

Jewish-American Counter Culture in Joseph Heller

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Abstract

The paper analyzes the works of Jewish American novelist Joseph Heller who presents the war-torn world of the twentieth century in a typically Kafkesque manner. Heller's first novel of the American counter culture catches the reader by surprise and forces him to find new strategies to confront a chaotic and changing reality. The linguistic and existential impasse of catch-22 created by Heller in the novel by the same name continues to reverberate with renewed intensity in the political and military world of modern America. Heller pursues the Catch-22 theme in later novels with more Jewish characters to show that their assimilation is not complete. His novels further reveal how the intellectual gridlock of contemporary America prevents individuals from becoming happy, independent from the choices they make. Issues of apostasy, ideology and angst continue to plague his protagonists in a confused and confusing world of American hegemony and control. Often comic, but successful, attempts at self-preservation become the central focus of Heller's works. Obviously

his protagonists are Jewish and male. The male imagination with its emphasis on self-preservation, sex and social success dominates the landscape of his novels. Heller nonetheless questions the institutions of capitalist societies where social success and wealth are seen as markers of individual happiness. Being a Jewish writer Heller achieves success writing about Gentiles and then reverts back to creating self-deprecating Jewish protagonists representing a historical transition from marginality to partial assimilation and then a return to his Jewish identity in a world of American gentiles. The psychological impasse of Jewish assimilation and marginality in later novels is played out in the same manner as the political and bureaucratic impasse of his first novel. Undoubtedly Heller's fame rests on just one novel he wrote, Catch 22, and he has never been able to duplicate the tour de force.

The name of Jewish American novelist Joseph Heller has become synonymous with the term catch 22, which appears in the novel by the same name, where any choice would lead to a disadvantage because of an inexorable mutually-dependent situation. Based on a catch 22 status quo, Heller sketches in his novels a topsy-turvy world of political cunning and military connivance of pre- and post-Second World War where characters enact their insanity in order to remain alive. The promise of individual freedom is always deferred by a call to duty and morality forcing the protagonist to wonder if there is any genuine freedom in capitalist societies. Heller's novels present the bravado of counter culture of the Vietnam War era where anything connected to the status quo was considered retrogressive. Though Heller's works have lost the thematic potency they had in the 1960s and 1970s, he is still read by non-conformist and against-the-grain readers who interpret the postmodern world the way *Catch-22* anti-hero John Yossarian did. Heller may not have spawned a generation of Yossarians but his

writing has confirmed “what they themselves might suspect” about life and society (Gonzales, 1993/1971 96).

Heller died in 1999 at the age of seventy-six, writing just seven novels in four decades, but is only remembered for his prophetic work *Catch-22* which took seven years to complete. The anti-war rhetoric, the double speak of bureaucracy, and the odds of urban existence resonate with unequivocal intensity even today as they did in 1961 when the novel was first published. After decades Heller brought the novel full circle in the dark sequel *Closing Time* (1994) where the aging heroes of *Catch-22* have brokered an uneasy peace with decadent America seeped in political sleaze, bureaucratic cunning, and financial greed.

This time the aging US Air Force B-25 bombardier Yossarian will again try to escape to a new land like Natty Bumppo or Huck Finn but will not get there. He will become a part of corporate America tasting the fruits of a post-capitalist society. The marginalized Jew has become mainstream American. His “execrable, ugly name” that makes General Dreedle’s “blood run cold and his breath come in labored gasps” will no longer be a hobgoblin to Americans (C-22, 259-60). At last the system has co-opted the rebel and his innocence and immigrant anxiety seems contained in the project of being successful in corporate America. . Mahler’s Fifth Symphony appended to the dénouement, “so sweetly mournful and Jewish,” co-opts not only the Russian Jewish author but also the hyphenated Jewish-American literature into the American mainstream.

Catch Me If You Can

The ethos and tone of *Catch 22* permeates all of Heller’s writings. On the surface Heller’s novels are quite different from one another, but deep down they are united by the irrational fear of urban life and disenchantment with a money-

centered society. An ingrained skepticism, a healthy dose of self-mockery and biting satire help individuals to confront insurmountable odds and force them to look inward for emotional and psychological sustenance. Mostly romantic at heart and rejecting the institution of marriage, Heller's characters often turn out to be loners, philanderers, and daydreamers—men like Yossarian “who likes to be alone much of the time, thinks and daydreams a lot, doesn't really enjoy the give-and-take of companionship all that much, falls silent much of the time and broods and is indifferent to everything someone else might be talking about?” (CT, 297). Yossarian is a “trouble-maker” who has “wilfully destroy[ed] his own army career” (Seed, 1989 23). Heller saw himself as Yossarian when he admitted to Barbara Gelb—“That is me, yes” (Gelb, 1994 10).

A quintessentially Hellenesque non-hero possesses a healthy disregard of the Judeo-Christian tradition, an uncomfortable recognition of Jewishness, anxiety about urban consumerism and skill in adapting to unique situations. He realizes that talking about his predicament helps him to keep his sanity—“The death of no person is as important to the future as the literature about it” (PT, 350).

As Jacques Derrida points out in *Madness and Civilization* every society constructs its own understanding of madness interacting with and separating from the madman. The ‘man of madness’ and the ‘man of reason’ communicate to each other in a “very crude language” and in the act of communication separate themselves from each other.

Then, and then only, can we determine the realm in which the man of madness and the man of reason, moving apart, are not yet disjunct; and in an incipient and very crude language, antedating that of science, begin the dialogue of their breach, testifying in a fugitive way that they still speak to

each other. Here madness and non-madness, reason and non-reason are inextricably involved: inescapable at the moment when they do not yet exist, and existing for each other, in relation to each other, in the exchange which separates them. (Derrida, 1988 x).

Heller too shows the difference and similarity of the mad world that his characters inhabit—the double speak bureaucracy and the all-too-human soldier seeking self-preservation at any cost. *Catch -22* not only presents the horror, guilt and escapades of World War II but also prophecies the upheaval and anarchy that would sweep the globe in subsequent decades representing the eternal foibles of humanity.

The monstrosity of events, the irrationality of fate and the absurdity of perspectives are presented with biting sarcasm by Heller. At the war-torn military establishment on Pianosa Island, that in some way symbolizes America, Yossarian tries “to maintain his perspective amid so much madness” (C-22, 20). He tells us that he is the lone “voice of an insistent refusal to accept the logic of the perverse system, a determination to deviate” (Woolf, 1979 263).

Paranoid about everything and everyone on the island Yossarian only thinks of his own survival. His friend, Clevinger, enumerates some of his symptoms which, the former considers, are put on; they are:

an unreasonable belief that everybody around him was crazy, a homicidal impulse to machine-gun strangers, retrospective falsification, an unfounded suspicion that people hated him and were conspiring to kill him (p. 20).

Yossarian confronts the crazy world and the foreknowledge of his death by

acting mad.

Heller reveals that there was no logic to the question of who will die and who will live. It was a mere accident of place and time that men find themselves in. People have fought for all kinds of reasons especially for money. Heller provides his own philosophical spin on perennial issues of death in war:

It was a vile and muddy war, and Yossarian could have lived without it—lived forever, perhaps. Only a fraction of his countrymen would give up their lives to win it, and it was not his ambition to be among them. To die or not to die, that was the question, and Clevinger grew limp trying to answer it. History did not demand Yossarian's premature demise, justice could be satisfied without it, progress did not hinge upon it, victory did not depend on it. That men would die was a matter of necessity; which men would die, though, was a matter of circumstance, and Yossarian was willing to be the victim of anything but circumstance. But that was war. Just about all he could find in its favor was that it paid well and liberated children from the pernicious influence of their parents (C-22, 84).

Heller sketches the dynamics of war where few die unwillingly for the sake of others. Their death does not influence the direction of history or lead to human progress. They die not because of “necessity” but because of “circumstance.” And Yossarian does not wish to share this fate.

Yossarian is willing to participate in the “war effort” but is put off by the people who are always “cashing in” on the efforts of others. He rejects Major Danby's advice that he should look at the “big picture”:

‘Between me and every ideal I always find Scheisskopfs, Peckems, Kornes, and Cathcarts. And that sort of changes the ideal’ (C-22, 551).

The thought of working for the “welfare of [the] country” and “the dignity of man” does not sit well with Yossarian who believes that he has fought enough for his country and now he will fight to save himself—

‘I’ve been fighting all along to save my country. Now I’m going to fight a little to save myself. The country’s not in danger any more, but I am’ (C-22, 553).

Yossarian knows that escape is not possible but nonetheless he will give it a try. He will be on his toes “every minute of every day” and they will end heaven and earth to catch” him (C-22, 561).

Something Happened To Neoliberal Institutions

In the next novel, *Something Happened*, Heller shifts his focus from the absurdity of war to the hegemonizing power of urban organizations and the collapse of neoliberal institutions. In the city a businessman Bob Slocum has everything—wife, three children nice house and a couple of mistresses—but is rather unhappy. He is disenchanted with the world and does not know what he wants. He panics that something will happen that would destroy his equanimity and sense of well-being:

I get the willies when I see closed doors. Even at work, where I am doing so well now, the sight of a closed door is something enough to make me dread the something horrible is happening behind it, something that is going to affect me adversely; if I am tired and dejected from a night of lies or booze

or sex or just plain nerves or insomnia. I can almost smell the disaster mounting invisibly and flooding out towards me through the frosted glass panes. My hands may perspire, and my voice may come out strange. I wonder why. Something must have happened to me sometime (SH, 3).

His anxiety of ending up as a failed husband, father, and businessman, nags him constantly, making him a bundle of nerves. Though we often take the author's pronouncements about his work with a pinch of salt it is worth noting that Heller spells out his technique in representing American reality in his interview with James Shapiro—

“I am trying very hard to *keep* the context of our society. Not only familiar but with nothing extraordinary in it and yet maybe as horrifying as Kafka does in his world. Now you use consciously I know this is my object. I'm trying to get the same sense of imprisonment, of intimidation, of psychological paralysis and enslavement, but without using any symbolism other than the society being a symbol of itself” (Shapiro, 1971 8).

The anxiety of ordinary day-to-day living in a neoliberal city creates a Kafkaesque world of “imprisonment,” “intimidation,” “psychological paralysis,” and “enslavement” that must be negotiated in order to find happiness. Most people like Slocum fail to do so.

Jewish Success and Marginalization in America

Heller continues to lament about the difficulties of succeeding in a big city in his next novel *Good as Gold*. The protagonist Bruce Gold is a disgruntled academic failed husband and confused politician and has all the negative traits that prevent him from succeeding in life. He is self-centeredness, skeptical, promiscuous,

sadomasochistic and self-deprecating. Gold comes of a middle-class Jewish family and has risen in the world. He wants to put some distance between himself and his uncouth parents and family. He wants, as Thomas Edwards writes, to transcend “the Jewishness he is so uneasy about” (Edwards, 1979 10). But his apostasy leads to a “crisis of conscience” hard to overcome:

He [Gold] was losing his taste for mankind. There was not much he did like. He liked goods, money, honors. He missed capital punishment, but did not feel, he could say so. Gold had a growing list of principles, causes, methods, and ideas in which he no longer believed, and near the top it contained a swelling sub-division of freedoms, sexual freedom, and even political freedom. Alternatives were hellish [sic] by no stretch of the imagination could he feel that this was what the Founding Father had in mind. Either Gold has grown conservative or civilization has grown progressively worse (GG, 73).

The conflict between neoliberal and conservative values is just a façade that is perpetuated on the gullible reader.

Gold knows what he wants—He wants “goods, money, honors” and “sexual freedom” and pursues them relentlessly. He has extramarital affairs with Andrea Conover and Linda Brooks and falls in love with women at the drop of a hat. Here is his first meeting with his daughter's teacher Linda Brook who give him a blow job:

Actually, her head was only so-so, but Gold did not criticize and Gold did not care. Before the sun set that same day he learned that Linda Brook was the easiest person to give his heart to that he's ever met. Gold had this

penchant for falling in love. Whenever he was at leisure he fell in love. Sometimes he fell in love for as long as four months; most often, though, for six or eight weeks. Once or twice he had fallen in love for a minute. Confident that this new attachment had no better chance of surviving than the others, he yielded to it completely. In the throes of romantic discovery, he told her all about Andrea, and much about Belle. In the freshness and exhilarating sweep of adventurous new feeling, he asked her to come with him secretly to Acapulco on his trip with Andrea, scheduled during her Christmas vacation, and she quickly agreed (GG, 398).

In the morning Gold regrets his escapade with Linda but then he has already fixed a clandestine trip to Acapulco with her and Andrea during the Christmas vacation. He loosens the stranglehold of Jewish tradition and authority through his libertine logic and escapes into a world of indulgence and sexual freedom. And contemporary America provides him the necessary conditions to realize his fantasies.

Like the youthful revolutionaries of the Sixties, Gold too sets out to experiment with new ways of living but discovers that the sexual, scholastic, and political freedoms may not lead to happiness but more longings and expectations. What follows toward the end of the novel is an attempt at psychological adjustment to practical ways of living. But it is done too quickly and seems impractical. It is not possible of an individual like Gold, to adjust to changed situation so very quickly. But as the story unravels he gives up his women and ambition for political success and goes back to his wife and family. Heller's desire to force Gold to suddenly transcend his Jewish past and marginality in a gentile world does not succeed. In his interview with Joseph Roddy, Heller claims that the position of the Jew in America "is no longer marginal" (Roddy, 1979 16). But Heller's own

preoccupation with Jewish marginalization in his novels belies the fact.

As the story in the novel, *Good as Gold*, unravels the reader comes to realize, together with the Jewish protagonist Gold, that without the help of an influential gentile it is not possible for him to succeed in a big way. Gold's marginal Jewish position is aptly summed up in the advice given to him by the ex-Governor of Texas. The ex-Governor tells him.

Gold, every Jew should have a big gentile for a friend, and every successful American should own a Jew. I'm big, Gold, and I'm willing to be your friend" (GG, 431).

Now this could be said all in jest but the ex-Governor does treat Jews as slaves implicit in his choice of the phrase "own a Jew." Gold understands his marginal position and realizes that "he doesn't really belong here" (GG, 196). Though he initially rebels, he finally accepts the ex-Governor's advice and patronage. Later, the ex-Governor opens his way to success and nearly gets him the position of Secretary of State. Incidentally, this opportunity is not grasped by Gold because of family complications, but this development is beside the point.

Gold's feeling of his own marginality becomes stronger as he realizes that he has failed both as an intellectual and a family man. Recognizing his dubious reputation as an academic he claims to be a creative writer. But even as a writer he has no claim to fame as he has only published short stories in some "far-flung quarterly magazines of very small circulation" (GG, 44). His family life is not a success either. He dislikes his children and feels sexually bored with his wife Belle. He does not enjoy to converse with his parents or his brothers and sisters. Hateful of his father Julius, stepmother Guisse, and brother Sid, Gold finds the

family get-togethers an ordeal—"He no longer liked his father or brother; if indeed he ever had" (GG, 21). At family dinner table he finds the "so many fucking faces" of his parents, brothers and sisters both "strange" and loathsome (GC, 27). He experiences their light badgering on such get-togethers both humiliating and distasteful. His children and relatives are resentful of him. They do not accept his authority either as a father or as an intellectual.

Gold's friends do not like him either. He grieves why everybody is so determined to humiliate him. "Nobody who knows me treats me with respect Everyone round here treats me like a schmuck" (GG, 182), he laments. He seems to be unaware that he presents the picture of a loser. A sloppily dressed balding man of forty-eight, wearing glasses, Gold discovers that everyone seems to make fun of him. Heller presents a picture of an urban society where success is measured by outward appearance, especially good clothes and smartness.

Surprisingly an intelligent man like Gold is not fully aware of the reason why people laugh at him. He inquires of his childhood friend, Mursh Weinrock, if there is something in his character that causes others to make fun of him:

'Mursh,' Gold entreated urgently, on the spur of the moment, 'maybe you can help me on this. Is there something about me, something in my makeup perhaps, that causes people to want to make fun of me? Is there something that inspires humor in others, am I of the type that encourages sport?'

Weinrock, leaning back with interlaced fingers on his belly, lowered his eyelids and looked wise, 'Yes, Bruce, I'm afraid there is' (GG, 389).

Weinrock believes that Gold is not aware of the image he projects to others. Gold is too self-centered chasing his own desires and felicity refusing to participate in

conventional day-to-day activities with his parents and colleagues. He values quick success and felicity and is filled with anxiety contemplating about death and failure.

Gold is so overpowered by the desire of success that he dreams of being not only the Secretary of State but also the President of the United States. He day-dreams:

'If I were President, thought Gold—When I am President he amended in fanciful contemplation—everyone will be appointed to some good government position one day ...' (GG, 199).

Nothing unusual for a man in his position to aspire to become the president of the United States, but his weakness for women saps his energy. He cannot concentrate on his work for long.

Gold relinquishes his academic and creative career and seeks his fortune in the world of politics. He cultivates the friendship of the members of the higher echelons in American politics to curry favor. He reestablishes friendship with his childhood friend, Ralph Newsome who is a top-aide at the White House and possesses power and influence. But Newsome is a hypocrite. Though he promises Gold the position of the Secretary of State it turns out that Newsome cannot do much for Gold. Newsome brings misery to Gold.

Gold's failure to acquire power is portrayed through the image of jogging. Jogging represents his need to keep in perfect physical and mental health for both the political and sexual race he has decided to run. But in both these areas he is tricked by Newsome and Andrea respectively. Gold soon begins to realize that

both the actual and the symbolic race are “an arduous chore” that saps his energy leaving him impotent (GG, 409; 411-12). He feels that he is not crass enough “to grab what you want when the chance comes to get it” (GG, 120). The White House, that symbolizes social success through deceit, is not for Gold (GG, 318). He realizes that he cannot become another Henry Kissinger, the Jewish superhero, whose duplicity he loathes but whose success he admires (GG, 356). Gold seems to become a sort of comic, shuffling, and self-castigating *schlemiel* like Woody Allen in some of his movies like “Love and Death” or “Manhattan.”

Gold cannot become a go-getter Kissinger as he still possesses “his kind” of Jewish morality. Though intellectually he rejects much of the Jewish tradition, emotionally he has not outgrown its influence. Probably Heller had set out to give a picture of a typically go-getter in Gold but somewhere on the way he got mixed up between his own feeling and that of the protagonist. Heller’s own prejudices surface in the diatribe against Kissinger. It seems as if suddenly Heller realized that the direction in which his protagonist was heading was similar to Kissinger’s. Heller immediately intervenes and changes the course of Gold’s life by using the author’s prerogative. In the process, much of the interest in the story is lost. For instance, enormous paper clippings of Kissinger’s underhand dealings and his cunning statements are strewn through the entire novel. Together with these, there are strings of Yiddish abuses and nasty statements about Kissinger. It seems as if Heller over the years has collected these newspaper items about Kissinger and used them all in his novel. However, by using Kissinger as a symbol of instant and immoral success Heller underscores the protagonist’s own desire to realize prestige and power by the same means.

Gold not only aspires for power and fame but also wealth. With that end in mind he befriends the rich heiress Andrea Conover. Through her he wishes to reach

the wealth of her father, Pugh Biddle Conover, who is a Southern landlord. But to his surprise he discovers that Conover is not willing to part with even a little portion of his wealth. Conover loves money “much more than health” (GG, 239). So instead of helping him financially, Conover makes fun of him. For instance, Conover finds Gold far inferior to him and perhaps fit only to geld his horses (GG, 225). It is ironic because Gold symbolically wishes to ride horses like the “lonesome cowboy” Kissinger, and not geld them. Gold’s father taunts him when he discovers that his son has been socializing with the Conovers—“Hey Jew Since when does a Jew ride a horse” (GG, 383)? Gold is constantly reminded of it by other of his Jewish origin.

Unable to acquire wealth or political power he seeks solace in women and sex but becomes anxious that there may not be enough time to get total physical gratification. Temporarily, he deserts his wife and children for the sloe-eyed Andrea. By possessing a *shikse* he can claim an emotional victory over America and perhaps realize a sexual compensation for his marginal existence. He is enamored by Andrea from the very beginning finding her the “first society girl in his life” who can give him satisfaction (GG, 125) He confides in his brother Sid of his intentions of divorcing Bele and marrying Andrea. He tries to convince Sid of the rightness of his decision:

‘She’s a lovely girl, Sid,’ Gold answered with persuasive feeling, ‘really nice, and her father can help me with his influence. There’s money there and that might make it easier for me to help Linda with those dental bills’ (GG, 402).

In brief, Andrea is a symbol of wealth, culture, power beauty, and immorality. Gold tires to control her to which Andrea complies in the beginning but rebels later. She is headstrong and Gold laments that,

she was not proving as malleable to his influence as he had formerly hoped, and there were salient of character that were going to prove hesitant to even his most apostolic attempts at modification. He could tell from watching her with her father that she was a person who never did anything she didn't want to and always succeeded in doing everything she did (GG, 391).

Unable to direct her the way he wants he seeks satisfaction in surrogates such as Linda Brooks, and the Mexican TV actress.

Gold is drawn to women because of the "raw magnetic force of their reciprocated animal desire" (GG, 406). But for him each fresh "attachment had no better chance of surviving than the others." He is not committed to his wife nor can he commit himself to other women. Realizing his non-committal and changing nature he gives himself to every relationship "completely" (GG, 399).

Most of Gold's love relationships are based on his psychological need for dominating others and the myth of complete sexual gratification. This being the case, his relationships with women do not last long. After his sexual encounter with a White House secretary, Felicity Plum Gold feels he neither got felicity nor the plum. This dissatisfaction leads him to other women as we learn from the FBI agent Greenpans (GG, 267). The constant sexual arousal by women is suggested through the image of breasts and perfume (GG, 398 and 194). Incidentally, the odor of sex is contrasted with the odor of sickness. Conover smells of "lineament" and Gold's mother of "bandages" (GG, 261; 53). The contrast strengthens the life-giving and stimulating aspects of sex.

Gold dreams of sexual orgies and he even attempts to enact one. But it ends in a memorable burlesque in a hotel room at Acapulco with three women, Andrea,

Linda and the Mexican TV actress. The orgy is frustrated by the arrival of the Mexican airline pilot, the Mexican TV actress's lover, and by Gold's wife, Belle. As the incident ends Gold's frustration is at its peak.

The peak of Gold's awareness of his failure comes when he hears the news of his brother's death. The news of Sid's death comes as Gold is attending the exclusive Embassy Ball where he is to be introduced to the U.S. President. Gold has written a favorable review of the President's autobiography. He expects that the President would repay him by considering him for the post of the Secretary of State. However, his meeting with the President is cut short by the news of his brother's death. He has to leave immediately to attend Sid's funeral. Symbolically, Sid's death marks the end of Gold's political ambition. It is an extraordinary moment in Gold's life when he realizes the ordinariness of his own existence. He feels, as he felt at Mendy's funeral, that he would soon be forgotten after his death. But then he also realizes that this is a situation one must accept. "Part of the Jewish experience would be to get him into the ground so fucking fast there would be no time to find and read his will" he thinks (GG, 289).

Gold finds the very mention of death suffocating. But after he realizes the inevitability of his own death, he comes to terms with it. Earlier the occasion when the family discussed plans about their burial plots, and by implication their deaths, was an absurdity to Gold. Now, however, the "thumping vertigo" that once possessed him upon the mention of death is over (GG, 289). Implicitly, he has also accepts that failure is inherent in life and everything cannot be gotten. He gives up his adolescent selfishness and begins to find meaning in compromises and failures. But this is only the beginning of his awareness into maturity. Had the author allowed the novel to take its natural course, it might have been possible for Gold to mature.

The novel is constructed around two basic themes: firstly, Gold's failure with his family, especially his father, brother and wife; and secondly, his desire to seek compensation for this failure in terms of power and wealth. In other words, Gold's failure—both personal and public—is the central theme of the novel. For instance, the first section, "The Jewish Experience," introduces the theme of failure both in his academic and in his social life. He has not yet written a book for Pomoroy from whom he has taken a loan of six thousand dollars. In this chapter we find that he has failed in his friendship too. His proclaimed friends, Lieberman, Pomoroy, Rosenblatt and Newsome are out to exploit him. The next chapter, "My Year in the White House," does not deal with the White House at all but with rueful family dinners. Gold is compelled to attend them where his failure as a member of the family is highlighted. Here we come to know that he is also estranged from his wife. The only reference to the White House is the review article Gold has written on the President's book *My Years at the White House*. In short, these sections trace his failure as a professor, as a member of this Jewish family and as a husband.

In the subsequent sections of the novel Gold's childhood is traced, when he invariably found himself "on the fringe of exile" (GG, 61). In his adult life too Gold continues to be in exile or *galut* as he is not fully accepted by his friends and companions. In short, he has been a marginal person since childhood. His sense of humiliation and failure in society are underscored here as he is treated as a fool or "shonda" to his race (GG, 269). The repeated motif of humiliation and embarrassment reach a climax in the last section where he decides to abandon his project of becoming Secretary of State. The structure of the novel points to Gold's sense of personal and social failure. John Leonard calls the novel a "nightmare of abuse and opportunism, of surreal graffiti" (Leonard, 1979). Gold's unsuccessful Jewish experience, introduced in the first section, comes full

circle in the last.

The narrative, as pointed out earlier, has detailed references to Henry Kissinger that tarnish the novel. If these details were skipped while reading, there would be no blurring of focus. Also the direct entry of the author in the novel destroys the element of suspense in the story. Instead of providing us with a deeper knowledge of the protagonist it gives us a list of improbable events. Heller writes about his protagonist that,

I was putting him into bed a lot with Andrea and keeping his wife and children conveniently in the background. From Acapulco, I contemplated fabricating a hectic mixup which would include a sensual Mexican television actress and a daring second-story bedroom window, while a jealous lover crazed on American drugs was beating down the door with his fists and Belle or a pack of barking dogs were waiting below. Certainly he would soon meet a school-teacher with four children with whom he would fall madly in love, and I would shortly hold out to him the tantalizing promise of becoming the country's first Jewish Secretary of State, a promise I did not intend to keep. We would see Andrea's father, Pugh Biddle Conover, one more time before his tale was concluded, and Harris Rosenblatt twice (GG, 308).

The above passage provides a foreknowledge of the incidents in the novel. It, however, does not compensate for the loss of suspense either by way of revealing the character of the protagonist or of strengthening the structure of the novel.

At times, Heller's prose style gains a liquid grace that he gave to his first novel *Catch 22*. The simile "good as gold" has been employed effectively, and at

different times it acquires different meanings. For instance, it implies Jewish marginality, individual worth, wealth in society, ethnicity and power (GG, 53, 429, 16, 237 and 236). These diverse meanings become part of the personality of the protagonist and are finally integrated in the novel. But quite often the style in *Good as Gold* is cumbersome and pedantic.

Circumlocution and the use of pompous words make comprehension difficult at times. Heller describes Gold's meeting with Weinrock in this way:

Mursh Weinrock, smoking cigarettes like a smoldering mattress and waxing fatter and rounder even as the witnessing eye beheld him, consigned him to the inspection of the assistant now sharing his practice, a very serious humorless young man who maintained the gravest silence for the longest time, riveting Gold with implications of tragedy by the incomprehensible sobriety of his manner" (GG, 386).

The sentence begins by describing Weinrock and ends by describing Weinrock's assistant. It suffers from misplaced emphasis, and lacks clarity.

Another related defect in the style of Heller is his verbosity. For instance, when Gold is unable to avoid Spotty, the "maleficent motherfucker" he whimpers resignedly (GG, 412). Gold feels "he had no chance ever of staring this otiose, imperturbable childhood friend out of countenance" (GG, 407). Again there is a statement like this: Gold remembers "his earliest models of that docile subservience endemic to the breeds of craven, watchful opportunists he was inspecting at length with such intrepid vindictiveness and excoriating contempt" (GG, 261). Perhaps, it would have been better if Heller had stuck to his simple and exuberant prose of *Catch 22*.

In *Catch 22* Captain Yossarian escapes to Sweden when he finds the events around him overpowering and uncontrollable. Gold has no Sweden to go to when he witnesses the collapse of his political career and his love life. Ironically, Gold returns to his wife and children (GG, 445). The author makes us believe that all this was in jest. He wants us to accept that Gold indulged in these events in sheer fun and his wild escapades were a minor aberrations of character after which he returns to his family. But we know that the author immaturely obstructed the natural flow of events and did not allow Gold's personality to evolve on its own. It would be naive to believe that Gold has accepted failure and dislocation as necessary conditions of urban life. We should guard against the fact that the emotions attributed to Gold toward the end of the novel are perhaps an inadvertent reference to the author's own. Probably, Heller himself has not been able to accept failure and dislocation as facts of city life. It would be interesting to point out in this connection that Heller admitted to Joseph Roddy that he had experienced the same emotion as those felt by the protagonist. Heller confessed to Roddy, "What Gold is experiencing in his mind I have already experienced." (Roddy, 1979 16). Heller has not been able to self-distance and let the protagonist speak for himself.

Good as Gold is a far inferior work when compared to *Catch 22*. Even the tone of mockery, rich in its implications in *Catch 22*, degenerates into facile laughter in *Good as Gold*. Despite all this, Heller's effectiveness lies in the way he shows the individual pitted against the odds of organizational city-life and the way he confronts them. Mostly people run away from failure but it is the acceptance of failure that is a necessary condition for sane living.

Heller captures the restlessness of the spirit in an insane world of military double speak, political cunning and corporate competition. Using the genre of the novel

as a resource for self-fulfillment Heller imagines a world where a dialogue may be possible between a sane and an insane world. But this dialogue does not reach a fruitful conclusion but ends in confusion and bedlam. Often he does not allow the story to unfold naturally and all of a sudden veers off into an emotional history of post-war America, personal recriminations, Jewish marginalization and a critique of neoliberal capitalist society. Nonetheless his prose often strains to capture the ineffable penumbra of urban anxieties and unfulfilled desires when pitted against the hard facts of life.

Notes

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