Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22* is not only a narration of Captain Yossarian’s continuous attempts at escaping the American war effort in the Mediterranean during World War II but also Heller’s commentary on the military procedures prevalent in all branches of the armed forces and those that Heller personally experienced. *Catch-22*’s vagueness in geographic setting allows for comparisons to be made in a global context and the flaws presented in military operations are not targeted at those of a specific country or leadership but towards the characteristics that all institutions embody. Distortion is a literary technique that gives disproportionate meaning to circumstances in order to present them as unrealistic and almost abstract. Heller employs this method to present actual military procedures in new light. In *Catch-22*, Heller portrays the corruption, negligence of medical care, and feigned unity in actual military proceedings through a presentation of the characters in exaggerated and inflated realities in order to make the reader realize the moral and ethical flaws and dehumanization that are overlooked in similar organizations so as to evoke the sense of urgency required for reform.

Corruption in military actions takes many forms and occurs at several levels of authority and serves as a hindrance in the efficiency of required military functions. Corruption, the dishonest exploitation of a system or of peoples for self-gain, compromises the integrity that
institutions such as the military are based on. The root of such actions of ‘Working the System’ lies in the continual desire for power and the momentary fame and wealth that it entails. Roscoe Blunt’s *Foot Soldier*, a first-hand account of the battles and proceedings during the Battle of the Bulge (1944), describes the actuality in the modern day system that rewards medals to soldiers for documented ‘Honor’. In this system, medals serve as the qualifications for promotions and this system enables those with the medals of perceived ‘Honor’ to advance rank regardless of their competence in pursuing the tasks. Blunt expresses his frustration with the standard in place for medals, “…But medals were normally reserved for officers who spent much of their time finding ways to write up citations for each other” (*Foot Soldier*). The desire of promotion places soldiers in a competition to gather citations and diverts focus from the war effort to their own personal interests. The country’s effort advertised through propaganda as one that every citizen contributes to is often plagued by the selfish desires of the few in power. Heller distorts this reality through the attention-grabbing representation of this ideal’s flaw in order to stress the importance of mankind’s long-due realization. Sergeant Major Major’s promotion to Major Major Major is not based on merit or qualifications but simply by an error in an I.B.M. machine. The lack of justification for such promotions draws reconsideration upon the reader. Colonel Catcarth underscores the lack or real purpose in Major Major’s subsequent promotions: “You’re the new squadron commander […] But don’t think it means anything, because it doesn’t. All it means is that you’re the new squadron commander” (Heller 88). Heller’s representation of the promotion as a means of filling “Opening for one major” or as merely an accident downplays the value of such promotions and mocks the reality. The perceived honor, respect and status in society that accompany a promotion in military institutions are often based on a system that lacks virtue but is presented in the most honorable fashion. Heller’s distorted version replaces the
dignity of the ceremonies, citations, references and medals with results of a computer program and grants ranks to the unworthy in a system where ranks have no value. The twisted absurdity in the procedure that draws upon the moral flaws in actual military procedures urge reconsideration of the methods established in convention. Heller distorts the reality to force examination of the aspects of human life that seem honorable on the surface. Through *Catch-22*, Heller hopes for mankind to not be blinded by the documentation of “Loyalty Oaths” that feign unity in a war effort which in its essence is overwhelmed by individual desires of power and status. Only through distortion of the military’s procedure of promotions could the pointless bureaucracy be exposed and reform enacted to make such systems more capable as whole of functioning efficiently.

Flaws in medical departments in the military are repeatedly covered up through secrecy. This is a trend prevalent in many military institutions that strive to maintain the reputation of their respective programs, despite the neglect towards the right to proper treatment. The lack of consideration towards the cure in military operations demonstrates the ethical flaw in upholding the value of a life of a soldier. Madigan Army Medical Center’s behavioral health department, during 2000s, misdiagnosed several hundred patients in their Washington hospital. Military institutions globally are blinded to the need of competence in the medical department not only because of the continual arms race focused at investing in technology for weapons of destruction but also due to the regard of enlisted men as pieces in a big picture strategy that have given up their rights to life by enlisting under the military officials. The constant struggle for the men in office is not aimed at taking responsibility for the lives of the soldiers but rather at maintaining their power and the reputation of the military. The Madigan crisis was dissolved without a public revelation of the results of the investigation with the statement that the “Pre-conditional” reports
“Would be used in a broader review of Army program from within the administration” (The Olympian). Political spin-arounds pave way for bureaucracy to reign supreme in the public domain as such exemptions are often justified by the importance of keeping information in the hands of authority. The secrecy that ensues hinders public involvement and understanding and prevents amelioration of flawed system. Heller, through Catch-22, employs exaggerated consequences of military incompetence in dealing with the rising number of and damages inflicted upon the soldiers, both physical and mental. The neglect towards the Soldier in White’s status portrays the dehumanization of men that is not regarded as an oddity by the military hospital in Pianosa but merely as a required practice by law. Heller, as the voice of the book, uses humoristic under tone and gives a blatant view of the actuality in describing the treatment given to the Soldier in White: “When the jar on the floor was full, the jar feeding him was empty, and the two were simply switched quickly so that stuff could drip back into him” (Heller 10). Heller’s presentation of distorted medical treatments in a formal and thoroughly descriptive scene renders the reader incapable of coming into accords with the inhumanity. Though extremely deviated from such possibilities in reality, the stretched view presented in Catch-22 serves to demand action from mankind. The unashamed admittance by Doc Daneeka of his true business in medicine as that of upholding “The ethics of [his] profession” and ‘Not … [of saving] lives” (86) is Heller’s distortion of the true purpose that, in actual military proceedings, is concealed under heavy wording and documentation. Heller’s techniques of blatant expression and depictions are aimed at making the imperfections more evident. The assessment of military proceedings needs to be regarded as a priority and can no longer be covered up to prevent the stability of the institution as such infringements upon the moral code endanger the stability of the country. Heller’s distortion through exaggeration puts forth the claim for a drastic reform of the
system and is aimed at resolving the moral flaws that prevail by enlightening mankind to not overlook the immorality in society’s norms.

Heller’s distortion of corruption through exaggerated examples and of the secrecy and dehumanization in the medical field put the aspects out of perspective but it is this viewpoint that convinces mankind to challenge authority and traditions in the developing world. The military operations satirized in Catch-22 are prevalent in actuality to some degree and continued neglect would prevent human society from improvement in ethical standards.

Works Cited
