# Acceptance or Revolt: A Comparative Existential Analysis of Billy Pilgrim in Slaughterhouse-Five and Yossarian in Catch-22 within the Context of War Absurdity

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#### **Abstract**

Acceptance and Revolt become two sides of the same coin in the face of the absurdity of war in Kurt Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse-Five and Joseph Heller's Catch-22. This paper examines how the protagonists, Billy Pilgrim and Yossarian, try to fill up the existential void created by a world devoid of inherent meaning. Both characters tragically encounter the psychological trauma and existential crisis during war. The profound negative impact of absurdity compel both of them to question their individual identity. The search for meaning through their contrasting approaches of Acceptance and Revolt is main goal of this study. Comparing their war experiences and aftermath, the paper tries to find out contrasting strategies adopted by protagonists to confront the trauma. The comparative analysis explores how Billy's unstuck existence and fatalistic acceptance is different from Yossarian's desperate attempts to defy the nonsensical logic of war in context of their existential struggle within a meaningless world around them.

Keywords: Slaughterhouse-Five, Catch-22, Existentialism, Absurdity, Psychology, War, Acceptance, Revolt.

#### Introduction

War, with its inherent brutality and disregard for human life, has a tragic and traumatic effect on behaviors, psyche and overall existence of an individual. "*Total war is an existential struggle*..." (Ordukhanyan et al., 2023). It creates the sense of meaninglessness and emptiness by leaving individuals to struggle with an unsettling destruction, loss of individuality and other horrible existential crisis. In the context of absurd situation of the war, current study compares the experiences and behaviors of two protagonists from two different post-modernist American novels that were directly influenced by World War II (1939 – 1945).

The first one is Billy from Slaughterhouse-five written by Kurt Vonnegut (1969) who passively, pessimistically and fatalistically accepts the absurdity of war, and the second one is Yossarian from Catch-22 written by Joseph Heller (1961) who, to an extent, revolts against meaninglessness of war. The challenge of copping up with existential crisis and struggle to survive is the main cause behind their attitudes towards the traumatic situation of war. Both the protagonists are compelled to question their identity and to find meaning of their lives in various ways. However, each one of them adopts contrasting approach to find out the ways of avoiding either physical or psychological trauma caused by war. This paper delves into the



existential impact of absurdity on the protagonists in these seminal works through the lens of existentialism philosophy.

Existentialism is a philosophical movement of 20th century that "arose from the Wasteland that was Europe during and after World War II" (Charlesworth, 1976). It discusses the unique experiences of individual, purpose of life, identity crisis, free will, death and various other aspects of human existence in a senseless world. The key philosophers of existentialism include Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre, Camus etc. There are different views of various existential philosophers on challenges of human existence, but this paper mainly refers to Jean Paul Sartre's philosophy of existence. Sartre (1905–80) is a French existential philosopher who sees existence from humanistic view point because, as ORDUKHANYAN et al., (2023) argue: "French existentialism tries to observe a person from the inside and is characterized by the tendency of individual reliving of war and empirical meaning." While considering Sartre's ideas about human existence, this study examines how Billy Pilgrim and John Yossarian respond to the existential crisis and inherent meaninglessness of war, highlighting the contrasting approaches of acceptance and revolt.

Through Billy's unstuck existence in time and his passive acceptance of fate, this paper explores the psychological toll of surrendering to the inevitable absurdity of war. Conversely, the desperate attempts of Yossarian to defy the nonsensical logic of the military bureaucracy, embodied in the infamous Catch-22, represent a form of rebellion against the absurdity he encounters. By comparing their experiences and behaviors, the paper seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the complex ways individuals grapple with the existential challenges posed by war and the search for meaning in a world stripped of inherent reason.

# **Research Objectives**

- I. To examine the negative impact of war absurdity on Billy and Yossarian which compel them to face existential crisis.
- II. To compare the response of Billy and Yossarian towards absurdity of war and their employed coping mechanism in order to avoid trauma caused by it.

## **Research Questions**

- I. What are the main elements that reflect existential crisis during war in both characters?
- II. How do Billy and Yossarian react differently to the inevitable absurdity of war in order to cope up with existential crisis?

## **Theoretical Framework**

The basic framework of this study is Existentialism, mainly of Jean Paul Sartre and partially absurdism of Albert Camus which is closely related to existentialism. Existentialism of Sartre (1984) deals with individual's consciousness, choice, actions, freedom and responsibility in life, especially in the case of confronting any anguished and meaningless situation. Camus (1955) believed that the interaction of individual's infinite search for the meaning and infinite silence of external world is itself an absurd phenomenon, but even if it has no meaning "it requires revolt".

The absurdity of war, where both Billy and Yossarian face existential crisis, is the context of this study. The framework of this study is based on ideas of Sartre and Camus about existence and absurdity. With the help of textual analysis, researcher explore existential

crisis of both characters and investigate their contrasting response; Acceptance or Revolt, to the meaninglessness of war.

#### **Literature Review**

Existentialism is one of the major philosophical movements which reached its peak in mid-20th century. Its central theme is to discuss the human existence and its related aspects i.e. purpose, responsibility, sufferings, identity crisis and meaning making in apparently senseless world. Sartre's lecture "Existentialism is Humanism" on October 28, 1945 in Paris "is regarded as something of a manifesto for the Existentialist movement" (Nasir et al., 2023). In this lecture, Sartre (1948) proposed "man is nothing else but what he makes of himself. We have choice, we have subjectivity, and we choose what we will make ourselves to be; we are entirely responsible for our existence". Additionally, in contrast to Christian existentialists, Sartre – as an atheist existentialist, denied the concept of creator (God) or any external force by suggesting that each individual is responsible for his own actions and one holds the right to make independent choices in the life. He believed in the idea of "existence comes before essence" (Sartre, 1948). It means that human beings have no predetermined purpose or meaning of life, rather each individual must be free and responsible for his actions in order to form authenticity (life experiences) even if he knows that the death is waiting for him. Sartre's philosophy (atheist existentialism) is truly based on freedom of choice to create the essence of existence without becoming part of any supreme or supernatural structure in an alienated world.

Existentialism has had played a significant role in diverse fields of knowledge (Ahmed et al., 2023). Nasir et al., (2023) explore various existential elements in the Character of the Underground Man and claim that the *Underground Man's* diary works as a window to delve into actual nature of existentialism because according to them "Notes from Underground (novella written by Dostoevsky) is a brilliant work of existentialist philosophy. In the midst of his innumerable failures, the story depicts the existence of a single individual man who tries to live, identify himself, define the environment around him, and belong."

Rathbone (2024) conducts a transdisciplinary research on meaningful labour and existentialism with reference to the narrative of Adam Smith 'The Poor Man's Son'. He claims "Existentialism has recently been used in labour studies to provide alternative perspectives on meaningful labour,...". He also discusses understanding of Sartre about anguish, freedom, authenticity and facticity, and he concludes "The narrative provides an important view on meaningful labour that does not merely have to follow moral aspects for happiness." (Rathbone, 2024). By applying Sartre's concepts of existentialism, Nuri (2018) has also explored a variety of existential elements in order "to elaborate the problems and choices that are faced by the main character" in the novel "The Alchemist" written by Paulo Coelho.

Catch-22 of J. Heller and Slaughterhouse-five of K. Vonnegut are well known antiwar post-modernist novels that are written after the destructions of World War II. Considering that the war posed several social problems, existential crisis and psychological traumas to the soldiers and civilians in general, there have been numerous studies done on both the novels through different lenses. Simmons (2010) has studied both works from general humanistic perspective of dealing with traumatic experience of war.

On the subject of Billy and his encounter with existential crisis, researchers and critics have shown more interest in biographical elements and psychological mechanism of the character such as Post Trauma Stress Disorders (PTSD). Vees-Gulani (2003) suggests that Billy, as a protagonist of Slaughterhouse-five, is actually written by Kurt Vonnegut in order

to overcome the trauma he himself suffered in Dresden attacks during WWII. Vees-Gulani (2003) further claims that in order to cope up with his war trauma, Billy uses his imagination as a tool of making sense. Considering the diverse views of literary critics on this particular point, Kall (2020) concludes that Billy's fantasies and delusions reflect his mental mechanism to grapple with tragic experiences of war. Additionally, the Tralfamadorian supernatural adventure of Billy also reflects his imaginative power that is adopted by him as a strategy to detach himself from problems of real world (Parshall, 1987).

In the case of Yossarian and his struggle to get out of the lunatic bureaucracy and meaningless situation of war, Mehmet Recep TAŞ (2017) claims that Yossarian can be considered as a Sartrian existential hero; because he is not bound to any external structure for his struggle of survival. In order to find the real essence of his existence, Yossarian revolts against nonsensical war; which has made him realize "humans are nothing but sacks of bones, disposable matter, and trash" (Garret, 2015). Luthra (2020) argues that Yossarian always tries to find ways of avoiding flying combat missions so that he can escape from tragic death. Nonetheless, both the authors have highlighted "the aspects of traumatic experience and their artistic reflection in these two novels, both at character level and at the more general level of the narrative" (Vlad, 2021).

### **Research Methodology**

This is a descriptive qualitative research paper. Researchers conduct a comparative analysis of Billy and Yossarian with the help of primary text of novels. Through close reading and textual analysis, the researchers explore and compare the existential crisis faced by both the characters and their reaction to the absurd situation of war.

## **Results and Discussion**

The aim of this section is to closely read the primary text of novels for exploring Billy and Yossarian's existential crisis in meaningless war. Researchers then goes on to study how the negative impact of war lead them to adopt contrasting strategies for coping up with war trauma.

## **Analysis of Billy**

Loss of Individual Identity in War Absurdity: Sartre (2002) suggests that an individual is totally lost in a situation where he is deprived of opportunities in a militarized reality. Billy has been absurdly trapped into the battlefield, German lines and imprisonment. It is to say because he is never born to be a soldier or a suitable man for any post in armed forces – rather "a filthy flamingo... powerless to harm the enemy or to help his friends." (Vonnegut, pp. 18 - 19) Billy has been drafted for military service, most probably unwillingly. He is described as a weak tall guy having no safety tools to avoid injuries. The presence of Billy in war becomes more absurd when Vonnegut tells the readers:

"Billy never even got to meet the chaplain he was supposed to assist..." (Vonnegut, p. 18)

The question is, then what is his responsibility and what is the reason for him to participate in the war? Is he only there to become a prisoner of war and to suffer? This meaningless presence of Billy makes him passive consumer of what he confronts because he has no other choice.

**Anguish, Authenticity and Bad Faith**: Sartre (1948) believed that after being thrown into this world humans face constant anguish – pain and agony, because we are



'condemned to be free' and we are the ones responsible for our actions. Billy, while suffering from war trauma, has almost put everything on fate, surrendering to the external events happening around him. As ORDUKHANYAN et al., (2023) raise the question "If existence is meaningless and absurd, then what difference does it make when, from what, how and where a person will die?", Billy also does not even mind dying. He does not seem to actively struggle for his freedom and survival. It suggests that Billy, rather than living an authentic life, goes on to live in bad faith by becoming both physically and mentally inactive for everyone and everything around him. His passive acceptance of the situation is reflected in his frustration:

"'You guys go on without me,' he said again and again." (Vonnegut, p. 19), scolding, or more likely avoiding his friends who want him to save himself from death by moving away from bullets.

Alienation and Pessimism: Alienation is a psychological state in which a person feels cut off from almost everything including oneself and considers himself alien (Nasir et al., 2023). Billy's alienation can be observed simply from his presence in war and his eccentric behaviors. He has estranged himself from others who think that Billy is going crazy. In this world of alienation, all he strives for is sleep and mental peace which cannot be achieved during war. Hence, he starts becoming unstuck in the time; travelling into past and future randomly – unavailable and unaware of present moment which brings him nothing but pain and suffering: 'He don't want to live, but he's gonna live anyway' (Vonnegut, p. 25). This line reflects his pessimistic attitude towards the life.

**Dehumanization**: As Sartre (2002) also discussed *objectification* and *dehumanization* of an individual accompanied by inner silence, we observe that Billy also becomes introvert, embarrassed and tired of carrying the burden of his body and soul due to traumatic experiences of war. Walking into the mouth of death, neither he complains nor argues – as if he is no more an individual human being. The absurdity around him has made Billy pessimistically accepts the fact that he cannot control or change his life and destiny, and he does not possess the option to define the logical meaning of his existence. He then learns from Tralfamadorians that there is no such thing called *free will*, there is no logical explanation for anything and every moment has always been existing since ever and will always exist. He also learns the real definition of time and existence which makes him even more pessimistic "That is the life. So it goes."

**Detachment from World:** Just for the sake of minimizing the war trauma and scape from the harsh reality, Billy has almost cut off his physical and mental connection from the meaningless and cruel world he has been trapped into, but people think that he is going crazy. Billy's delusions and delightful hallucinations reflect his almost full detachment from the worldly life. There are times when he does not even realize that he is sitting on fire or he is dancing or doing anything at all. As Vonnegut himself suggests that *Billy has seen greatest massacre in European history, which was the firebombing of Dresden* (Vonnegut, p. 48), he is all ready to reinvent himself and his universe for which metaphysical (supernatural) elements i.e. science fiction is very useful. The Tralfamadore planet reflects his imaginary utopian and luxurious world which he finds peaceful.

Time travel of Billy has made it possible for him to disassociate his life from worry of traumatic events accordingly. He stops caring about life and death because "As a time-traveler, he has seen his own death many times" (Vonnegut, p. 66). Even though he knows beforehand "that the city would be smashed ... that most of the people watching him would soon be dead" (Vonnegut, p. 70), he keeps going on with his fellows to Dresden without letting them know about the tragedy waiting for them because he has surrendered to the fate, predetermination and vagueness of existence. These all sort of beliefs enable Billy to cope up

with the pain he has to go through while facing traumas and fear of death (Vees Gulani, 2010). It suggests that, whatsoever is the source of his fantasies and delusions, Billy has mentally prepared himself to surrender in front of the brutal reality of war. He has embraced evasion from real world and goes on to live in imagination instead, either consciously or unconsciously, so that he can minimize the sufferings of absurd war and make sense of his existence for himself.

### **Analysis of Yossarian**

Loss of Individual identity in War Absurdity: Yossarian, as a victim of meaninglessness of war, is a character quite similar to Billy. He is also facing existential crisis after being trapped into war as a bombardier, and he has been fed up of flying combat missions anymore. As Zahoor (2017) claims that the most conspicuous theme of this novel is subjugation of an individual by powerful military, the illogical and paradoxical law of "Catch – 22" has been imposed by military officers to strip off the individual identity of soldiers. Absurd law of Catch – 22 means that only a crazy soldier can be grounded, but he has to request for it and 'anyone who wants to get out of combat duty isn't really crazy' (Heller, p. 30), so he has to continue flying combat missions. The officers also keep increasing combat missions illogically which reflects the dehumanization of Yossarian and violation of his free will. Apart from that, Yossarian has to take part in an absurd parade every Sunday afternoon in heat, and he hates to be part of it. In these kind of absurd situations where individuals are treated as machines, materials and objects – everything proves to be entirely unproductive (Sartre, 2002).

**Existence Precedes Essence**: This is one of the core elements of Sartrean existential philosophy which means that man exists first, finds himself, ventures into the world, and then defines himself. Sartre also emphasizes freedom and responsibility of an individual to make independent choices or decisions in an anguished world. Yossarian truly breaks the chains of various external structures, and as a Sartrean existential hero, he consciously shows a great interest in survival, free will, valuable existence and meaningful life. Although he does not know what his future will be, he wants to exist anyways.

After going through several traumatic experiences of war such as Snowden's death, Yossarian becomes a cunning rebel against lunatic mind of military bureaucracy which is evident from his words and actions. Just like he makes his mind up to spend his time in hospital due to "a pain in his liver ... that it wasn't quite jaundice. If it became jaundice they (doctors\*) could treat it. If it didn't ... they could discharge him. But this just being short, being short of jaundice all the time confused them", (Heller, p. 3) – Yossarian actively tries to find out various excuses and strategies to somehow avoid the trauma posed by war. Upon asking why he does not eat fruit when he has a liver condition, Yossarian replies 'fruit is good for my liver. That's why I never eat any.' (Heller, p. 41). His behavior towards real world situations is an evidence of his conscious awareness of his own existence – which he adopts to cope up with the trauma he is going through. After learning that he lives in 'an artificial inhuman world created by the bureaucracy of the army' (Beták, 2017), Yossarian puts his valuable existence before so-called patriotism and bravery. His knowledge about corrupt capitalist military officers and their manipulative mindset can be observed in his eye opening conversation:

'Would you like to see our country lose?' Major Major asked.

'We won't lose. We've got more men, more money and more material. There are ten million men in uniform who could replace me. Some people are getting killed and a lot more are making money and having fun. Let somebody else get killed' (Heller, p. 70).



Fear of death and struggle of survival help Yossarian realize that whosoever has trapped him into war is his real enemy. He tells Clevinger:

'Open your eyes, Clevinger. It doesn't make a damned bit of difference who wins the war to someone who's dead.' – and 'The enemy is anybody who's going to get you killed, no matter which side he's on,...' (Heller, p. 84)

**Freedom of Choice**: In his book "Being and Nothingness", Sartre discusses human existence and its relation to freedom. His concept of being-for-itself suggests that an individual may make independent choices, but he must always be responsible to face the condemnation of consequences. Here, military officers use their power to deprive each soldier of his individual choices because 'you've always got to do what your commanding officer tells you to.' (Heller, p. 38) Even though officer threaten Yossarian to fly combat missions, Yossarian – as a rebel, decides to be less enthusiastic to participate in warfare anymore. He disregards the system – the main cause behind his identity crisis and fear of death. He also has a great hatred for those who support and appreciate this system. He abuses a soldier named Appleby 'I hate that son of a bitch,' (Heller, p. 11), who believes in God and patriotism.

Yossarian comes to realize that killing people will bring him nothing, so he stops caring whether his bombs hit the target or not. Survival becomes his real purpose of life as "his only mission each time he went up was to come down alive" (Heller, p. 18). Eventually, after facing various challenges, Yossarian decides to run away from his squad. He declares 'I'm not running away from my responsibilities. I'm running to them. There's nothing negative about running away to save my life' (Heller, p. 308). This narration reflects that Yossarian has taken the responsibility of his freedom and its possible consequences. He has proved himself a rebel who revolted against all established political, religious and nationalist structures to save his life from traumatic and absurd situation of war.

Acceptance or Revolt: A Comparison

Acceptance of Revolt: A Comparison  Acceptance of Pilly  Devolt of Vesserier	
Acceptance of Billy	Revolt of Yossarian
Billy faces the existential crisis in absurd	While on the other hand, Yossarian actively
situation of war and accepts the fact that he	tries to find out the ways to get out of
cannot control or change it.	absurd situation of war.
Billy has pessimistically put everything on	In contrast, Yossarian struggles to create
fate and predetermination.	essence of his existence by himself.
1	,
Billy does not protest against	But Yossarian disregards the military
dehumanization and he does not care for his	bureaucracy and he struggles to preserve
free will.	free will.
	2200 11220
Billy does not mind dying, for he has	Consciously experiencing and realizing the
already been detached from real world.	sufferings of real world, Yossarian is afraid
	of death and tries to avoid it in every
	possible way.
	•
Billy has no interest in taking responsibility	
to go against external structure for his	Yossarian revolts against all external
freedom.	structures in order to construct his identity.



Billy eventually becomes a time traveler – And Yossarian runs away physically from unavailable in present moment. Pianosa where his squad was stationed.

#### **Conclusion**

The main purpose of this study is to explore the war experiences of Billy and Yossarian from standpoint of existentialism, and their contrasting response towards absurdity of war. The textual analysis of both the novels reveals that in order to cope up with physical and psychological trauma Billy accepts the situation, while Yossarian revolts against it.

Billy's existential crisis make him realize that he cannot control or change his life subjectively, so he puts everything on fate and gets himself detached from real world's sufferings with the help of time travel. His acceptance is reflected in his various actions and careless attitude towards life. As Billy becomes delusional, he pays no attention to his surroundings whether he lives or dies. On the other hand, Yossarian becomes a rebel who revolts against lunatic officers and overall system in his struggles to survive and create essence of his existence himself. In contrast to Billy, Yossarian consciously remains active within real world in order to find out ways of avoiding war trauma. Since Yossarian is interested in meaning making, he tries to make various independent choices to preserve his free will, individual identity and valuable existence.

This study concludes that individuals – like Billy and Yossarian, who face existential crisis and other hardships in their lives may either fatalistically accept everything or struggle to get themselves free of it. Existentialism provides a suitable theoretical framework to study these type of characters. However, both the novels can be studied further from various psychological, social and philosophical standpoints.

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