

Napalm in the Morning: An Absurdist Interpretation of the Poetics of Humor in Three Modern War Novels



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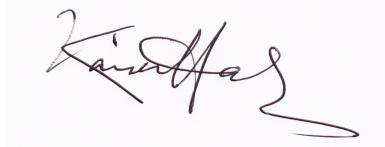
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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

I hereby declare that this thesis is the student's own work and effort. All sources of information incorporated here have been duly acknowledged. This thesis has been submitted with my approval.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kaiser Hamidul Haq', is displayed on a light gray rectangular background.

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DECLARATION

This thesis is a presentation of my original research work. Wherever contributions of others are involved, every effort is made to indicate this clearly, with due reference to the literature, and acknowledgement of collaborative research and discussions.



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Table of Contents

Abstract	i
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Wars and the Changing Ethos.....	3
Chapter 2: Literature Review	6
Chapter 3: War, Humor, and Absurdity.....	11
Establishing precedent.....	11
Response and Remembrance.....	14
War is Absurd.....	17
Chapter 4: War and the Poetics of Humor.....	23
(Ir)rational men, (ir)rational world.....	23
Humor as a coping mechanism.....	26
Humor and bureaucracy.....	29
Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori.....	33
Chapter 5: Conveying Absurdism through media: the problems of adaptation.....	37
Kid Sampson, half-off.....	40

Chapter 6: Conclusion-----	43
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Works Cited-----	46
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Abstract

This paper aims to analyze the narratives and the characters of Jaroslav Hasek's *The Good Soldier Švejk and his Fortunes in the World War*, Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, and Tim O'Brien's *Going after Cacciato* using an Absurdist framework in order to decode the mechanics and functions of humor in the depiction and memorialization of war. The discussion will be divided into three salient chapters that all interweave to illustrate the paper's central thesis. The first of these chapters aims to identify whether humor is an appropriate response in times of war and trauma, and if Absurdism can be used to understand the operational and philosophical aspects of war. The second chapter will discuss the specific function and poetics of humor within the context of the three selected novels, and analyze how the three authors used Absurdist and satirical elements to evoke the physiological and psychological trauma of war. The final section will discuss what form of media is most optimized for the transmission of the message that is part of the three selected narratives, with the hypothesis that textual media is superior to visual media (movies and tv shows) due to the constructionist nature inherent in the act of reading and meaning-making.

Keywords: *The Good Soldier Švejk*, *Catch-22*, *Going after Cacciato*, Absurdism, poetics of humor, war humor

Chapter 1

Introduction

VRChat (Virtual Reality Chat) is a virtual online platform that utilizes virtual reality technology to allow players to embody established fictional characters, or create their own avatars, and collectively occupy a virtual world, with essentially an inexhaustible number of ways to interact with their digital surroundings and each other. This allows for an almost infinite range of possible interactions - from structured gameplay, to entropic group roleplay. One particular subsection of the community, however, uses the liberal online space and the anonymity provided by the computer-generated avatars to talk about their trauma - a form of anonymous therapy and mutual aid. One particular creator, using the moniker Syrmor, has developed a community based around these specific conversations, and provides a platform for people to tell their stories. Syrmor specializes, among other things, in talking to soldiers and veterans with harrowing combat encounters and near-death experiences. There is, however, a catch - due to the inherent nature of VRChat, all parties involved in these conversations visually present as cartoonish animated characters with highly exaggerated body language and caricatured expressions. The VR technology is able to capture and replicate the gestures and expressions of the people speaking, which results in an absurd array of contrapuntal visuals. So, as an air force veteran recounts his career as an airgunner deployed in Afghanistan, and is able to barely contain himself as he recounts the gut-wrenching experience of accidentally gunning down a building full of women and children in the Helmand River Valley, what viewers see on screen is an animated character from the *Star Wars* franchise gesticulating wildly while sitting in a fantasy neon swamp with Winnie the Pooh

and a round magic cat with droopy green eyes (*Syrmor* 12:57-17:19). In another video, a hardened US Marine, using the avatar of an animated cyborg Japanese schoolgirl, talks impassioned to a cartoon cat about being nearly killed by a rigged anti-tank mine and facing enemy fire from an exposed position (*Syrmor* 01:50-14:06). This may seem counterproductive, or even disrespectful, to the therapeutic and amelioratory purpose of these sessions; however, the combination of the comic and hyperpop visuals with the gritty retellings often serves to enhance the holistic impact of the videos. The humorous avatars foreground the narrative, and the absurdity of the visuals grounds the stories in reality. Although VR technology is new and novel, the contribution of humor and absurdity in understanding, encapsulating, and reshaping tragedy and trauma have a long-established literary lineage.

This paper aims to examine the intersectionality of humor and depictions or retellings of war, and interpret it through an Absurdist framework, through an analysis of the narratives and the characters of Jaroslav Hasek's *The Good Soldier Švejk and his Fortunes in the World War*, Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, and Tim O'Brien's *Going after Cacciato*. The analysis will be conducted in three distinct but interconnected sections. The first section will examine if humor is an appropriate or adequate response in the setting of war, while establishing the historical literary precedent of employing humor as a means of conceptualizing war and collective human trauma. The second section will discuss the specific function and poetics of humor within the context of the three selected novels, and analyze how the three authors use absurdist and satirical elements to evoke the physiological and psychological trauma of war. The final section will discuss what form of media is most optimized for the transmission of the message that is part of the three selected

narratives, with the hypothesis that textual media is superior to visual media (movies and tv shows) due to the constructionist nature inherent in the act of reading and meaning-making.

Wars and the Changing Ethos

For the majority of civilization, war has been a reality-establishing and mythopoeic effort - wars and conflicts determined survival, created gods and heroes, and gave rise to ideologies that still inform human ideation and thought. However, as the primary incentives for waging war shifted from grounded needs (such as the struggle for land and resources for survival), to more abstract ideals (establishing belief structures and identity formation), humanity's perception of martial conflict has undergone a paradigmatic shift. A significant departure from the universal perception of war was observed after World War I which, according to Arnold Toynbee, marked the end of a "span of five thousand years during which war had been one of mankind's master institutions" (214). This change, however, was gradual and not without resistance. An onslaught of war books published after World War I painted a grisly and horrific image of the various fronts of combat, presenting a stark contrast to the supposed ideals of the 'Great War'. This sparked the 'War Books Controversy', which was "used to refer to everything from the novels' factual accuracy to their ideological content, but most often served as a pretext for moving the discussion away from the actual texts and onto a different, extra-literary terrain" (Dušanić 101). *All Quiet on the Western Front* by Erich Maria Remarque, *A Farewell to Arms* by Ernest Hemingway, *Undertones of War* by Edmund Blunden, *Good-Bye to All That* by Robert Graves, *Under Fire* by Henri Barbusse, and *Journey to the End of the Night* by Louis-Ferdinand Céline were some of the books that became the target of polemic outrage. The impact of these and other books of the genre, and the discourse generated by both their supporters and detractors, had a large cultural footprint.

Although the shift of opinion was unable to completely put an end to upcoming wars in the 20th century, it laid the groundwork to establish the idea “that the institution of war, particularly war in the developed world, was repulsive, uncivilized, immoral and futile”, which was “voiced only by minorities before 1914” (Mueller, *Changing Attitudes* 2). Joseph Mueller is further of the opinion that war, or at least war on a grand international scale, is to become obsolete - “where war was once often casually seen as beneficial, noble, and glorious...the conviction has now become widespread that war would be intolerably costly, unwise, futile, and debased” (*The Obsolescence* 321). This seems to be supported by the fact that, despite there being a relatively transparent target to be villainized by the Allied powers, anti-war sentiment during the ensuing second World War was high across the West. Evidence of the interwar period further suggests that the prevalent feelings among even the Germans regarding Adolf Hitler’s machinations and aggression was either antipathy or abject horror (321). The formal cessation of World War II, the unprecedented scale of casualties and losses of the two wars, disillusionment with the war myth, and a growing push for global stability eventually led to an unrestful peace. The collective result of these effects was perhaps best encapsulated in the prevalent anti-war sentiment expressed by the American populace as a result of American intervention and involvement in the Vietnam war. Multiple factors were responsible for the public perception and resulting disavowal of the war. The United States faced heavy casualties during the war (the death toll was estimated to be 47,244 dead, while 303,704 were wounded, according to the Vietnam Veterans Leadership Program of Houston), and “for many on the homefront, Vietnam was the antithesis of the promise of American life” (Rollins 419). This was also the first war that was heavily televised, and “Americans regularly saw film of airplanes flying, often dropping bombs, and troops on patrol, sometimes in combat” (Mandelbaum 157). Coupled with the fact that, despite long term deployment of troops and resources, America

was nowhere closer to cementing a victory, was hypothesized to have led to further disenchantment and disapproval of the war effort. America was also suffering from internal issues related to class, race, and gender, and there was an active civil rights movement fomenting in nearly all parts of the country. All these factors contributed to a concerted anti-war movement, which in turn was buoyed by, and also empowered, existing anti-establishmentarian countercultural movements - a 'beat generation' was spawned, leading to the birth of the hippie movement which embraced rock and folk music to challenge materialism and traditional American values (Harrison 99).

The point of tracing the history and ethos of these three wars is to establish a literary lineage of the three war novels that have been selected for this paper. *The Good Soldier Švejk*, *Catch-22*, and *Going after Cacciato* are each a result of a different war with their own geopolitical and sociocultural context. *The Good Soldier Švejk* was published in three volumes between 1921 and 1923 by Czech writer Jaroslav Hasek, who fought for three different armies during the first World War. *The Good Soldier Švejk* is an early example of an anti-war novel, and both its ideology and form of delivery makes it an outlier at the time it was published. Joseph Heller served as a bombardier during the second World War at the age of 19, and his experiences inspired the creation of *Catch-22*, first published in 1961. *Catch-22* is a fair reflection of the societal tenor of its time regarding the general outlook towards war, and belongs to the established literary context of anti-war and anti-establishmentarian ideology. *Going after Cacciato* was published in 1978 by Vietnam war veteran Tim O' Brien, and perfectly echoes both the horrors of war as experienced by soldiers, and the dominant anti-war spirit of the time of its publishing. By tracing the changing ethos which resulted in these books, it would be safe to draw the conclusion that, in most parts of the world, the heroic treatment of war has become an anachronism.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

There are varying degrees of scholarly research based on *The Good Soldier Švejk*, *Catch-22*, and *Going after Cacciato* which cover a wide array of topics examining their form, purpose, internal logic, and literary merit. *Catch-22*, arguably the most famous of the three, has been researched and written about inexhaustibly since its publication 1961, which makes it difficult to find new avenues for research. *The Good Soldier Švejk* precedes *Catch-22*, and served as an inspiration for it and many other novels that followed in the wake of World War I and II. The output of scholarly work about *The Good Soldier Švejk* in English is comparatively lower than *Catch-22*, yet still abundant. The real issue arises regarding research on *Going after Cacciato*, where specifically the novel's formulation of humor and absurdity is a scarcely written about topic. It has to be noted that unlike *The Good Soldier Švejk* and *Catch-22*, which are considered the magnum opus in their respective writers' oeuvre, *Going after Cacciato* is one of O'Brien's comparatively lesser known works. O'Brien is more notably known for his 1990 anthology *The Things They Carried*, which has generated significantly more academic interest.

A particular challenge of locating academic writing on the literary qualities of *Catch-22* is that search terms need to be highly optimized and pointed in order to ensure that the search results are not completely drowned out by writing from other disciplines that have used the paroxysm of *Catch-22* in their writing. In this regard, the novel suffers from its own success, as the phrase itself has become an artifact of culture and has been adopted in modern lexicology. The elements of

absurdity and humor in *Catch-22*, and how they operate within the confines of the narrative of the novel has been extensively written about. In “Joseph Heller: At War with Absurdity”, Jean E. Kennard discusses *Catch-22* as being more than just a work of satire or an anti-war novel, and examines the Absurd aspects of the novel. He identifies the novel as “an illustration of the absurdity of the human condition itself” (75), and applauds the experimental risks in storytelling that Heller takes in order to drive home the fundamental futility of human actions in an absence of meaning. Significant critical writing has looked into the humor of *Catch-22* and explored the various facets that it covers. James Nagel calls the humor of the novel “angry”, and argues that almost no critic has been able to decipher what makes the novel funny. According to his examination of the novel, he discusses the idea that the humor is not explicitly meant for entertainment, but rather stems from “the harsh derision and directed social attack of satire...hitting out against definable groups within American society and creating a unified front against a corrupt and ridiculous enemy” (100). He makes a distinction between Heller’s targeted derision rather than the ubiquitous applicability of humor to general grievance and misfortune. Taking a different approach, Laura Hidalgo Downing describes how the humor in the novel is derived from the subversion of expectation resulting from various layers of incongruence and contradiction, which supports this paper’s angle of viewing the novel through an Absurdist lens. Downing uses a cognitive approach to text in order to interpret how the incongruities that arise between people and circumstances are resolved (108). Walter R. McDonald chooses the functional aspect of the comedy in *Catch-22*, and investigates how the comic form in the novel exists to heighten the images of dread and exploitation that soon follow, which is again congruent to this paper’s conclusions. According to McDonald:

The comic form and techniques of the book, then, are functional, designed to make us laugh and then, in Heller's own words, "look back in horror" at what at the time seemed funny but which was, all along, hideously destructive...the many tricks of comedy work to persuade us to see the world as Yossarian sees it - as a cruel and humorless nightmare that is dreamed up, ordered, and played by catch #22. (18)

In contrast to these other streams of thought, Daniel Green eschews the interpretatory lens of viewing the mechanics of humor and absurdism in *Catch-22* and, and focuses on the plain comedic merits of Heller's writing. His intention is to show that the comedy and the serious tone of the novel are not mutually exclusive, and the comic itself can be serious (187). Critical studies have also been conducted regarding the structure of class and bureaucracy in the novel. In "Catch, class and bureaucracy: the meaning of Joseph Heller's *Catch 22*", Nick Perry analyzes the trappings of bureaucracy in the novel, and attempts to "reconstruct how the novel works on its reader and to suggest the ways in which this connects with...distinctive social and cultural situation" (719). Shifting to visual media studies, in "'I See Everything Twice': An Examination of *Catch-22*", author Chuck Thegze discusses the 1970 film adaptation of the novel, and discusses the unique challenges and limitations in adapting the novel for screen, which supports the idea that elements of the novel are better off in novel form due to the restrictive storytelling and runtime concerns of visual media.

Critical readings of *The Good Soldier Švejk* that align with the ideas that will be discussed in this paper talk about the ironic structure of the novel, its anti-militarist strain of satire, and discusses Švejk as a wilful protagonist whose intentional or unintentional sabotage of bureaucratic

affairs display a strong sense of self and individuality. In “Prosaic Irony: Structure, Mode, and Subversion in *The Good Soldier Švejk*” Joshua P. Beall argues that the novel “performs its subversion of hegemonic histories, nationalist obligations, and narrative conventions by means of prosaic irony” (208). Through the use of irony and satire, Švejk is able to escape the constraints of ideology that aims to bring him to heel. Peter Petro, in a comparative study between *The Good Soldier Švejk* and Vladimir Voinovich’s *The Life and Extraordinary Adventures of Private Ivan Chonkin*, echoes the sentiments expressed by Beall, and discusses how the absurdities of war affect both Švejk and Chonkin’s actions (117). Focusing on the character of Švejk, Peter Steiner comments that Švejk’s indirect challenge of authority as an act of philosophical resistance, which makes him an “[individualist] who resist all attempts at molding [him] into cooperative members of...[society]” (469). Erica Weitzman’s views are in agreement with Steiner’s assessment, and she adds that Švejk’s cheerful incompetence is part of a passive form of sabotage that destabilizes the ideology of war (118).

Resources on *Going after Cacciato* are relatively scarce, and there are no critical writings regarding the internal use of humor and its connection to the absurdity of the narrative. Most scholars who have written about *Going after Cacciato* have chosen the novel’s theme and structure, the temporal anomaly in the story, and the novel’s implications of Western empiricism. In “Going After Cacciato: The Romance and the Real War”, G. Thomas Couser discusses the usual unreliability of war narratives in their ability to reflect the real war, which is a prevalent theme of the novel and also this paper. Couser argues that “the shape of his narrative is convincingly grounded in-and thus expressive of-his central character's experience of the war”, which leads to a distortion of the perception of time and reality (2). Micheal W. Raymond findings are

incongruent with those of Couser, as Raymond claims that the entire narrative is a piece of imagined fiction being used as a simulation for the experiences of the Vietnam war (104).

The gaps in the scholarship of these novels is that they have never been studied in conjunction with one another, despite sharing themes and ideas that synergize with each other. *Going after Cacciato* is also an understudied piece of literature, despite being part of a literary tradition that echoed the popular anti-war sentiment of its time. This paper hopes to bridge some of these gaps, and present a holistic view of the themes of absurdity and humor that permeate the three novels.

Chapter 3

War, Humour, and Absurdity

Since this paper delves into the functionality and poetics of humor and absurdity during wartime, identifying whether humor is an appropriate response to extended trauma, or if Absurdism can be used to understand the basic mechanics of war, is a necessary prerequisite. This chapter will argue that humor and absurdism are essential armaments during any large-scale conflict, which is reflected through the narratives in *The Good Soldier Švejk*, *Catch-22*, and *Going after Cacciato*. The argument will be presented in three parts - the first part will establish that there is a canonical literary precedent of using humorous and satirical narratives in writing about war; the second part will examine the idea that due to the core essence of war and what it asks of people, there is no singular ‘appropriate’ reaction or response to war; the final part will elaborate on the idea that Absurdism is an ideal lens to comprehend the frustration and futility of war.

Establishing precedent

Common law systems rely heavily on precedent, or previous cases that follow the same legal heredity, in order to check the validity and veracity of newer claims. Borrowing a page from the jurisprudence playbook, this section will focus on identifying a literary precedent for the establishing an interconnection between war and humor. In “Comedy and War”, Melvin Maddocks talks about different authors who found war a fertile ground for comedy, dating back to the time of Aristophanes. Some of these authors often faced backlash or even persecution from the authorities due to their treatment of the war, as those in power believed that the trivialization

of wars would alter public opinion against conflict. Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, published in 411 BC, is considered by many to be one of the first comedies ever produced that espoused anti-war sentiments. Between 432 and 404 BC, while the Peloponnesian War was still underway, Aristophanes wrote a total of 4 comedies (Maddocks 22). Even wars that were completely fictional, or part of an amalgamated historical myth, inspired comedies that questioned the optics and causes of various conflicts. Matthew Wright believes that certain Old Comedies, which include Aristophanes' *Acharnions*, *Birds* and *Daedalus*, Cratinus' *Dionysalexandros* and *Nemesis*, Eupolis' *Prospaltians*, and Plato's *Menelaus* made substantial use of the Trojan War theme (412). The spirit of these comedies was carried well into the Renaissance and subsequent eras by writers such as William Shakespeare (through his depiction of John Falstaff), Hans Jakob Christoffel von Grimmelshausen (*Simplicius Simplicissimus*), and Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra (*Don Quixote*). Maddocks also includes the likes of Jonathan Swift (*Gulliver's Travels*), Voltaire (*Candide*), and Nikolai Gogol (*Dead Souls*) for their "remarkably deft touch at ridiculing the wrong reasons for going to war" and for portraying the tenuous balance between the tragedy and elation of war (25). The scale and destruction of the first World War caused a tectonic shift in our collective consciousness, and humanity searched for ways to make sense of the chaos. In many ways, this ramped up the production of war comedies, and they have ever since been a constant fixture of world literature. So, *The Good Soldier Švejk*, *Catch-22*, and *Going after Cacciato* are part of a long tradition of writers, whose task is not only to ridicule and illuminate, but to remember. Be it during times of peace, or in periods of unrest, their humane exploration of the inhumanity of war through a comical lens preserves the memory of the reality of conflict, and its toll on the human endeavor.

War narratives are either informed by personal encounters, or emerge from the shared well of collective human experience. As a result, the humor and absurdity chronicled through the media are echoes of real life, which are reflected by the wartime experiences of Jaroslav Hasek and Joseph Heller. In his World War I military career spanning from 1915 to 1920, Hasek somehow managed to fight in two different wars for three different armies. He was first drafted into the Austro-Hungarian army in 1915, but was captured while fighting in the Eastern front. He was recruited into the precursor of the Czech legion from a prisoner camp in what is now Ukraine, but later defected and joined the Russian Red Army (Weil 42). Joseph Heller joined the war when he was only 19 years old, and served in the European Theater of World War II till 1944. With the complete strength of the world's most powerful military-industrial complex supporting him, and with access to the most sophisticated instruments of war available at that time, Heller flew 60 missions, most of which he described as 'milk runs' - missions that posed little to no effort to his life. One of the aircrafts Heller flew in, a B-25 Mitchell 8U, a craft that was part of multiple missions that completely obliterated many small civilian settlements in Italy such as Pont-Saint-Martin, was affectionately nicknamed 'L'il Critter from the Moon' ("Joseph Heller and Catch-22").

The second world war even had its own version of memes, which evolved and spread organically owing to the migratory patterns of deployment. The prime example of this phenomenon was Kilroy, which was a graffiti image of a man peering over a wall with 'Kilroy was here' inscribed next to it. The most common depiction of Kilroy is that of a bald man with a disproportionately large bulbous nose and two pinprick eyes. Kilroy was nearly omnipresent and omniscient during World War II, appearing everywhere where armies went, and keeping a close

eye on the war effort - “every combat theater, in every latrine at every training camp, in every ruined building, it seemed Kilroy had been there” (O’Gorman 19). Part of Kilroy’s charm was that he was able to pop up in the most unexpected of places, and his proliferation shows that even during harsh and violent stages of human life, there is always space for levity. The combination of these aforementioned elements is proof that humor is inseparable from the arena of war, and there is a long-established precedent of the literary connection between war and humor.

Response and Remembrance

The response and reaction to a phenomenon, either individual or collective, is based on both an epistemological and sociological perception of events. Having an ‘appropriate’ response to war presupposes the idea that there is a static set of responses that are apropos in the face of war, which is categorically untrue. This section will discuss the fact that the very nature of war is antithetical to most intrinsic human values, and the formation of a singular objective narrative of wartime experiences is impossible.

‘War is hell’ is a common aphorism used to describe war, which forces the extrareal nature of war as something comparable to divine damnation. One of the most prevalent ideologies when it comes to war is that war and morality cannot coexist and are mutually exclusive, so moral consideration when faced with war or the possibility of war should be ignored. This sentiment that has no collective name, but is expressed by many rubrics: ‘realism’, ‘military necessity’, ‘inter arma silent leges’, ‘all’s fair in love and war’, ‘anything goes’, and ‘war is hell’ (Dombrowski 19). What sets war apart from perdition is that the majority of people that war affects are innocent and

not deserving of death or eternal torment. War destabilizes economies, rips families apart, destroys markers of civilization, and causes untold trauma and suffering on people from all socioeconomic spheres. Normal rules of engagement and social conduct are completely set aside during war, and committing atrocities is often encouraged as a form of weakening the enemy - rape and sexual violence as a weapon war, mass genocide of intellectuals to cripple an economy, and the destruction of historic monuments and artifacts are all recognizable actions undertaken during global and national conflicts . Events that, if perpetrated during peacetime, would lead to national and international news and swift legal action, become commonplace during war. Soldiers are given commendations and medals of bravery for perpetrating human suffering. War is born of humanity, and has been a hallmark for civilization and progress for millennia; however, the scale of the horror and tragedy committed in the name of war seems almost eldritch, as if by collective psychosis or demonic possession. This strengthens the idea that due to the very nature of war, and what it asks of people, there is no response that can be universally ‘appropriate’ which captures the true spirit of what people feel during war.

Another important challenge in trying to frame and conceptualize war is that narratives of war are subject to bias and optics of agenda. The experience of war, and the stories of the people who participate in it actively or passively, are not monolithic. Due to the splintered and piecemeal way war narratives unfold, their perception and reception has the potential to be vastly different based on the stage and scale. The global perception of a war can be markedly different from the local impression, which again will have a stark difference to how individuals perceive it. Avi Matalon acknowledges this rift between the global experience and the local expression of it. Even

wars that wreaked global havoc and fundamentally altered human history cannot force a unified global culture - “the war was global because everyone experienced it. Cultural expression of the war was local because everyone experienced it differently” (25). This is a natural result of the fragmentation caused by war - the true image of war is always obfuscated. Soldiers and personnel who fight in the war or are affiliated with it in some capacity view the war from a myopic lens. They are too close to the actual events to know its larger impact, and often their perception is clouded by personal injury, trauma, and grief. This is compounded by the fact that the documentation and memorialization of the war experience while in active duty was often discouraged or even forbidden, owing to fears of stoking panic at the homefront or interception of important information by the enemy. During the first World War, “recording battle experience in journals or diaries was expressly forbidden along the Western Front and letters home were carefully censored” (Eide 86). This means that the retellings of soldiers of their time at war are often products of remembrance, and memory is fallible. O’Brien expresses this exact idea in *Going after Cacciato*:

Each soldier, he has a different war. Even if it is the same war, it is a different war...In battle, in a war, a soldier sees only a tiny fragment of what is available to be seen. The soldier is not a photographic machine. He is not a camera. He registers, so to speak, only those few items that he is predisposed to register and not a single thing more. Do you understand this? So I am saying to you that after a battle each soldier will have different stories to tell, vastly different stories, and that when a war is ended it is as if there have been a million wars, or as many wars as there were soldiers. (218)

On the other hand, people not directly involved or affected by the war only have second hand knowledge of it. They know what they are allowed to know, and can fall prey to propaganda and other biases enforced by the authorities in order to push a particular narrative. Their view of the war is hyperopic, and limited to what exists and is allowed to exist in the ether. This illustrates the fundamental problem of knowing about the war - the perception and interpretation of it will vary based on an inexhaustible number of factors. As there is a fundamental incompatibility in the range of experiences and emotions that a war generates, it is impossible to arrange war narratives into a cohesive whole. Therefore, war will always be a kaleidoscopic affair, with the true reality being refracted and scattered by opposing shards of memories, experiences, and feelings.

War is Absurd

This section will introduce theoretical perspectives of Absurdism as described by Camus to illustrate that war itself is an absurd undertaking, and the narratives and characterizations in *The Good Soldier Švejk*, *Catch-22*, and *Going after Cacciato* perfectly encapsulate the Absurdist ideal. Camus was not the progenitor of the idea of Absurdism, but his essay “The Myth of Sisyphus” traces his inspiration from the likes of Aristotle, Søren Kierkegaard, Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Jaspers, and Fyodor Dostoevsky, and enunciates his own interpretation of Absurdity.

Although various interpretations of the philosophical imperative and consequence of Absurdism exist, it is agreed that the core concern of Absurdism is the inherent lack of meaning and purpose, the indifference of the universe to human concerns, and the impossibility of having

knowledge of the true nature of reality. According to Baltzer-Jaray, “absurdity lies in the chaos and irrationality of the universe, a universe that is not oriented toward our concerns but is benignly indifferent to our aspirations and endeavors” (9). The conflict of wanting to understand the world and find meaning in the void is both a precursor and anathema to human existence:

This world in itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said. But what is absurd is the confrontation of the irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart. The absurd depends as much on man as on the world. For the moment it is all that links them together. It binds them one to the other as only hatred can weld two creatures together. This is all I can discern clearly in this measureless universe where my adventure takes place. (Camus 26)

Wars are fought over many things - resources, identity, ideology, and bragging rights are a few examples of the reasons why mankind has occupied themselves with war throughout its existence. These causes, however, are an extension of the human desire to restore order and balance, although the exact type of order that might establish dominance is a matter of contention. War is absurd because it follows in the path of the core contradiction of human existence, which is the attempt to restore and maintain order in the absolute vacuum of it.

The existence of a fundamental contradiction or paradox between two or more irreconcilable forces is a fundamental aspect of Absurdism, and it could be extrapolated that the existence of contradictions regarding the nature of existence and the principles of human life is one of the primary roots of human suffering and existential angst. Camus argues that the “absurd

is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world” (31-32), and all other contradictions addressed by Absurdism are an extension of this basic concept. The attempts of a rational man to exist in an irrational world, or a seemingly irrational man functioning in a rational world all give rise to Absurdism. There is no resolute answer or solution, only questions that lead to the same questions. This fundamental paradox, this catch, means that everything results in a closed loop. The loop allows for no escape, only continuation ad finitum. The 3 selected novels perfectly represent the inability to escape, as the characters attempt to make sense of a world that seems to be both crumbling and flourishing around them. In *Catch-22*, Doc Daneeka explains the elegant but brutally effective paradox to Yossarian:

There was only one catch and that was Catch-22, which specified that a concern for one's own safety in the face of dangers that were real and immediate was the process of a rational mind. Orr was crazy and could be grounded. All he had to do was ask; and as soon as he did, he would no longer be crazy and would have to fly more missions. Orr would be crazy to fly more missions and sane if he didn't, but if he was sane he had to fly them. If he flew them he was crazy and didn't have to; but if he didn't want to he was sane and had to. (46)

Flying missions that might pose a risk to one's life goes against the fundamental drive of self-preservation. A person willing and eager to fly missions was therefore not in their right mind, and could be grounded. All one had to do in order to be grounded was ask, but the very act of asking displayed rationality and a desire for self-preservation, marking the individual as completely sane. It was military decree that anyone in their right mind must obey their duties, so if one asked to be grounded he must fly missions. The loop closes on itself, and there can be no escape.

This sentiment is expressed in *The Good Soldier Švejk* as well - no matter how much trouble Svejek gets himself into, or how many times he's imprisoned or institutionalized, he is always brought back to the theater of war. After a series of shenanigans that lead to him getting kicked out of his battalion's train to Budejovice, he was condemned to walk all the way to join his regiment. Without giving much thought to the distance, Švejk starts walking to his destination, however, "and God knows how it happened, but the good soldier Švejk instead of going south to Budejovice went on marching straight to the west" (Hasek 239). He ventures further and further away from Budejovice, but is eventually captured by the military police, tried, and after much deliberation and questioning which Švejk handles in his usual good-natured and aloof way, he is reinstated and returned to his battalion. For Švejk, as all roads lead to Rome, "all roads lead to Ceske Budejovice too" (241), and so do all roads lead to war. In *Going after Cacciato*, a large segment of the narrative focuses on Cacciato's desertion of the Third Squad, and his flight to Paris. The squad, led by Lieutenant Corson, decides to follow and capture Cacciato. The novel traces their journey from Vietnam to Paris through locations such as Delhi, Tehran, Izmir, Athens, Yugoslavia, and Luxembourg. The squadron loses more and more people along the way, but manages to reach the promised land. During their final showdown with Cacciato, it is revealed that the entire journey was a flight of imagination that took place in an alternate reality dreamt up by Paul Berlin. They had not left Vietnam at all, and the reality that allowed for even imaginary escape collapses in on itself, bringing them back to the observation post by the sea. This portrayal of the inevitability and inescapability of war is a reflection of real life. Large scale or global wars may be undergoing a period of dormancy, but localized conflict is still very much alive. It seems as if every other decade a dictator, or military regime, or an officious superpower using a proxy,

launches a war. The war is widely chastised and condemned by the international community, asking for immediate ceasefire and diplomatic resolution. Sometimes international criminal tribunals even issue arrest warrants for the aggressors, but that does not usually amount to anything. After a while concerned parties shift focus to their own problems, and the world goes back to its own trajectory. Meanwhile, the dead stay dead, and localized trauma passes off into the annals of history as collateral damage to progress. For millennia, the boulder of war has been continuously and religiously rolled uphill, only for it to fall down and crush millions of lives in its path. Rinse and repeat, for all of living memory.

The inexorability of war, and that it has been a prevalent phenomenon in all ages and centers of human civilization, suggest one of two possibilities. The first one is that war and conflict are a necessary prerequisite to human progress, and indispensable to human evolution. If such is the case, then the basic idea that destruction, chaos, and unnecessary death are essential ingredients for peace and stability is markedly absurd. If war is not intrinsic to the progress of humanity, then the second possibility is that war is something that we just do. In an episode of *M*A*S*H*, Hawkeye says that “war is the world’s favorite spectator sport” (“War is war” 00:01-00:06), which is a claim that has since found considerable scholarly attention. Colin McInnes elaborates on this idea and explains that the “experiences of war for the majority...is that of a spectator” as “those of us who watch, hear about or read about such events are inevitably removed from it. We may sympathize but we do not suffer” (144). If this is the case, and war has no function other than alleviating biotic boredom, then that proposition too is wholly absurd. Therefore, regardless of what angle or perspective we choose to look at it from, war is absurd. *The Good Soldier Švejk*,

Catch-22, and *Going after Cacciato* through their narrative and characterization perfectly encapsulate the true spirit of Absurdity.

Chapter 4

War and the Poetics of Humor

This chapter of the paper will discuss the ends to which humor, satire, and absurdity are employed in *The Good Soldier Švejk*, *Catch-22*, and *Going after Cacciato*, and the things that these narrative devices reveal about the nature of war. Before delving into these specific ideas, a brief character analysis of Švejk, Yossarian, and Cacciato are necessary to analyze why their characters are messianic in their ability to lay bare the underlying absurdity and frustration of war.

(Ir)rational men, (ir)rational world

Many titles have been conferred to *The Good Soldier Svejk*'s Josef Švejk, *Catch-22*'s John Yossarian, and *Going After Cacciato*'s Cacciato (whose full name is never disclosed in the novel) - fool, Absurdist hero, messiah, dimwit, antihero, Antichrist, and crazy are some of the monikers they have earned over the course of years of critical discourse. Analyzing this wide range of characterization and understanding how they are often coterminous presents a gateway in understanding these characters' motivations and their struggle in the face of a world that seems hellbent on antagonizing them.

In "The Antihero in Modern British and American Fiction", Ihab Hassan claims that the modern antihero is, above all, a victim:

In fiction, the unnerving rubric "antihero" refers to a ragged assembly of victims: the fool, the clown, the hipster, the criminal, the poor sod, the freak, the outsider, the scapegoat, the scrubby opportunist, the rebel without a cause, and the hero in the ashcan and hero on the leash. (55)

Most of the descriptors used by Hassan apply to our three intrepid characters. Before his fateful brush with the first World War, Švejk had been previously discharged from duty as he was determined to be an idiot. Throughout his journey, Švejk is imprisoned more than once, committed to a mental asylum, chastised by multiple official tribunals, suspected of being a spy, and almost court-martialed. Even though he manages to escape these circumstances, he is seemingly the quintessential hapless victim of the vicissitudes of fate. Yossarian also feels that he is singularly victimized by the war, and that he is targeted by forces on all sides. He takes crazy steps only in order to protect himself, but his superiors and peers interpret those actions either as foolish or heroic, which further thrusts him into the limelight he wishes to avoid. Cacciato tries to escape the horrors of war and find enlightenment, but is hounded by the fact he wants to escape. Despite his squadron pursuing and victimizing him, he aids them in their journey, even helping them escape prison.

In "Myth of Sisyphus", Camus identifies the qualities that qualify Sisyphus as an absurd hero - Sisyphus' "scorn of the gods, his hatred of death, and his passion for life won him that unspeakable penalty in which the whole being is exerted towards accomplishing nothing (108). These qualities are also embodied by Yossarian, Švejk, and Cacciato. Like Sisyphus, these 3 characters are successful in evading death, or at least delay the inevitability of death. Both *The*

Good Soldier Švejk and *Catch-22* feature censure of the religious order that serves to appease and distract people. It is, however, their passion for life that motivates most of these characters' actions. Both Cacciato and Švejk are content with the simple pleasures of life - Švejk with his pint and smoke, and Cacciato with his fishing bait. Even the non-existence of fish does not perturb Cacciato, as he is simply happy with the act of waiting patiently, watching his line bob in a waterlogged bomb crater, as Berlin tries to convince him to come away - "Don't you see?" Paul Berlin said. "It's a joke. Lake Country, it's Doc's way of joking. Get it? Bomb craters filling up with rain, it's just comedy. No lakes, no fish." (O'Brien 260). Yossarian is perhaps the strongest contender as an Absurd hero out of all 3 characters - his desire to evade death, and his paranoia that an ubiquitous 'they' is out to get him, motivates most of his actions. No matter the odds, Yossarian had "decided to live forever or die in the attempt, and his only mission each time he went up was to come down alive" (O'Brien 30-31). His paradoxical desire to die, if necessary, in the attempt to live forever is emblematic of the Sisyphean hero.

Lastly, the words most commonly used to describe Švejk, Yossarian, and Cacciato by the ensemble of characters surrounding them are some synonyms of fool or dimwit. Švejk, before his fateful brush with the first World War, had been discharged from duty for his foolishness, which he humbly reports to an officer - "I was discharged from the army for idiocy and officially certified by a special commission as an idiot. I'm an official idiot" (Hasek 20). Cacciato, as well, is constantly described as being borderline mentally handicapped, with a childlike innocent face that rarely changed expressions. Paul Berlin describes Cacciato as being "fat, slow, going bald, young. Rapt, willing to do the hard stuff. And dumb. Dumb as milk. A case of gross tomfoolery" (137). Yossarian is also called foolish and crazy for his various hijinks by his peers. However, their

foolishness and position as outcast allows them to visualize the absurdity and horror of war with perspicacity. Their roles can be interpreted to be analogous with the archetypal jester, or the Shakespearean idea of the fool. Embodying this archetype, these characters can “serve as a bridge uniting neglected, enshadowed, and unconscious elements with prevailing conscious attitudes” (Bala 53). Their understanding and indulgence of the absurdity of war allows for clarity that can help pierce through the veil of war and reveal truths that those in positions of power might want to keep in the background.

The upcoming sections will discuss the poetics of humor in the 3 novels, and have been categorized into three different sections - Humor as a coping mechanism, humor as a means of revealing the incompetence and antipathy of bureaucracy, and humor as a weapon to pierce the myth of war.

Humor as a coping mechanism

The role of humor to cope with and recover from trauma has been long established, and is the basis of old aphorisms like ‘laughter is the best medicine’. Appreciation of the absurd, and the ability to laugh at and reconceptualize trauma is a way of surviving personal and collective grief. Freud’s theory of humor marks it as an essential aspect of the human mind in navigating the world. Freud calls humor a “rare and precious gift” (166), and the ability of humor in “fending off of the possibility of suffering places it among the great series of methods which the human mind has constructed in order to evade the compulsion to suffer” (163). In *Man’s Search for Meaning*, Viktor Frankl writes that humor was one of “the soul’s weapons in the fight for self-preservation”,

and that humor “more than anything else in the human make-up, can afford an aloofness and an ability to rise above any situation” (63). Echoing these sentiments, the humor and absurdity of war act as a solace for characters, and it offers much needed respite in the face of the inequities of war. Following the narratives in the 3 novels, it can be safely concluded that good humor is a necessary balm for the survival of a war. Švejk’s good natured kindness and his ability to face any circumstance with good humor saves him from many tense situations. In one such circumstance, Švejk, after he starts working as an orderly for Lieutenant Lukas, arranges for a dog to be stolen. Lieutenant Lukas had inquired about a dog as a companion, specifically a pinscher, and in order to impress him, Švejk decides to procure one for him. He asks his former associate and partner-in-crime, Blahnik to steal a pinscher from the area around the barracks, which Blahnik accomplishes. Lukas is initially happy with his wish being fulfilled, but while on a walk with the dog is confronted by their commanding officer Colonel Kraus von Zillergut. It is then revealed that Švejk has stolen the dog from Zillergut, who is understandably furious. Zillergut in a fit of rage decides to send Lukas to the frontline in order to punish him for his insubordination. Once realizing what had really transpired, Lukas plans on confronting Švejk. His plans on the things that he was going to do to Švejk when he saw him, which include “smash[ing] his jaw” and “tearing his skin from his body in little strips” (Hasek 206), but faced with Švejk’s “kindly innocent eyes” and his “expression of complete composure”, Lukas’ anger dissipates (209). Švejk is able to avoid repercussions and escape the tyranny of fate due to his good-humored nature. In *Catch-22*, Yossarian’s absurd actions and use of humor to both amuse himself and maintain his sanity is a major plot point. Yossarian, and even other soldiers around him such as Clevinger, McWatt, Hungry Joe, Nately, and Dobbs, entertain their own versions of reality where the absurd triumphs. Yossarian’s idiosyncrasies include blacking out entire letters except for a few selected words when

he is asked to censor letters, making up various illnesses in order to stay out of combat, and refusing to wear clothes after the destruction of Ferrara. All of these actions have a purpose, which Robert Brustein identified in his review of *Catch-22*. According to Brustein, Heller's intent in placing his novel squarely in the domain of the humorous and the absurd is to highlight the significance of comedy in dealing with an irrational and often cruel world - "comedy is [Heller's] artistic response to his vision of transcendent evil, as if the escape route of laughter were the only recourse from a malignant world".

The concept of coping and escaping from the abject horror of war by seeking shelter in what is funny and absurd is perhaps best portrayed in *Going after Cacciato*. Although it has humorous and satirical elements, this novel is not as overtly comedic as *The Good Soldier Svejk* and *Catch-22*. The humor in *Going after Cacciato* leans more towards the metatextual, as the squadron uses their own version of twisted humor in order to stay in good spirits. The deaths of their other members of their squadron, the torrential and constant rain, the corrosion of armaments and decay of clothing, severe infections, amputations, rape, and loot - for the soldiers "these were all things to joke about" (O'Brien 12). Escapism, like the rain in their station in Vietnam, is a recurrent theme in the novel. Paul Berlin, the narrator, suffers from a disease that the troop's doctor describes as an overproduction of the glandular biles, which was causing a "paralysis of the mental processes that separate what is truly happening from what only might have happened" (39). The trauma of the war had, to some degree, severed Berlin's connection with his base reality, and he synthesizes alternate realities in order to escape into fantasy. The troops fall into the tunnels on their way to Paris, and their falling out of the tunnels to emerge in Mandalay are also reminiscent of Alice's fall into the rabbit hole that leads her into another reality (Raymond 101). The interplay

of the various realities brings into question if anything Berlin describes are real, or simply are figments of his imagination used to hide by his traumatized mind. Perhaps Cacciato never existed at all, and was always the personification of Berlin's desires - his desire to go to Paris, his desire for peace, his desire "to return home to live in a normal house in a normal town in a time of normalcy. Nothing grand, nothing spectacular" (142). This is the same thing that most of the characters we have discussed so far desire - a normal and peaceful life. That being rejected, they look towards humor and the absurd for survival.

Humor and bureaucracy

The labyrinthine processes of military conduct, in combination with the desire for individual upwards mobility, presents a vision of bureaucratic hell in *The Good Soldier Švejk*, *Catch-22*, and *Going after Cacciato*. These novels show the military higher powers as self-interested, greedy, and apathetic to the plight of soldiers, and further comments on the absurdity that bureaucracy breeds. In *The Good Soldier Švejk*, Hasek issues a sharp censure of the incompetence and belligerence of personnel in power, and the interactions between Švejk and the bureaucracy provides necessary impetus to the plot. Owing to his perceived simplistic nature, and his ability to disarm others with his aloofness, Švejk is able to navigate the dangers of the self-absorbed military elite. Švejk also reveals the hypocrisy of the military enterprise, by following instructions to a letter and thus negating one set of instructions in following another. He was branded an official idiot by the military, which lends him an aura of protection. After Švejk is put into a sanatorium, the commission assigned to judge his characters tries to decipher his thought process, to which Švejk replied that a former commander had ordered him to not think during duty,

as “a soldier mustn't think for himself. His superiors do it for him. As soon as a soldier begins to think he's no longer a soldier but a dirty, lousy civilian (Hasek 76). Hasek comments on the pompous self-righteousness of those in power, and their adherence to inane rigidity that reduced people into numbers and nothing more. In criticizing the self-indulgent bureaucrat “who spends half a century pasturing on official red tape and devours nothing but official documents” (650), Hasek also discusses the way in which unnecessary diligence and rote proceduralization hampered systems that were meant to proliferate the ideals of justice and righteousness:

Here all logic mostly disappeared and the [red tape] triumphed. The [red tape] strangled, went mad, turned, laughed, threatened, murdered and gave no quarter. The magistrates were jugglers with the law, high priests of its letter, devourers of the accused, tigers of the Austrian jungle, who measured their spring on the accused by the number of clauses. (24)

Mitigation of harm and dispensing of justice takes a back seat to the bureaucracy's need to inflate numbers and meet quotas, and following orders becomes more important than a sense of morality. Hasek also succeeds in weaponizing Švejk's innocence in the face of an internal order where innocence and culpability have become meaningless. Švejk explains this notion to a fellow inmate who had been screaming of being innocent that being innocent could not even save Jesus Christ from being crucified. The only path to salvation was blind obedience - “Maul halten und weiter dienen!” (19), which is a phrase popularized by Švejk that translates to “Grin and bear it and get on with the job”. *Going after Cacciato* also illustrates the pitfalls of bad and apathetic leadership, where the wrong decision taken by an individual or a small military intelligentsia can lead to the deaths of a disproportionate amount of people. There are two such characters in leadership position

in the novel - Lieutenant Sidney Martin and Lieutenant Corson. Martin was arrogant and headstrong, and he was determined to follow standard operating procedures, no matter the cost. It was his insistence that the troops clear Vietcong tunnels before detonating them, and the following of this immutable instruction was dangerous and life-threatening. Despite general disagreement, he continued to make them search tunnels before destroying them, and the unexpressed rancor of the soldiers took solid shape, and “disobedience became fully organized” after “Frenchie Tucker and Bernie Lynn died in tunnels” (O’Brien 56). It is implied that Sidney Martin is murdered by the squad, after which Lieutenant Corson replaces him. Corson is impotent, decrepit, and ineffectual - he provided no real guidance to the soldiers, and was too old to lead. The soldiers favored Corson because he had dysentery and a bad back; Corson “took no chances, he wasted no lives. The war, for which he was much too old, scared him” (55). This goes to prove that if given a choice, a soldier would rather follow an inept leader than a bloodthirsty and inflexible one.

Ineptitude parading as leadership, and disorder in the uniform of order is the name of the game in *Catch-22*. The narrative is replete with stories of individuals endangering the lives of others and pushing the war effort for personal advancement, capitalist profit, or simply in the name of amusement. The absurdities of bureaucracy range from inane actions that only waste time and resources, to drastic miscalculations that kill people on both sides of the line of war. These absurdities too appear in dichotomies. Whereas the soldiers risk their lives on dreaded missions with no guarantee of landing safely, Colonel Cathcart keeps raising the number of mandatory flights to prop himself up as a candidate for promotion. Major Major Major Major, who is introduced as an extraordinarily ordinary man whose upwards mobility through the ranks is

partially owing to his name, finds himself becoming radicalized and attempts to stir up trouble for himself, only to receive further commendations. Then there's Doc Daneeka, the army doctor, who staunchly repeats the claim that it was "not [his] business to save lives" (Heller 180), and spends most of his time fussing about his own health and imagined maladies. Doc Daneeka never flew any himself, but was able to collect flight pay because another soldier, McWatt, would log his name on his own missions. When McWatt's plane crashes, Doc Daneeka, despite being alive, is declared dead for all purposes. The army ignores his existence as all the paperwork for his death had been filed away, and even Daneeka's 'widow' disregards his correspondence after receiving a handsome retirement fund in Daneeka's name. His state of half-death is mirrored by the dead man in Yossarian's tent, Mudd, "a replacement pilot who had been killed in combat before he had officially reported for duty...Because he had never officially gotten into the squadron, he could never officially be gotten out" (111). Therefore, Doc Daneeka and Mudd share a liminal space, a paradoxical state between life and death. The biggest example of *Catch-22*'s unfurling absurdity that transitions into horror is Milo Minderbinder, a lowly mess officer who slowly eclipses every other character in the novel in power. Minderbinder "emerges as capitalist incarnate, a profile in corporate greed" (Perry 730), and despite his shoddy trades, he establishes an empire based on the sufferings of others. The absurdity of these scenarios shows that bureaucracy is as inescapable as death in *The Good Soldier Švejk*, *Catch-22*, and *Going after Cacciato*, and triggers the same amount of, if not more, dread and hopelessness.

Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori

War creates myths. It gives birth to narratives, vilifies the defeated, deifies victors, creates gods, platforms demagogues, and erects shrines in the name of glory and righteousness. This does not mean that myths are inherently bad; myths can serve different purposes and can spread messages of hope and perseverance. The fundamental problem with the process of myth and second-order signification is that myths and narratives can be manipulated. Bad faith actors and people who want to seize power for themselves can use propaganda and other tools of mass manipulation to proliferate a specific version of events that is beneficial for their cause. This is why history, despite being factually immutable, can be changed. These changes can then be spread through capillaries of power and institutions that benefit from upholding the status quo. The myths of war have powerful cultic properties, and can be used to shape national ideology and policy. Among the list of noble attributes related to war that support hegemonic power relations are bravery, loyalty, patriotism, perseverance, and self-sacrifice. A retelling of war that is faithful to the experience of those who encounter it closely might become obfuscated by the venerated and lofty ideals that are propagated on the homefront. Experiences themselves are temporally and emotionally situated, and can lose sharpness and contrast over time. Memory itself cannot be relied on, as they are infallible and prone to embellishment. What this essentially means is that the absurdity and horror of real war is not easily captured, as detailed by Paul Berlin in *Going after Cacciato*:

The real war was forgotten. The dullness and the heat and the endless tracts of time and the tired villages and petty conversations and warmed-over jokes and rivalries and rumors and

hole-digging and hole-filling and the long marches without incident or foul play—all this was blurred and fuzzy like a far-off summer day. Odd, because what he remembered was so trivial... War stories. That was what remained: a few stupid war stories, hackneyed and unprofound... What remained was simple event. The facts, the physical things. A war like any war. No new messages. Stories that began and ended without transition. No developing drama or tension or direction. No order. (311)

The role of humor and absurdity is to penetrate the myth of war, and through sharp contrast with the bleak setting of war narratives, reveal a faithful image of war. The absurd and surreal elements in *Going after Cacciato* works to highlight the ravages of war in Vietnam - razed villages, entire communities exterminated, child soldiers, torture and death at every corner, all part of the reality of the Vietnam War. Even as the Third Squad depart Vietnam and head towards Paris and peace, the phantoms of war follow in their wake.

Underneath the easy joviality and banal inanities that make up Švejk's journey, there is an undercurrent of deep misanthropy and cruelty. The value of life of the common man in the novel is abhorrently low, and the narrative shows lives being uprooted and destroyed in order to maintain a semblance of order after the death of the Ferdinand. Švejk first encounters this when he is taken to a prison for malingerers, which tortures people in the name of treatment till they either join the army or die - "consumptives, rheumatics, people with hernia, kidney disease, typhus, diabetes, pneumonia and other illnesses" were subjected to torture (Hasek 62) . These tortures include a severely restricted diet, dosing with quinine, stomach pumps, regular enemas, and cold exposure. Not being able to tolerate the inhuman treatment, many people succumbed to their diseases. Hasek

also strongly criticizes the establishments and institutions that funnel people into war, treating them as fodder or tradeable chattel:

Throughout all Europe people went to the slaughter like cattle, driven there not only by butcher emperors, kings and other potentates and generals, but also by priests of all confessions, who blessed them and made them perjure themselves that they would destroy the enemy on land, in the air, on the sea etc.

Švejk himself is treated like an expendable pawn in the war effort, who can be traded or sold at will. He is initially taken on as a batman by a chaplain called Otto Katz, who “sold Švejk to Lieutenant Lukas, or, to be more correct, gambled him away at cards, just as they used to sell serfs in Russia in the old days” (156). This is emblematic of how the common populace is treated in *The Good Soldier Švejk*, and reveals a disturbing disregard for human life.

The narrative of *Catch-22* is fundamentally erosional - as the story progresses through spatio-temporal leaps in storytelling, and more of the reality of war surfaces, any semblance of good-natured humor and benign Absurdism quickly crumbles away. The story offers bits and pieces of the underlying terror that plagues Yossarian and his surroundings, but only in non-sequiturs and detached glimpses. We hear of the dead man in Yossarian’s tent, the secret spilled by Snowden, and Milo’s rapidly expanding black market syndicate. The subterfuge crumbles during the last few chapters of the novel, and *Catch-22* devolves “into phantasmagoric horror” (Aldridge). McWatt, in one of his usual fly-bys of the beach, miscalculates his trajectory and kills Kid Sampson with his propeller, and then commits suicide himself. *Catch-22*, which had largely

been used for mostly comedic effect to highlight the absurdity of their circumstances, becomes a fascist slogan that is used to justify sacking Rome and displacing people from their homes. Milo goes from a small black-market dealer duping and stealing from his own regiment to a full-fledged war criminal, bombing his own base after taking money from the Germans. Snowden's secret is finally revealed in the penultimate chapter as he is slowly dying in Yossarian's arms. Snowden is essentially gutted by artillery, and Yossarian reads the spilled secret in Snowden's innards:

It was easy to read the message in his entrails. 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. (455-456)

Kid Sampson's secret is the essential reality of war - the expendability of people. The individual was nothing but matter, and his death is a small dent in the grand scheming of nations and higher powers. Humor and absurdity allow for the effective communication of this message to those who have not experienced war, and whose formulation of war is a mediated and propagandized pastiche of reality.

Chapter 5

Conveying Absurdism through media: the problems of adaptation

In her reading of the works of the French writer and experimental filmmaker Marguerite Duras, whose stories are often placed within a setting of death and apocalyptic finality, Julia Kristeva comments on the idea that language is deficient in trying to grasp and wrestle with the tragedy of human life, leading to “a monumental crisis in thought and word, a crisis in representation” (138). This crisis, according to Kristeva, cannot be translated into words in a way that is cathartic or conciliatory. The normal modalities of perception and representation become ineffective when faced with the searing and overbearing brunt of cataclysmic trauma, and the silence of horror that arises at the edges of psyche becomes a more adequate mirror for human suffering than other modes of symbolic expression. In discussing the limitations of language, Kristeva writes:

How is the truth of pain to be spoken when the available rhetoric of literature and even that of everyday speech somehow always seem festive? It is only by subverting this festive rhetoric, distorting it, making it grate, rendering it awkward and clumsy. (140)

Kristeva suggests that film is a better medium for expressing the insurmountable malady of death by “compensat[ing] for the failure of this exaggeratedly silent or precious speech that is stretched taut as a rope over suffering” (140). Kristeva also suggests that people experiencing Duras for the first time should see her movies or plays, as they are more palatable and “enveloped in a dreamy charm that both softens it and makes it more...conventional. By contrast, her books

bring us close to madness” (140). By extrapolating the ideas discussed by Kristeva with regards to the works of Duras, this section of the paper will argue against the position that film is a better media for the signifying pain and trauma, and discuss the idea that the textual representation of absurdity and humor when faced with all-consuming collective trauma is a better vehicle for the expression of these ideas than visual media.

As a response to the alleged trend that the habit of reading was in decline, and that visual media was slowly taking over the domain of the textual, Ursula K. Le Guin presents this spirited defense of the act of reading, and its collaboratory aspect:

In its silence, a book is a challenge: it can't lull you with surging music or deafen you with screeching laugh tracks or fire gunshots in your living room; you have to listen to it in your head. A book won't move your eyes for you the way images on a screen do. It won't move your mind unless you give it your mind, or your heart unless you put your heart in it. It won't do the work for you...reading is actual collaboration with the writer's mind. No wonder not everybody is up to it.

Text, specifically fiction, regardless of its content, is essentially a blueprint. In order for an individual to get something from a text, he must build the specifics of narrative and characterization himself. If a room full of people were all given the same page from a novel to read, their individual interpretation would be unique and tailored to themselves. Reading is creation, and the way that a reader constructs a world will be stamped with their own idiosyncrasies and markers of identity. This is why Le Guin called it a collaboration - by writing a novel, the

author only does half the work. The existence of a narrative is dependent on it being observed and constructed, without which it only occupies a twilight space before signification. The unique impressions a reader can have on a book is dependent on their own worldview and experiences - they might visualize a character as someone from their personal lives, which will heighten the narrative for them. The text might resonate with a reader on certain grounds, but it is still a heuristic process where the reader must connect the dots and map out the story. This is the beauty in the process of reading; the reader participates in the process of creation, and is never a passive observer. The writer and reader collaborate in order to create a tailored experience.

This is the advantage that text has over visual media. Writing can be suggestive, it can allow for abstractions, tonal shifts, and modal enjambments. Using various techniques of narration and storytelling, writing can evoke and equivocate, and can play around with time and space. An important result of this is that text can deftly control flow and pace. Visual media has access to some of these mechanics, but in a far restrictive fashion. The fundamental disadvantage of visual media is that it must show. Kristeva marks this as an advantage of film, that they include the “inherently spectacular volumes and combinations of bodies, gestures, actors' voices, sets, lights, producers, of all those professions that involve *showing*” (140). Yet, this is restrictive and takes away agency from the viewer. Visual media shows exactly what a character looks like, a viewer cannot imagine them as someone else. The swelling sounds and musical cues might heighten visual storytelling, but also cue the viewer as to how they should feel in a particular moment. Film and television are devoted to eliciting a response from the viewer, and it employs every tool in its arsenal to achieve that goal. There is far less room for interpretation in artifacts of visual media. This intrinsically makes it an inferior medium to text when it comes to conveying abstract and

miasmic dimensions of human experience. In order to further elaborate on this hypothesis, a single scene from *Catch-22* across two adaptations will be discussed.

Kid Sampson, half-off

The specific scene that will be used for this analysis occurs in the last few pages of Chapter 30 of *Catch-22*, which is titled “Dunbar”. It starts out in a leisurely, idyllic fashion - soldiers out on the beach, and Kid Sampson on a floating raft. McWatt, infamous for flying his plane as low to the ground as he possibly could, and making passes over the soldier’s tents and the raft floating out past the beach, was making one of his usual fly-bys. In his childlike excitement, Kid Sampson reaches out to touch the bottom of the plane “at the exact moment some arbitrary gust of wind or minor miscalculation of McWatt’s senses dropped the speeding plane down just low enough for a propeller to slice him half away” (Heller 351). What ensues is complete pandemonium, as people shrieked and try to get away from the beach. Half of the severed body stays standing comically for a few minutes before toppling into the water and turning “completely upside down so that only the grotesque toes and the plaster-white soles of Kid Sampson’s feet remained in view” (351). McWatt, after ejecting the other 2 pilots on his plane, flies higher and further away from the landing pad, and after dipping his “wings once in salute, decided oh, well, what the hell, and [flies] into a mountain” (353). This is a pivotal scene in the novel, as in many ways it marks the beginning of the dissolution of Yossarian’s synthesized reality, and as such is featured in both the 1970 film adaptation directed by Mike Nichols, and the 2019 miniseries.

The 2019 miniseries that streamed on Hulu is the most recent adaptation of *Catch-22*. Christopher Abbott plays Yossarian in the show, which has a far darker and more serious tone than the novel. Abbot's portrayal of Yossarian is also considerably more straight-laced and attuned to the reality of war from the very start of the show, which detracts from the narrative of Yossarian's gradual disillusionment. The scene in question occurs in the third episode of the six-part miniseries, and in adherence to the overall tone of the show, is far graver and more grounded. It is also significantly more gratuitous, as an explosion of blood and viscera splashes across McWatt's windshield after Kid Sampson dies, which the viewers are shown from the perspective of McWatt. The death is immediately followed by a swell of emotional music and a flurry of deranged expletives from McWatt, which is absent from the book. Rather than the easy casualness with which McWatt commits suicide in the novel, Jon Rudnitsky, who plays McWatt in the show, is shown doubled over in grief and guilt as he barrels into the mountain ("Episode 3" 36:43-39:56).

The 1970 film is more faithful to the novel, and Alan Arkin plays Yossarian with some semblance of the combination of swagger and dejectedness that is described in the book. The specific scene takes place around the middle of the movie, but Kid Sampson is not a featured character in the film, and is instead replaced by Hungry Joe. In the scene, McWatt flies into Hungry Joe, and neatly slices him in half. This does not, however, elicit a strong response in the onlookers, and they watch despondently as McWatt flies into a mountain in a big flare of dust and debris (*Catch-22* 01:01:35-01:04:22). This adaptation lacks the sense of chaos that follows the accidental death, which the novel then reels back in to show how the bureaucracy reacted to the deaths. In the novel, the last line of Chapter 30, the line that immediately follows McWatt's self-destruction, is "Colonel Cathcart was so upset by the deaths of Kid Sampson and McWatt that he raised the

missions to sixty-five” (353). This line is a perfect encapsulation of the humor and absurdity that this paper has so far discussed, which the visual media productions fail to capture due to their inherent limitations.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper had hoped to satisfactorily analyze the poetics of humor in the depictions or retellings of war, and interpret it using an Absurdist framework, through an analysis of the narratives and the characters of Jaroslav Hasek's *The Good Soldier Švejk and his Fortunes in the World War*, Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, and Tim O'Brien's *Going after Cacciato*. The discussion was divided into three salient points that all interweave to illustrate the paper's central thesis.

The third chapter dealt with the first of these points, which was to identify whether humor is an appropriate response in times of war and trauma, and if absurdism can be used to understand the operational and philosophical aspects of war. The core arguments in support of this idea has been presented in three parts - the first part established that there is a canonical literary precedent of using humorous and satirical narratives in writing about war that can be traced back to the times of Aristophanes and is still a critical part of war literature today; the second part dissected the idea that due to the essence of war and the unreliability of memory and shared experience, there is no singular 'appropriate' reaction or response to war; the final part utilized Camus' theorization of Absurdism to examine the idea that Absurdism is an ideal lens to make sense of the mindless ravages and cruelty of war.

The fourth chapter begins with a analysis of the three characters that are central to the plot of the three selected novels - *The Good Soldier Svejk's* Josef Švejk, *Catch-22's* John Yossarian,

and *Going After Cacciato*'s Cacciato in order to show that their status as outsiders and outliers allows them a clarity of vision that can help pierce through the veil of war and come face to face with its reality. This chapter identifies three primary functions of humor and absurdity during wartime by using examples from *The Good Soldier Švejk*, *Catch-22*, and *Going after Cacciato*. Firstly, humor acts as a shield and defense mechanism that helps soldiers cope with the horrors and injustices of war. Secondly, humor is used to illustrate the disregard for life and hyper-fixation on self-advancement that are part of a rigid, uncaring bureaucracy. Finally, adoption of humor and acceptance of the absurd can be a powerful means of understanding and combating hegemony, which can then reveal the abject horror and hopelessness of war.

The fifth chapter discusses the idea that books are a superior form of media compared to film and television in conveying messages tied to Absurdist and satirical principles due to inherent flaws of visual media. Extrapolations from Kristeva's theoretical framing of Duras were used for illustrating this point, and an examination of a singular scene from two adaptations of *Catch-22* with regards to their emotional and psychological impact further highlighted the rift between text and visual media.

It is impossible for us to know if any of our protagonists are able to escape the war and find the normal lives they had sought. Hasek died before he could finish Švejk's story, and the good soldier's journey is cut short before he can join the frontline. Yossarian deserts the army at the end of *Catch-22*, and makes way to Sweden. The readers are never told if he succeeds in his journey. It is implied that Cacciato never makes it out of Vietnam, and that he dies in a skirmish with the squad. However, Berlin holds out hope that there may be a possibility. As frustrating the not-

knowing may be, it is surprisingly on brand for these characters. As unlikely as it may be, we can hope that they made it out of the relentless gyre of the war. As Camus does with Sisyphus, we must imagine our characters happy.

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