Fleming, the hero who, though initially afraid, patriotically dedicates himself to the pursuit of the heroic “red badge” during battle, which represents the ultimate honor. Derby’s fate, however, is not the fate of Crane’s Henry Fleming. His last images are not “of tranquil skies, fresh meadows” and “cool brooks,” which are the closing images of *The Red Badge of Courage*. Derby’s last images are those of mass destruction. Vonnegut suggests that maybe the ironic death of Derby should be the climax of the novel. The impact of Edgar Derby’s death, however, is neutralized by its being narrated at the very beginning of the novel. The execution of Derby for petty theft poses the question: if death is the appropriate punishment for Derby for stealing a teapot, then what would be the appropriate punishment for those responsible for the complete destruction of an
undefended city and the massacre of one hundred thirty-five thousand of its citizens? (Morse 80).

The bird song “Poo-tee-weet?” that frames the novel at the end of the first and last chapters is nihilistic and meaningless, and it supports the statement made by Vonnegut that:

There is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre. Everybody is supposed to be dead, to never say anything or want anything ever again. Everything is supposed to be very quiet after a massacre, and it always is, except for the birds. And what do the birds say? All there is to say about a massacre, things like ‘Poo-tee-weet?’ (Vonnegut 14).

The bird song symbolizes the inability of the mind to process a pointless loss of human life that is so huge that language cannot even describe it. The bird song “becomes a meaningless cry testifying to the indifference of nature [and God] over the worst human massacre in modern European history” (Morse 88). The only way to break such a silence is through the new narrative of Vonnegut, which tells the story indirectly by using a combination of science fiction, “reality,” humor, songs, limericks, drawings and multiple narrators.

_Slaughterhouse-Five_ is also concerned with the central question of free will. In the novel, there is a certain sense of what Klinkowitz calls “pessimistic fatalism” (Vonnegut in America 185). An example of this “pessimistic fatalism” is in the constant repetition of the meaningless and “numbing, fatalistic refrain” (Dickstein 43) “so it goes” after each death as an “indictment of divine absence” (Giannone 94). The refrain “so it goes” is an ironic and satiric statement that portrays Billy’s resignation to the state he is in. Billy also learns on the planet Tralfamadore that the concept of free will is
uniquely human: “only on Earth is there any talk of free will” (Vonnegut 62). Events are structured in a certain way, there is no choice; things are, always have been, always will be, the way they are. The narrator informs us that “among the things Billy Pilgrim could not change were the past, the present and the future” (44). The destruction of Dresden simply “had to be done… That's war,” Rumfoord tells Billy, whose only response is “I know… Everything is all right, and everybody has to do exactly what he does” (Vonnegut 144). According to Tralfamadorian philosophy, human beings are like insects trapped in amber and every moment “simply is…There is no why” (Vonnegut 55). Vonnegut, by denying Billy Pilgrim any free will, and making him a “specter” in his own existence (Cacicedo 363), is asking the question: if man actually does have free will and is in control of his own fate, then how can he possibly justify the inhumanity of war in general and the destruction of Dresden in particular? (Schatt 89). One critic argues that Vonnegut presents us with the idea that if humans would just become conscious of the absurdity of their actions, then they might be able to recognize reality (Schatt 91). However, people are unaware of the absurdity of their actions and so, “they have no control over their destinies and are as much the playthings of fate as is Billy Pilgrim” (91).

The fact that *Slaughterhouse-Five*, a novel about World War II written by a World War Two veteran, was published during the Vietnam war era, stresses the “uninterrupted rhythms of war” (Walsh 199). In the novel, World War II and the destruction of Dresden is happening simultaneously with the war in Vietnam since we are told that Billy’s son is a member of the Green Berets in the U.S. Army. Vonnegut writes about the destruction of Dresden in light of the other atrocities of World War II (Morse 80) much like we may read *Slaughterhouse-Five* and other war novels in light
of wars, massacres and other violent events that have happened since their publication. We come to the realization that Dresden happened during the “enlightened twentieth century,” not during the dark ages (Morse 82). The horrors of Dresden-like events have occurred since then and they continue to occur. It seems as if humans, with all their knowledge and scientific and technological advancements, have not learned much from the past. Maybe Vonnegut is correct in his belief that there will always be wars, they are “as easy to stop as glaciers” (3).
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

According to Margot Norris in *Writing War in the Twentieth Century*, “war writing is an inevitably intertexted process, obliged to contend with its own tradition of genres and conventions in the spirit of debt, opposition, or subversion” (24). The war novels of Norman Mailer, Joseph Heller and Kurt Vonnegut, which have been the focus of this study, have had to contend with the tradition of the war genre. As American novelists writing about the Second World War, the tradition these three novelists have had to contend with ranges back to the narratives produced by the experiences of the early settlers with the Native Americans and the Indian Wars, which are the first American war narratives (*Regeneration* 22). Along with having to contend with the literary traditions of the American war novel genre, the novelists had to confront the national mythologies that these war narratives engendered.

Slotkin describes the myth of regeneration through violence, the myth of the frontier and the myth of the American hero as being part of a “mythological system” that was adapted according to the needs of the growing nation (*Gunfighter* 4). According to Slotkin, the frontier became an ideological term which referred to the concept of “unlimited opportunity for the strong, ambitious, self-reliant individual to thrust his way to the top” (*Regeneration* 5). Slotkin links this “frontier psychology” to the myth of regeneration through violence, since the roots of that myth are in the experiences of the Puritans with the Native Americans (6). Slotkin believes that what the Puritans desired above all was “a tabula rasa on which they could inscribe their dream: the outline of an idealized Puritan England, a Bible commonwealth, a city on a hill exemplifying the Word of God to all the World” (38). The Puritans traveled to the
New World seeking regeneration. However, the genocide of the Native Americans was required in order for that regeneration to occur. Thus, according to Slotkin, the myth of regeneration through violence, which adapted to the changes of history, became an essential part of the “American experience.” In his study of the myth of regeneration through violence, Slotkin traces the use and development of that myth throughout American war narratives, starting with Indian War narratives and ending with very recent movie productions such as The Thin Red Line. A clear example of how the myth of the frontier is essential to the “American experience” and adapts to the changing times and needs of the nation is the rhetoric used during the Vietnam War. According to Alex Vernon, in Soldiers Once and Still, there is a “literary interpretation that views America’s twentieth century role toward Vietnam as a reenactment of its nineteenth-century myth of the frontier” (272).

Literary works such as James Fenimore Cooper’s Indian War novel The Last of the Mohicans, Stephen Crane’s Civil War novel The Red Badge of Courage and Hemingway’s war novels For Whom the Bell Tolls (set in the Spanish Civil War) and A Farewell to Arms (set in World War I) are all a part of the literary canon of American war novels, which adopt the myth of regeneration through violence to varying degrees in their narratives. These novels, among other war narratives, are examples of the tradition that Mailer, Heller and Vonnegut write against in their respective war novels: The Naked and the Dead, Catch-22 and Slaughterhouse-Five.

The war novels of Mailer, Heller and Vonnegut are all anti-war novels which contain elements of alienation, anxiety and significant trauma. The Naked and the Dead, Catch-22 and Slaughterhouse-Five, like many other post-World War II novels, do not romanticize war. The three novels portray the image that “there is no more horrible or
degrading experience than combat...war indeed is hell” (Meredith 1). All three novels, despite their differences, emphasize the trauma experienced by soldiers during the Second World War as a result of the unprecedented violence of that war, which was, according to Dickstein, “a new kind of experience” (21). Dickstein states that this new experience, which involved young men killing and dying at a very young age, “produced instinctive existentialists, young men caught between adventure and dread who suddenly became aware of the fragility of life and their own vulnerability” (21).

The philosophy of existentialism, as proposed by Sartre in Being and Nothingness (1946), grew out of the experiences of the Second World War and what Dearborn calls “the enormous concomitant psychological, cultural, and ontological changes in those who had lived through them” (57-8). The war novels of Mailer, Heller and Vonnegut were clearly influenced to varying degrees by the philosophy of existentialism, which expresses the engagement of the human consciousness in “a perpetual, and futile, flight from the anguish of realizing our own absolute freedom” (57).

Margot Norris believes that “because war is a world-unmaking event, a reality deconstructing and defamiliarizing activity, one of the challenges of war writing is how to make its epistemological disorientation, its experienced ‘unreality,’ real” (24). The three war novels discussed in this study portray war as a “reality deconstructing and defamiliarizing activity.” However, each novel creates that representation in different ways, using different narrative forms. In The Naked and the Dead, Norman Mailer is concerned with creating an accurate representation of the activity of war in an epic war novel. Mailer, by realistically describing the details of the American military campaign on the fictional Pacific island of Anopopei, illustrates the physical horror, futility and the existential anguish of the soldiers in World War II. Mailer represents the
experiences of war to the reader in an attempt to accurately portray the un-regenerative reality of war and its power to “strip away the complexities of modern life and to plunge the soldier back to the prehistory of man as a species” (Walsh 116). Walsh states that in *The Naked and the Dead*, there is a “prevailing nihilism, carried through the novel’s unity of tone and language” (117). There are no heroes in the novel, and it is hard to sympathize with any of the characters, who seem incapable of performing any kind of “positive and redemptive action” (112-13).

In *The Naked and the Dead*, Mailer introduces several new elements into the genre of the American War novel. Mailer criticizes the American military, he humanizes the Japanese enemy and he presents an existential view of the world that is futile. In the novel, war is considered absurd and un-regenerative and God is regarded as a “practical joker” (Walsh 114). Despite these new narrative elements in Mailer’s text, he maintains some traditional elements of the genre. He is clearly indebted to the war novels of Hemingway, and he appears to be trying to create a text that lives up to the standard of Hemingway’s war novels. In *The Naked and the Dead*, war is portrayed as a man’s world. It is a purely male sphere of action in which a man is supposed to behave according to a certain set of rules. For example, at the beginning of the novel, Hennessey, the soldier who is killed first, is afraid to ask not to be left alone since that would show weakness, which would not be accepted by the other men. Another element that is reminiscent of traditional war narratives is the fact that the novel is centered on the lives of men during times of combat. The soldiers spend most of their time in the novel waiting for combat action. However, there are few scenes of confrontation between the American soldiers and the “Japs.” Some characters in the novel try to perform “heroic” acts such as climbing up Mount Anaka or saving Wilson. However,
these acts are motivated by sheer desire for power, as in the case of Croft wanting to climb the mountain no matter what, or by fear, as is the case of the soldiers trying to save Wilson. In addition, unlike *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *The Naked and the Dead* maintains linear progression of time. Events in Mailer’s novel are told in chronological order and the traditional structure of the novel, consisting of rising action, a climax and falling action are still present.

Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22* is consistent with Norris’ assertion that the war writing process is “inevitably intertexted” (24). Heller, who has been influenced by Mailer, has to contend with the influence exerted by *The Naked and the Dead* and so in *Catch-22*, he satirizes and subverts Mailer’s novel. Heller, unlike Mailer, is not concerned with representing the reality of the war or with making the “‘unreality’ of war real.” Heller is more concerned with creating a work that portrays the absurdity of war and post-war existential anxiety through a humorous, clever, satirical attack on the American military and its bureaucracy and institutions. Heller’s novel parodies and subverts earlier war literature. *Catch-22*, as Walsh writes, is “a new kind of satire, one whose elaborate fabrications communicate a profound national Angst” (191). Yossarian reliving Snowden’s death represents the climax of the novel and presents the essential message of the novel that war is pointless and unnecessarily destructive. In the world of *Catch-22*, Heller satirizes the traditional concepts of war, heroism and regenerative violence, all of which prove to be “obsolete and invalid” (Walsh 194). Despite Yossarian’s inability to escape catch-22, at the end of the novel, he manages to accomplish his goal of surviving the war by simply following Orr’s lead and running away. By confronting his fears of death in the chapter entitled ‘Eternal City,’ Yossarian decides that desertion is the only escape from a violent death at war. The ending of the novel creates the sense
that there may be some form of a solution for the madness of war. Away from violence, life is “normal” and order is restored. When Yossarian makes the decision to desert, the narrative assumes chronological order and “assumes a forward motion” (Seed 50).

Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five*, on the other hand, offers no such solution for escape from the madness of war. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut represents the unreality of war. He is not concerned with the revulsion at the sights and smells of the rotting bodies of soldiers who died violently, as is Mailer. Nor is he concerned with making precise satirical attacks on the military and bureaucracy the way Heller does in *Catch-22*. *Slaughterhouse-Five* is the embodiment of unreality; it is the absurd textualized. Billy Pilgrim’s Tralfamadorian, Schizophrenic story of being unstuck in time and traveling back and forth between past, present and future, and between the planets Earth and Tralfamadore, is a narrative enactment of what Bradbury calls “the absurdity of the human endeavor” (215).

In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut enlarges the attack started by Mailer and continued by Heller to include Christianity, American exceptionalism, the heroic tradition of novels such as Stephen Crane’s *Red Badge of Courage*, the concept of free will, history, war and the military industry. *Slaughterhouse-Five* becomes an assault on the human condition. Like *The Naked and the Dead* and *Catch-22*, there is a pervasive sense of dread, nihilism, lack of hope and resignation in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, but the narrative representation of these thematic elements, is different in Vonnegut’s novel. His narrative is not limited in any way; it incorporates various modes of expression, such as absurd phrases, and it mixes science fiction with biography so that in the narrative, reality and fantasy become interchangeable. The novel challenges the traditional concept of time and history by presenting a non-chronological progression of
events and a Tralfamadorian world in which events happen simultaneously. The Tralfamadorian concepts of time, history and free will allow Vonnegut to launch an attack on all topics he wishes to criticize. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, all wars are unregenerative, no matter what the justification; war is not a sphere of manly combat as it is in *The Naked and the Dead* and running away, as Yossarian does in *Catch-22* is not a viable option.
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