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POLYPHONY IN JOSEPH HELLER’S FICTION

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Abstract

The novels of Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22*, *Something Happened* and *Good as Gold* selected for the present study throw light upon the polyphony in its various and multiple forms. Hence, an attempt has been made to analyze them within the frame work of Bakhtin’s theory of polyphony. Heller’s unusual expression of anti-establishment themes ranging from rebellion against conformity to pastoral retreat, explain its current popular appeal. The selected novels concern the nature of individual freedom, political, social and psychological in confrontation with the mechanized system of life. Heller deals with the insignificance of war, science and religion, through the characters of his novels in *Catch-22*, *Something Happened*, and *Good as Gold*.

It is hoped that the study will offer deeper insights into the times by highlighting the polyphony aspects of Heller’s fiction. Joseph Heller not only engages the attention of students of literature and academics but also of the general readers because of the choice and treatment of the theme reflecting society in all its authenticity. Heller’s works are fascinating gallery of portraits, all the more interesting and are important in the context of the tensions and contradictions inherent in the characters and sensibility through which writers accomplish their mission.

Key words: Bakhtin’s theory of polyphony, Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22*, *Something Happened* and *Good as Gold*

The term polyphony comes into Bakhtin’s writings only with his first book on *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, published in 1929. Bakhtin states, “The essence of polyphony lies precisely in the fact that the voices remain independent and, as such, are combined in a unity of a higher order than in homophony” (*Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, p.21). Therefore, one key to polyphony is dialogism, the interaction and conflict of multiple, independent consciousness’s; it is in this way that the author expresses truth. The second significant aspect of polyphony is the position of the author. In a truly polyphonic novel, the author’s standpoint is not allowed to dominate; rather, it is simply one of the multiple, independent consciousnesses within the novel. As Bakhtin himself emphasizes, it is important to note that in a polyphonic novel the author’s position is not absent. Instead, it must not be allowed to squelch or modify the other consciousnesses represented in the novel.

Catch-22 (1961) concerns a World War II bombardier named Yossarian who believes his foolish, ambitious, mean-spirited commanding officers are more dangerous than the enemy. In order to avoid flying more missions, Yossarian retreats to a hospital with a mysterious liver complaint, sabotages his plane, and tries to get himself declared insane. Various defined throughout the novel, the term ‘Catch-22’ refers to the ways in which bureaucracies control the people who work for them. Many critics contend that while *Catch-22* is ostensibly a war novel, World War II and the Air Force base where most of the novel’s action takes place function primarily as a microcosm that demonstrates the disintegration of language and human value in a bureaucratic state. *Catch-22* enjoyed enormous success during the Vietnam War, when many soldiers strongly identified with Yossarian’s plight.

Something Happened (1974), centers on Bob Slocum, a middle-aged businessman who has a large, successful company but who feels emotionally empty. Slocum attempts to find the source of his malaise and his belief that modern American bourgeois life has lost meaning, by probing into his past and exploring his relationships with his wife, children, and coworkers. Although critics consider Slocum a generally unlikable character, he ultimately achieves sympathy because he has so thoroughly assimilated the values of his business that he has lost his own identity.



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Good as Gold (1979) marks Heller's first fictional use of his Jewish heritage and childhood experiences in Coney Island. The protagonist of this novel, Bruce Gold, is an unfulfilled college professor who is writing a book about 'the Jewish experience', but he also harbors political ambitions. Offered a high government position after giving a positive review of a book written by the president, Gold accepts, leaves his wife and children, and finds himself immersed in a farcical bureaucracy in which officials speak in a confusing, contradictory language. In this novel Heller harshly satirized former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger as a Jew who has essentially forsaken his Jewishness? In so doing, the author draws an analogy between the themes of political lust for power and Jewish identity. Similarly, Gold's motives for entering politics are strictly self-aggrandizing, as he seeks financial, sexual, and social rewards. Throughout the novel, Heller alternates the narrative between scenes of Gold's large, garrulous Jewish family and the mostly gentile milieu of Washington, employing realism to depict the former and parody to portray the latter.

Despite the critical attention paid to the fiction of Joseph Heller labeling it as fantasy, black humor, grotesque, absurd and so on, it can be found that no detailed examination of Heller's fiction can be found from the perspective of polyphony. An analysis of his fiction in the light of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of polyphony is sure to yield rewarding results. Bakhtin's idea on the novel promises to be a rich exploration and mapping of Heller's fictional output.

Joseph Heller's conception about the position of the author in his novels is quite similar to Bakhtin's conception about the non-interfering position of the author in polyphonic novels. Both these writers see the author as remaining more or less passive and hidden in comparison to their fully independent and self-conscious heroes.

This paper re-asserts the position of the selected novels in their polyphonic aura and emphasizes the polyphonic nature of fiction in general, the degree of which varies from writer to writer depending upon the use of double-voiced discourse. The primary trait of a polyphonic novel is the presence of highly independent characters and special non-interfering position of the author.

To sum up on the achievement of Joseph Heller would be contrary to the spirit of this novelist whose oeuvre is marked by openness, innovation, surprise and creativity. The difficulty of such a task is compounded when the study is made through the perspectives of Mikhail Bakhtin who saw everything in the world as 'unfinalizable', who celebrated dialogue characterized by its open-endedness and who despaired over 'the ultimate word' on anything.

In *Catch-22* Heller dealt with the basic values of the profit system and presented the war as the inevitable product of an insane culture that valued material gain more than human life and whose morality was based on the impact of power and the operation of the free market, a combination that defines human beings as commodities among other commodities. In *Something Happened* he portrayed the moral and psychological dilemmas of a protagonist living within that culture at the pinnacle of its power-within a cocoon that both protects and deadens, permitting the protagonists many possessions and pleasures but denying him any sense of vital human connection, even within the family. The family in *Good as Gold* seems to be the only remaining source of stability and human values in a society whose larger political and social institutions are fast decaying. Gold eventually learns that, however unglamorous, tedious, and troublesome the individual personalities, his family is the only real community he knows that supports human individuality.

Heller's novels renders to a Bakhtinian analysis through the concept of polyphony. The selected novels present a number of chaotic events happening to real as well as to fictional personages. Rambling and episodic, they are a curious hybrid of fact and fantasy, reality and imagination. It defies laws of causality and eschews a linear plot and thwarts all attempts at comprehending it.

It is in his study of Dostoevsky that Bakhtin defines and elaborates the idea of polyphony. Primarily, the term denotes a special position of the author in the text created by him. The author of polyphonic fiction allows extraordinary independence to his characters. They are capable of standing beside the author on the same level as the author, in these



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texts. By renouncing all ‘essential authorial surplus’ on them, the polyphonic author refuses to ‘finalize’ his characters. Such characters in polyphonic fiction are not mere objects (‘it’) but become full-fledged subjects (individuals). All this results in a relativizing of the author's position, authority and voice in the text. His becomes one more voice in the polyphony (of his characters' voice).

By allowing an extraordinary independence to his characters, Heller reduces his own voice to just one more voice in the text. As a consequence, characters in *Catch-22*, *Something Happened* and *Good as Gold* become full-fledged subjects capable of standing alongside the author, arguing with him and entering into a dialogue with him. Further, Heller has combined polyphonic design with a plot-structure of the adventure novel for the purpose of posing philosophical questions and raising important issues. In this process of polyphony and adventure-plot, Heller is able to attack established notions of military and economic order, corporate milieu and political establishments through polyphony, Heller points out the narrow, one-sided nature of all official discourse and authoritarian ideas. In all these respects, the selected novels prove to be polyphonic novels par excellence on the lines of Dostoevsky’s fiction. A polyphonic study of these novels reveals Heller’s design and skill underneath a seeming dark humour.

When the analysis of his individual novels are placed in a wider perspective we see that this polyphonic approach reveals aspects of Heller’s fiction which do not yield themselves to other approaches. A polyphonic study attests to the remarkable range of his techniques in presenting his artistic vision. Such a study reveals the indomitable comic/anarchic spirit in Heller that is ever at war with serious/authoritarian tendencies in the society at large as well as within him. The present study also emphasizes the need to desist from imposing a uniform monologic pattern on his fiction. All these aspects of Heller’s fiction are brought to sharp relief by a polyphonic approach.

Joseph Heller has explored the moral landscape of American culture during that period in which the United States emerged as the dominant nation in the Western world and fully adopted the principles and activities of power politics on a global scale. His protagonists Yossarian, Slocum, and Gold all deal with the tangle of temptations that America, at the time of its ascendance, presents. All try to come to terms with themselves in a system where power, morality of the nation-state and the web of shifting alliances based on self-interest, has filtered down through the corporate order to family and individual relationships.

In *Catch-22* Yossarian struggle for survival evokes great deal of laughter in the novel at the same time it focuses on the grim reality of the omnipresence of death. His aim is to fight and defeat not the Germans but *Catch-22* since it is this obnoxious law which comes in the way of keeping himself alive. *Something Happened* develops the theme of the corporate bureaucracy as a destructive order through the lens of its protagonist Bob Slocum. To expose the corporate structure, Heller shows Slocum using linguistic patterns that typify the bureaucracy's attributes. Everything that happens in the narrative occurs within Slocum's inner monologue as he replays past, recent, and imagined experiences to determine what has ‘happened’ to make himself and his family so unhappy. Whereas the dangers of Yossarian's world were obvious external threats to his physical and moral well-being, the forces threatening Slocum's identity and sanity come from within and from without, being so subtly entangled that they are as difficult for Slocum to define as they are to combat.

In *Catch-22* and *Something Happened*, Heller reveals how both the military and corporate bureaucracies have created a disastrous kind of order. *Good as Gold*, suggests this thematic and structural duality with its play on the word ‘gold,’ which names both the hero and the symbol of his quest. By balancing Gold and gold, man and matter, against the word ‘good,’ the title also poses questions about human values and priorities in Gold's materialistic surroundings. Thus while Yossarian struggled to save his life and Slocum his sanity, Gold must fight to hang onto his humanity (his identity and human values) against a formidable array of external and internal forces.

Thus we understand that in *Catch-22*, Heller satirizes the military and economic orders; in *Something Happened*, he scrutinizes the corporate milieu; and in *Good as Gold*, he satirically attacks the political establishment of the nation's



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capital. Heller was a witness and a victim of socio-political-economic-psychological circumstances in which he found artistic capital that he exploited to his fictional advantage. As a result, his works have become profound transcripts of a life and a vision that had lost its ideals. As has already been analysed in the previous chapters, Heller while reflecting a crisis-hidden society employed the polyphonic device that set him and his works apart in the true spirit of Bakhtin theory.

Heller dramatizes the crippling effects of modern society on the sensitive individual as in his portraits of Yossarian, Dunbar, the chaplain, Major Major, Clevinger, Nately, and Snowden. Yet he goes beyond his liberal predecessors to show that the enemy is not just the corporations and their authorities (in this case the military and its commanding officers). They are indeed amoral if not immoral; they are Korn, Black, Cathcart, Scheisskopf, Dreedle, Peckem, Aarfy, Wintergreen, and Milo. Heller locates the root of this elite's, destructiveness in its subversion of values -the substitution of the private values, interests, and idiosyncrasies' of the powerful for shared human values such as life, liberty, and justice. In Heller's fictional world the empowered few no longer represent the interests of the many but instead exploit them.

In *Catch-22*, Colonel Cathcart's reduction of everything will improve or impede his chances for promotion exemplifies this subversion of values because it symbolizes his pursuit of self-interest at any human cost, his bid for preferment being the reason he keeps raising the number of missions which in turn sends men to their deaths. Another result of the power elite's control and subversion of values that Heller examines is the moral emptiness and mindlessness that reign. *Catch-22* satirizes such moral and mental idiocy through characters like Schiesskopf, who would impose his 'crackpot definition' of reality as a parade upon the troops by 'wiring them together in a perfect marching formation'.

In dramatizing the authorial process, Heller wants his authorial audience attend to the way that he constructs the novel, although in a way it is different from the attention he required in *Something Happened*. Slocum tries, for a time, to salvage his identity and sanity from the corporate conformity that fragments them. In *Something Happened* money is less obtrusive and it is the value underlying Slocum's inability to give up his pursuit of corporate success and a materialistic mode of living. Heller sets out to destroy the American mythology that equates wealth and happiness.

Good as Gold portrays a void within the political sphere by making the President and his associates into mental midgets who devote their zeal to self-promotion rather than the public weal. He wants his audience to see the tools of his satire, rather than simply to focus on its targets-the self-deceptions and moral corruptions of Washington politics. The presidential commission scene provides a typical example of the self-reflexive impulses in Heller's narrative. When the governor lectures Gold on the way that the commission works, he simultaneously supplies a description of the way that Heller has designed the scene.

Heller's novels may strike one as so different from each other that they hardly seem to be written by the same pen. The protagonists - a rebellious soldier, a depressed corporate executive, a cynical college professor - could hardly be less alike in personality, role, or milieu. Yet a closer examination of Heller's novels reveals that all spring from a unified world view, that is one that looks critically at American institutions and values and satirizes what it sees: a society, in which the institutional forces of order create chaos, destroying human lives, liberty, identity, and values. In each work his satirical thrust is not merely the exposure of the power elite but of its effects as well on individual, community, and the shared values that support human life. Heller's deepest concern is the preserving of human values in a society where the powerful few seem bent on destroying them by substituting their own private interests for those of the general welfare. In short, Heller examines this dehumanization caused, ironically, by the organizations founded presumably for the betterment of individual and society.

In not giving a fixed identity, status, job, residence or religion to his hero and deviating from all the conventional literary norms in his portrayal, Heller leaves open a polyphony prospect for his hero. The author does not give any finalizing verdict about the characters or about the storyline at the end. Taking into consideration all the above characteristics one should suppose that Heller held a different view about novels and their characters which had all the ingredients of a



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polyphonic novel that Bakhtin talks about. Heller was perhaps envisioning an idea reader for his polyphonic novel. While *Good as Gold* and *Something Happened* succeed as satirical novels, *Catch-22* still remains Heller's greatest achievement, as well as an American masterpiece, in its combination of brilliant, biting humour with an innovative narrative style designed to simulate the 'chaos' that he exposes. In this dissertation we have examined the various types of voices' in *Catch-22*, *Something Happened* and *Good as Gold*.

On examining the applicability of the concept 'polyphony' to *Catch-22*, *Something Happened* and *Good as Gold*, it can be understood that these three novels are polyphonic in nature. By establishing the traits in these three novels as representative novels of the Post World War II American fiction, it can be concluded that the novelistic genre is characterized by polyphony. Accordingly, the selected novels abound in double-voiced discourse and are highly polyphonic in nature.

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