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LANGUAGE AND THE SYSTEM: THE CLOSED WORLD OF JOSEPH HELLER'S FICTION

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
Graduate Studies and Research
in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

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June 1994

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ISBN 0-612-05425-X

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ABSTRACT

This is a study of the use of language in Joseph Heller's novels Catch-22, Something Happened, Good as Gold, God Knows and Picture This. Heller's fiction is characterized by self-negating sentences and logic, a repetitive story line and circular structure. Each novel concerns the relationship between people and language, but the relationship invariably is circular and inherently non-progressive. The separation between people and language, analogous to the separation between existence and expression, is the basis for Heller's thematics.

Joseph Heller is a novelist who writes about language. Heller's novels all contain or evoke a common system characterized by self-containment and self-reference. In this system, language and literature are self-referential. It is implicit within Heller's writing that literature is a self-contained, non-progressive system, and consequently, it cannot yield a conclusive resolution. The self-contained system of his novels becomes analogous for literature, language, and finally knowledge. Definitive knowledge, being a derivative of language, is impossible. Eventually, Heller's fiction allows no final resolution because of the inconclusive nature of language itself.

RÉSUMÉ

Cette étude porte sur l'emploi du langage dans les romans de Joseph Heller, *Catch-22, Something Happened, Good as Gold, God Knows* et *Picture This*. Les romans de Heller se caractérisent par des phrases et une logique qui se nient elles-mêmes, par une trame répétitive et une structure en cercle. Chaque roman traite des rapports entre les êtres et le langage, mais ces rapports sont invariablement circulaires et par inhérence non progressistes. La séparation entre les gens et le langage, qui évoque la séparation entre l'existence et l'expression, est à la base de la thématique de Heller.

Joseph Heller est un romancier qui écrit sur le langage. Ses romans contiennent ou évoquent tous un système commun qui se caractérise par l'autonomie et l'autoréférence. Dans ce système, le langage et la littérature sont autoréférentiels. Il est implicite dans les écrits de Heller que la littérature est un système autonome non progressiste et que par conséquent, elle ne peut aboutir à une résolution concluante. Le système autonome de ses romans devient synonyme de littérature, de langage et enfin de connaissance. La connaissance décisive, qui est un dérivé du langage, est impossible. En définitive, les romans de Heller n'autorisent aucune résolution définitive en raison de la nature inconcluante du langage proprement dit.

CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

This study proposes that Joseph Heller's novels reveal a common thematic system characterized by self-containment and self-reference. All of Heller's novels will be examined in this study in chronological order: Catch-22, 1961; Something Happened, 1974; Good as Gold, 1979; God Knows, 1984; and Picture This, 1988. In each novel, the system becomes analogous to variations on a common theme which is the relationship between people and language. Each novel reveals a discernible system which the protagonist must confront and, in turn, is confronted by. Herein lies the source of tension that becomes the impetus for the book. Heller's use of the relationship between the protagonist and the system is ironic, since he invariably portrays the nature of those associations as inherently circular and non-progressive.

Additionally, this study argues that there is a steady progression in Heller's interest in both the relationship between people and language and between the protagonist and the system. Heller increasingly emphasizes certain aspects of the nature of both relationships. The self-contained and self-referring system is altered to suit the differing emphasis and consequently the system becomes directly analogous to the appropriate linguistic subject.

The second chapter focuses on establishing characteristics (which will re-occur throughout the subsequent books) of the self-referential system as portrayed in Catch-22. Heller's emphasis is directed towards the effect such a system, represented by the U.S. Army Air-Corps, has on

the characters and describes how the Air-Corps sustains its non-progressive existence.

With regards to the Air-Corps system, Heller's emphasis is on the effect rather than the cause. Heller's interest is in the intrinsic structure of the Air-Corps' closed system. The structure and linguistic style (which will become distinctive features of Heller's fiction) are intended to reflect the necessary outcome in the relationship between the sympathetic characters and the Air-Corps.

In Something Happened, Heller's interest gravitates to more self-reflexive literary concerns. Something Happened relates the story of Bob Slocum's unresolved Oedipal complex. Heller's portrayal of Slocum's Oedipal complex causes the story itself to become the closed system in this book. Slocum's attempts to resolve his Oedipal complex (which, as Heller writes it, is unresolvable) becomes analogous to the inconclusive nature of fiction. Both Slocum and his story share similar qualities and characteristics with Catch-22's Air-Corps. However, Heller's emphasis remains on the cause of fiction's inability to substantiate resolution rather than the effect this "system" has on Slocum. The entirety of Slocum's complex, all the details and characteristics which Heller gives the problem, becomes an extended metaphor for Heller's belief that fiction can give no conclusive resolution.

Good as Gold is also a self-reflexive novel. Heller creates a fictional world populated by ridiculous caricatures and grossly satiric events that strike the reader as completely absurd. Good as Gold makes no pretense of fictional realism. Bruce Gold, the protagonist, "sees" the book (of which he is a part) as the reader does, and he responds to the other characters and events with astonished disbelief. Gold, though, must try to make

sense of his obviously fictional world and try to achieve conclusive answers from a source that will yield none.

In this novel, Heller examines the nature of the relationship between reader and text by offering Gold's struggle to find answers as an analogy for that relationship. Heller examines this relationship by creating a character, Gold, who is analogous to the reader and making him confront a world, the text, which is controlled by the self referential nature of language and literature.

In God Knows, Heller's attention turns away from the self-reflexive fiction of Something Happened and Good as Gold and concentrates more on the nature of language. The linguistic questions raised in the previous novels become paramount in God Knows. King David's struggle is ultimately against language as he tries to create a linguistic system of his own. His struggle proves futile as he confronts three supremely authoritative self-contained systems which are all derivations of each other: The Bible, God, and language.

Picture This is something of an anomaly in Heller's work. Its primary concern does not seem to be with literature or language, even though it constitutes a logical progression in Heller's interest. The primary concern of Picture This is history, specifically the history of Western civilization, but its presentation of historical events is derived from the linguistic and literary philosophy of Heller's previous novels. The separation between people and language which Heller depicts earlier seems to be the foundation for the style and tone of the narration. In Picture This, the discontinuous nature of language and knowledge offers the possibility that our knowledge of history may be untrue and may prove impossibly resistant to verification.

Heller's emphasis is on the extremely detached nature of his presentation. The book's impetus derives from the tension between the subject and Heller's oddly unsettling presentation. Picture This brings Heller's linguistic and literary theories into the human-oriented world of history and argues that definitive knowledge, being a derivative of language, is an impossibility.

CHAPTER 2
CATCH - 22

A majority of critics believe Catch-22 is Joseph Heller's most important and artistically successful work. Hellerian critics, and the author himself, often set the novel as a prototype against which all his other works must be judged. For example, David Seed sees Catch-22 as "the major point of reference in [Heller's] career, the work against which he measures his subsequent work." [1] Seed's observation matches the position of every critic even remotely concerned with Heller's writings. Catch-22 is a useful starting point for a study of Heller not just because it is his first, but also because its structural and linguistic style reappear throughout all Heller's subsequent novels.

Heller here develops the linguistic style and thematic closed system motif which he uses in all his later works. The presence of this style as motif is not as obvious in novels such as Good as Gold, Something Happened or God Knows, but it is discernible in all of them. Characterized by a peculiar (and sometimes frustrating) circularity of events and language, Heller uses this common style to explore variations on similar themes, all derived from his pervading interest in language, structure, and, for Heller, their correlative: a self-contained and self-referential system.

One of the primary and still relevant criticisms of Catch-22 is its extremely complicated, confusing, and irrational "non-structure." [2] Whitney Balliett describes this structure in his New Yorker review: "It doesn't even seem to have been written; instead it gives the impression of having been shouted onto paper." [3] In another review, Roger Smith

remarks that the book had no coherent structure, joking that the pages must have been mixed up on the way to the printer. [4] Smith's first complaint was, and still is, a common one.

But Heller has stated that this "formlessness" was intentional and that Catch-22 "was constructed almost meticulously, and with a meticulous concern to give the appearance of a formless novel." [5] Heller's statement is backed by the existence of numerous note cards on which he planned the structure of Catch-22 before he began writing. [6] Regardless of how unusual the construction is, it is well established that there is a coherent but well hidden and sometimes flawed[7] structural plan underlying the novel.

Burhans' essay draws a rather detailed chronology for Catch-22 and points out that the novel covers a time span of four years, from 1941 to December of 1944. [8] However, the story actually begins in July of 1944, a time when more than half of the events had already occurred. The events prior to July, 1944 seem to be flashbacks, but this is not the case at all. All the events in the first three/fourths of the book (from 1941 to around October 1944) are scrambled and mixed together, making it exceedingly difficult to follow the story with any sense of linear time.

Heller offers no indication that one chapter, or even one paragraph, does not chronologically follow the preceding chapter or paragraph. At times, this applies to individual sentences as well. So what we get is an extremely confusing narrative with little distinction between the past and present. We also get a circular structure as the same events are continuously and almost obsessively repeated within the narrative.

The false conclusion is that there is no progression in the novel, but as many critics correctly point out, [9] the repetitions act more like a spiral

staircase than a merry-go-round. Each re-telling or re-appearance of events becomes more intricately detailed and, consequently, more grim and entrapping for the sympathetic characters involved in the story.

The circular structure of the book helps support the impossibility of escape from the war, from death, and from the authority of the U.S. Air Corps. The sense of progression is continuously denied by the repetitions. The characters are not impervious to this; Yossarian, Dunbar, Chaplain Tappman, and others are increasingly aware that they are experiencing what they have experienced before and will experience again. For example, Tappman is haunted by a sense of déjà vu. [10] Dunbar (who, next to Yossarian, seemed to be the most sane) responds hysterically to the return of the Soldier In White, screaming "He's back!" and causes a riot. Soon after, he is "disappeared" and is never seen again. (pp. 356-59) Yossarian plays Snowden's death-scene over and over in his mind and is terrified by Cathcart's constant raising of the required missions.

The raising of missions does not overtly act as a repetition as there seemingly is linear progression. However, as Yossarian and others realize, the actual number hardly matters as it becomes obvious that no one will ever be allowed to complete the required missions or be allowed to go home. The numbers do not matter at all because there is no chance of fulfilling the requirement. As soon as anyone finishes his last mission, the number gets raised and he has to fly more missions, continuing ad infinitum. Yossarian tells Dobbs that although Dobbs has flown the required sixty missions, he will not be going home. "So what?... [Cathcart's] only going to raise them again....He always raises them."

(p. 301) Then Yossarian states that he may not live through his sixty required missions, pointing out that each mission brings him that much closer to death.

The repeated connected events do not cause familiar comfort because they are so elusive and confusing that they bewilder and disturb the characters with their sinister implications. Discussing the effects on the reader of the multiple references within a sentence, David Seed states: "Every episode contains references to other episodes so that the reader is constantly invited to make connections but these connections multiply and extend too far for the connections ever to be finally made. The reader is thus in a position similar to that of one of the characters in being haunted by a sense of connectedness which can never be adequately substantiated."[11]

Haunted is an appropriate word because there is something ultimately very evil behind the repetitions. Underlying evil is gradually revealed to the reader as the book's grim and menacing tone progresses. For instance, Clevinger's trial is one of the funniest moments in the whole novel. Heller depicts Army justice as overwhelming when Clevinger stands accused of a crime he cannot even understand. In the end, he is found guilty regardless of whether he actually is. Heller writes, "Clevinger was guilty, of course, or he would not have been accused, and since the only way to prove it was to find him guilty, it was [the Action Board's] patriotic duty to do so." (p. 79) Clevinger is sentenced to march fifty-seven "punishment tours."

Three hundred pages later, Chaplain Tappman endures a trial which is very similar, but the humour is gone. Tappman, like Clevinger, cannot follow the double-talk accusations of his interrogators. Like

Clevinger, he is guilty simply because he was accused. The scene, however, is fraught with sinister overtones as it takes place in a cold, damp cellar, and there are constant threats of torture, not to mention a mysterious third officer who knows everything about the Chaplain.

Another repetition which helps to explain the book's structure is found in Yossarian's multiple hospital stays. The book begins with Yossarian in the hospital, faking a liver ailment. The hospital is presented as a kind of sanctuary from the war. However, Yossarian's successive returns become increasingly dramatic, culminating with the Soldier In White's return, Dunbar's losing control and his subsequent disappearance. Then during Yossarian's last confinement, someone makes this enigmatic threat: "We've got your pal, buddy. We've got your pal." (p. 422)

Yossarian has no idea who is making the threat, what it means, or to whom it refers. Tappman is guilty of some offense and will suffer some kind of punishment, and most of his other "pals" are either missing or dead. Yossarian is now in a position of either being jailed or cutting a deal with Cathcart and Korn. Yossarian feels trapped. When the man who threatened him appears three pages later and says the same thing, Yossarian's fears are confirmed. This man acts as if he is Yossarian's subconscious. [12] Furthermore, the man who appears on page 425 is never positively identified as the first man. They are similar. But neither the reader nor Yossarian can say that they are the same person. The identity of the man (or men) is concealed as this scene, and Tappman's trial, are presented with dark, hallucinatory qualities.

The inability to understand or make sense of these re-occurring situations, as well as the fundamental malevolence with which they are

presented, unnerves both the characters and the reader as the only possible progression in this repetitive novel is towards death. There is an end to this spiral staircase but the only way to reach it is by dying. The characters are only dimly aware of this. Dunbar, however, realizes this all too well as the Soldier In White's return reveals that death is the only thing that lies behind these repetitions.

Perhaps the most obvious link between repetition and death is the Soldier Who Saw Everything Twice. Yossarian believes this soldier is a very talented faker who uses some enigmatic and ingenious symptom to get out of his duty. Yossarian decides this is good, and quickly begins to emulate him. His admiration of the soldier ends when, sometime during one night, the soldier dies. Yossarian realizes that seeing everything twice is not such a good idea after all (pp. 176-80). The reason why this soldier saw everything twice is unknown. The cause of his death is unknown. The last thing this soldier said was a demand for the walls to be pushed back, which one doctor pretended to do. The soldier is satisfied with how far the walls are pushed back, and that night he dies.

Perhaps the Soldier Who Saw Everything Twice is a symbol for all the other soldiers in the novel as he is caught in a repetitive and stifling existence which was created especially for him by the Army Air-Corps. The doctor's pushing back the walls could be seen as an act of mercy since this soldier is allowed to free himself from his circular existence. Unfortunately, though, the soldier's newly found freedom costs him his life. Yossarian stops imitating the soldier as he begins to connect this vague and elusive sense of repetition, the U.S. Army Air-Corps, and death.

The circularity of the novel is Heller's way of dramatizing the relationship between the soldiers and the U.S. Army Air-Corps. Like the Soldier Who Saw Everything Twice, the Soldier In White is a compact and precise symbol of this relationship. However, the sole impact of the Soldier Who Saw Everything Twice is on Yossarian. The Soldier In White affected an entire ward, proving that although the soldiers might not be able to explain their situation, they are aware of their dangerous predicament.

The Soldier In White appears in the hospital in the first chapter, "encased from head to toe in plaster and gauze...[and has] two useless legs and two useless arms." (p. 13) He seems to appear out of nowhere as he is sneaked in at night. Clear fluid from a clear jar is fed into him, and his waste is collected into another jar on the floor. When the feeding jar is empty and the collecting jar is full, the jars are switched "so that the same stuff could drip back into him. All [the patients] ever really saw of the soldier in white was a frayed black hole over his mouth." (p. 14) The Soldier In White never makes any sound and a few days after his arrival a nurse discovers he is dead. The patients say the Soldier In White was killed by the good-natured Texan who spent his afternoons talking to him.

The hospital scene is first offered as just another example of Catch-22's black humour. Later in the novel as the tone darkens, the scene is presented again with more detail and more significance that make it central to the relationship between the soldier and the Air-Corps. Heller writes that the other patients shrank away from the Soldier In White as "They gathered soberly in the farthest recess of the ward and gossiped about him in malicious, offended overtones, rebelling against his presence as a ghastly imposition and resenting him malevolently for the

nauseating truth of which he was a bright reminder." (p. 166) The patients are not sure of the Soldier's identity and it is this uncertainty that unnerves them. The supposed sanctuary of the hospital is invaded by this "bright reminder" who represents the true nature of the soldier's role in the Army and the world the Air-Corps created. The soldiers see themselves as being trapped in the Soldier In White's bandages with pads over their eyes and with no possible escape except through death.

When the Soldier In White returns while Yossarian and Dunbar are staying yet again in the hospital, his significance can no longer be endured. Although this Soldier In White is shorter and fatter than the original, everyone responds to him as if he were the same one. "...Yossarian remembered him instantly by the two stiff arms and the two stiff, thick, useless legs...and by the frayed black hole in the bandages over his mouth." (p. 358) Dunbar loses all self-control and a riot breaks out as the Soldier In White's unearthly presence blasts home the truth: "There's no one inside!" (p. 358) and yet there is everyone inside. The patients all see themselves as the Soldier In White. Someone screams, "Everybody get up and run!" but there is nowhere to run to escape from the ubiquitous Soldier In White. Trapped in a circular world created by the Army, the soldiers are hopelessly open to destruction. Dunbar realizes this and goes berserk, shocking everyone in the ward into the same conclusion. At this point, escape for the soldiers seems impossible and their mouse-like actions during this mini-riot support this interpretation. The patients run from one end of the ward to the other, screaming wildly until the M.P.'s show up and restore order. Then, Dunbar is mysteriously made to disappear.

The Soldier In White is a complete creation of the U.S. Air-Corps. Every distinguishing feature of the Soldier In White is caused by and reflects the essence of Heller's description of the Air-Corps. The senseless switching of the fluid jars, which seems totally illogical and terribly funny at first, becomes simply terrible as the underlying meaning of the Soldier In White is revealed. Also, the very reason he is plastered from head to toe is due to his association with the Air-Corps.

Within the context of Catch-22, the Army is seen as being wholly responsible for this man's death. The true enemy is presented as not being so much the Germans as the U.S. officers. The Soldier In White was effectively killed by the Air-Corps and all the other soldiers are in the same danger. However, the Soldier In White not only represents the victims of this novel, he is also a symbol of the machinations of the very system to which he is prey. His uncertain identity and his mysterious ability to physically transform himself, yet still remain the same makes him not only indefinable but also, in some way, omnipresent. He has no limits or end and, thereby, is able to return again and again. The Soldier In White's association with the U.S. Army has led him to be overwhelmed by its system. Thus the Soldier In White shares with the U.S. Army the same oppressive and strangling qualities. Sharing these qualities kills the actual man wrapped in those bandages but the system which he also represents cannot be killed. The U.S. Army thrives on these qualities; the soldiers do not.

In every detail, the Soldier In White reflects the elusive world the Air-Corps invents for itself. The core of this world is an all-consuming circularity caused by the Army's self-contained existence. In his article "Catch-22 and the Language of Discontinuity", Gary Davis asserts that

the "Army's entire administrative procedure arises from [the] ability to put purposeless, self-reflexive discourse into action within its field of activity. Ultimately its self-contained organization and action define a closed world whose 'illusory depth' becomes its inhabitants' only 'reality'," [13] with "illusory depth" referring to Donato's definition as a "temporary spectacle of things beyond words."[14] The Army sets up a system which, by its life threatening nature, forces its "inhabitants" to try to come to terms with the Air-Corps' rules. The Army actively invites interpretation of itself by the soldiers by not only setting up "educational sessions" (p. 34) but also by allowing glimpses into its mysterious essence such as the Soldier In White, the Soldier Who Saw Everything Twice, or their trial system. Such provocative and tantalizing clues demand investigation and, possibly, interpretation by the soldiers. However, they will never come to any conclusive answers as the Army completely and effectively resists resolution. Resolution remains elusive through various means, all evolving from an ability to defy definition, control discourse, and deny access to information.

The Army administration controls discourse either by creating a linguistic system that is self-referring and entirely uninterpretable, or by cutting off all access to understanding through bipolar rules that cancel any possibility of resolution. With this, Colonel Korn is able to stifle any question that might be asked at educational sessions by ruling that "the only people permitted to ask questions were those who never did." (p. 35)

Examples of this type of thinking also allow for Catch-22's most famous incarnation, --a definition of Catch-22 that states for an airman to be grounded for reasons of insanity, all he has to do is ask. But when someone does ask, he is no longer considered insane and has to fly more

missions. (p. 46) No-one is allowed to find any kind of resolution and always "has to do what [his] commanding officers tell [him] to do" (p. 58), which is another definition of Catch-22.

Subsequent Catch-22 definitions, as well as the returning Soldier In White or any other repetitive or elusive event, seem to transform themselves indefinitely. Like all the definitions, the meaning gets grimmer as the book progresses.

For example, Catch-22's meaning is first associated with letters. Yossarian is in the hospital censoring the patients' mail as the second page of the book states: "Catch-22 required that each censored letter bear the censoring officer's name." (p. 8)

Yossarian turns this seemingly harmless job into something with significant implications throughout the book. He decides to break the boredom of censoring by playing games with the letters, blocking out all modifiers, articles, everything but articles, and even entire letters, except for salutations and signatures. He signs one letter with the group chaplain's name and others with Washington Irving as censor. [15] Then he starts censoring out the "names and addresses on the envelopes, obliterating whole homes and streets, annihilating entire metropolises with careless flicks of his wrist as though he were God." (p. 8) Except for being a mean spirited trick on the recipients of those letters, his actions are offered as a joke. However, much like the Soldier In White, the humour disappears as the meaning of Catch-22 becomes steadily more serious.

The penultimate definition of Catch-22 is offered after the M.P.'s go on a rampage and destroy Yossarian's favorite brothel. Yossarian asks the madam what right they had to destroy the place. She responds,

"Catch-22. Catch-22 says they have a right to do anything we cannot stop them from doing." (p. 398) Which means they have a right to do whatever they want since it is nearly impossible to stop them from doing anything, including altering reality to accommodate their own needs. Whatever is officially recognized as reality is reality no matter how contradictory it may be with actual "facts." In this way, Doc Daneeka is killed when a plane he is officially supposed to be on, but is not, crashes. His protests that he obviously is alive are ignored; he no longer receives pay, he is not allowed access to any services, and the men treat him as if he really is dead. After a while, Daneeka's "Alarm changed to resignation...[and] he realizes that, to all intents and purposes, he really was dead,..." (p. 337) The official report kills Daneeka and the Army does a fine job disallowing his life. His being alive is not recognized as reality, so his death becomes fact.

Similarly, Yossarian's moving the bomb line over Bologna to prove that the city is captured by allied forces becomes fact when the line appears on an official map. (p. 118-9) His joke about the Germans' Lepage Gun, which glues "a whole formation of planes together in mid-air" becomes truth when he hears it from an official source, Colonel Korn.

Yossarian lives in a dangerous world where anything that is thought up may become fact, and that world dictates its own reality. Official recognition is all that matters. So, annihilating entire metropolises on envelopes effectively destroys those metropolises. The letters will never reach their destination. Thus Yossarian's actions become analogical with the Army's sense of reality. In this case, he is the authority, officially denying an obvious and logical reality. This reveals Yossarian's willing (albeit unknowing and ignorant) contribution to the

myth of independent and nonsynchronistic reality. Furthermore, Yossarian's circular conversations, such as the one he has with Luciana about why he can and cannot marry her (pp. 157-59), reflect the Army's self-contained reality. They become self-referential conversations that block off access to a conclusion. Resolution is denied as it becomes clear the conversations exist solely for conversation's sake.

The Air-Corps exists as a complete and separate being, carrying on its business unhindered by and uninterested in any outside forces. Interest lies solely within its own parameters. Therefore, insignificant things such as Scheisskopf's parades and General Peckem's "bomb patterns" are elevated to concerns of most importance. During the useless air raid on a small and undefended Italian village, Peckem confidentially admits that "bomb patterns" is a term that "means nothing, but you'd be surprised at how rapidly it's caught on. Why, I've got all sorts of people convinced...it's important for the bombs to explode close together and make a neat aerial photograph." (p. 318)

Although bomb patterns are not important, the officers think they are and consequently it becomes paramount to their mission. During the pre-raid briefing, Colonels Cathcart and Korn tell the men, "...and you know how [Peckem] feels about bomb patterns...And let's see you put all those bombs on a dime!" (pp. 321-2) "Bomb patterns" is just a senseless phrase made up of selected words but these words shape and alter reality with definite and hideous results. The war is incidental and the innocent villagers who will be killed are inconsequential. The U.S. Army treats the villagers as if they do not even exist.

And as far as the system is concerned, they do not. Davis characterizes the victims of the novel as being, "Abandoned to a labyrinth

of words and appearances, [Catch-22's victims] are elements of a discourse which, referring only to itself, neither comprehends nor controls some 'world' beyond." [16] He could have also added that this discourse , which is the basis of the U.S. Army, does not care about "some 'world' beyond." The Air-Corps exists as a system that disallows its inhabitants any escape or resolution since its source, Catch-22, defies any final definition.

Catch-22 seems to be an all-purpose rule that allows the Army to do anything. Yet, much like the "bomb pattern" phrase, it means nothing. Shortly after his last meeting with the madam, Yossarian concludes that "Catch-22 did not exist,... but it made no difference. What did matter was that everyone thought it existed, and that was much worse, for there was no object or text to ridicule or refute, to accuse, criticize, attack, amend, hate, revile, spit at, rip to shreds, trample upon or burn up." (p.400) Any protest coming from within the system in hopes of destroying something that does not exist and yet carries such devastating power is futile. With no concrete definition of Catch-22, the Air-Corps can wield unlimited power over anyone who accepts their authority.

Furthermore, as the Army exists solely for its own sake, denying any outside reality while simultaneously creating its own, it creates a closed system which necessarily and repeatedly refers to itself. The constant self-references, though, shall always remain elusive, continuously resisting any kind of closure in the form of a final and set definition. The foundation for these self-references is either beyond or below definition. The basis is meaningless, even non-existent.

The inhabitants of this world are confronted by the antagonistic nature of the Army. They feel trapped and threatened but also feel compelled to try to make some sense out of an essentially non-sensical system. Once they reach a conclusion, such as understanding one definition of Catch-22, completing their final mission, the initial figure mutates into something else, spiraling beyond their grasp once again.

Ironically, this puts the characters in a position similar to that of the reader as they are confronted by a text (the Air-Corps) that will never yield any substantive conclusions. As Seed points out, the reader cannot substantiate any of the connections he feels are there and, similarly, the characters cannot substantiate any conclusions. For the soldiers then, "Interpretation [becomes] nothing but sedimenting one layer of language upon another to produce an illusory depth which gives us the temporary spectacle of things beyond words." [17] Interpretation is futile because each evaluation proves inconclusive and points towards the idea that there is nothing beyond words.

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11) Seed, pp. 44-5.

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15) This is one reason why Chaplain Tappman is put on trial.

16) Davis, p. 66.

17) Donato, p. 96.

CHAPTER 3
SOMETHING HAPPENED

Regardless of how self-reflexive Catch-22's fiction may be, as rendered by Heller's portrayal of the U.S. Army as a self-contained and self-referring system, I believe it is his most traditional novel. Something Happened is a novel that shares equal concern for both subject matter and structure. Catch-22's story is as important as the way the story is presented. The circular structure of the novel is used as a way to explain the relationship of the individual soldiers to the Air-Corps, and to help explain the necessary outcome of such an oppressive relationship. The structure and the subject matter are complementary but they also carry equal weight in a consideration of the work. In short, Heller searched around for a style that would best suit his story.

I believe Catch-22 is the only novel in which Heller pays as much attention to his theme as he does to his structure. Heller's theme and style are always complementary, but starting with Something Happened there is a shift in concern towards the writing process, making it seem that Heller searched around for a story that would best suit his theme.

However, to speak of the structure of Something Happened is misleading as it is an essentially formless novel. In his review, William Kennedy describes the novel as being "...devoid of story, structure, tidy continuity and other accoutrements of the conventional novel." [1] Catch-22 has a discernible structure, derived from spiraling progression. Something Happened does not. Something Happened is a book in which

nothing happens. What little plot or story there is is not nearly as important as the way the story is told.

Since the novel is written in the first person, the structure (or non-structure) not only reflects Slocum's psychological make-up but also is that psychological make-up in a tangible form. In an interview with Martin Amis, Heller says, "As for Something Happened, I can justify its length the same way I can justify the whole book- by the psychological nature of Bob Slocum." [2] The story is fused with the form, making the two inseparable and creating a novel that resembles an extremely long monologue in a psychiatrist's office more than anything else.

Despite how well suited Catch-22's style is to Heller's theme, the book could have been written in another way. That is not true in Something Happened. Slocum's mental problems dictate the structure of the novel but Heller gives Slocum these problems for a specific purpose: he wants to expand his investigation into the nature of fiction. During the time between the publication of Catch-22 and Something Happened, Heller came to a conclusion about that nature which was only hinted at in Catch-22; in fiction, there can be no progression and no conclusive resolutions.

All his subsequent novels have this as their fundamental theme, but within Something Happened, (which really is a transitional novel in his career), Heller begins to give greater concern to theme than to story. [3]

Slocum's story acts as a vehicle to carry Heller's fictional statement. His story (Slocum's unresolved Oedipal complex) becomes an analogy for the inconclusive nature of fiction. Slocum is far from being a caricature and yet he acts as a symbol for Heller's fictional philosophy. His narrative is symbolic of that philosophy. The most interesting aspect of the story is found not within the complex, but in the reasons why it is

unresolvable. Within these reasons the author progresses from a straight-forward narrative to a more symbolic narrative that is designed to express his fictional philosophy. The central feature of that philosophy is the "structure" and, again, it is a circular, repetitive, and stifling one.

Slocum is caught in circular reminiscences, constantly telling and re-telling the same stories from his past, but without the increasing elucidation that characterize the also repetitive Catch-22. Each time he repeats a story, he may or may not add some new details, but the underlying meaning of that story will remain as murky as the first time he told it.

Slocum is obsessed with a fairly small number of episodes from his life, but never seems able to explain why he is obsessed with them. Ambiguous circularity is similar to the characters' situation in Catch-22 but there is no progression whatsoever in Something Happened.

In Catch-22, progression was possible because the soldiers, though a part of the system, were not the same as the system. Slocum is Something Happened. The entire world of the book is found in Slocum's mind and expressed in his monologue. The soldiers in Catch-22 are outsiders confronting, and confronted by, a closed system. Slocum is his own closed system and it is as if Heller wants to explore a theme similar to Catch-22's but from inside the system itself.

In his review of the book, Nelson Algren wrote "Slocum's complaints and hopes...are offered with a repetitiousness that brings the reader close to asphyxiation." [4] Algren's comment is a pretty fair assessment. Reading the entire book is an exercise in endurance. As opposed to Catch-22's humour, which was funny but also an important

thematic component, Something Happened's humour is gloomy, depressing, and definitely unfunny.

Slocum's wish is to be happy. In his anguish, he attempts to remedy the problem by an intense self-analysis of his present and past life, searching for some sort of linear progression along with a cause to explain his misery. "Something did happen to me somewhere that robbed me of confidence and courage and left me with a fear of discovery and change and a positive dread of everything unexpected." [5]

The previous passage, often quoted, indicates the purpose of his reminiscing. Slocum believes that if he is able to plot his life on a kind of mental graph, he will be able to pin-point the exact place and time it began to go downhill. ("Something must have happened to me sometime.") (p. 3) Once that "thing" that must have happened to him is singled out he would then, presumably, be able to understand his malaise and do something about it.

However, it should be noted there is an obvious conflict between Slocum's purpose and his attitude towards that purpose. It is true enough that Slocum wants to find out the cause of his problems, and that he wants to discover what happened to him. But, it is also clear from the quote above that he has a "fear of discovery."

That quote is not just off-handed; it is a central feature to Slocum's psychological nature. In one way or another, Slocum repeats this sentiment throughout the book. "Today, there are so many things I don't want to find out." (p. 6) "I try not to think of [Derek] at all; this is becoming easier...." (p. 129) "I'm afraid of closed doors and afraid of what I might spy or what might come in through open ones." (p. 345) "How shall I die? Let me count the ways. (No, I won't.)" (p. 557) The point of

Slocum's monologue is that he sincerely wants to discover why he is unhappy and resolve his emotional crisis but he simultaneously dreads that discovery and the resolution that it may offer.

A good example of this is when Slocum is telling about the time he was searching for a mouse in his house. Slocum says, "The possibility of finding a live mouse behind every door...filled me with nausea and made me tremble. It was not that I was afraid of the mouse itself,..., but if I ever did find one, I knew I would have to do something about it." (p. 10) Having "to do something about it" means having to act. It also means a possibility of resolution, the possibility of an end. In his article, "Closure Resisted: Style and Form in Joseph Heller's Novels", David Craig succinctly sums up Something Happened as being "...about a man who searches for something that he will not allow himself to find," [6] and believes "knowledge revealed," or the possibility of resolution, within the book is equated with pain and death. I agree with him but this raises a question: Why does Slocum even bother searching for that something in the first place?

Slocum, much like the Air-Corps in Catch-22, prefers the status quo and, by extension, prefers to deny progression. His fear of discovery implies that he would like to live in a self-contained system, "referring only to [himself]," [7] and exist in a circular, non-progressive system of his own making. Spurred on by human nature and the inherent anxiety that accompanies such an existence, Slocum also wants to put an end to his denial of progression as well as to his anguish. At the outset, both these impulses have an equal hold on Slocum's conscience. An essentially unresolvable conflict is created in which Heller exploits his belief that the nature of fiction is a paradoxical conundrum.

In Something Happened, it is not the self-negating sentences and logic characteristic of Catch-22 (as well as Good as Gold and, to some extent, Picture This) which act as a source for paradox and a resistance to closure. [8] The effect language can have on reality described in Catch-22 (for example, Daneeka's death) is not a major concern of this book. Language is important to the novel but not in the same way. As stated before, Slocum is within and is the system of the book, much like the commanding officers of Catch-22, so word play and logic that would strike the reader or any of the characters as absurd are impossible.

There are no contrasting or dissenting views to point out that absurd logic. The paradox of the novel is really as simple as the way Craig describes it: Slocum is searching for something he will not allow himself to find. The paradox is the story itself. However, "paradox" is not exactly accurate: Slocum not only will not allow himself to find this thing; he really is unable to find it.

Many critics believe it is helpful to read much of Something Happened with the air of Freudian analysis. [9] Heller peppers his text with references that can be interpreted with Freudian theories, the most pertinent being, "Imagine having a father that wanted to kill you. That's the part they all leave out of the Oedipus story. Poor Oedipus has been much maligned. He did not want to kill his father. His father wanted to kill him." (p. 336)

Mellard has written extensively on the Oedipal complex in Something Happened and states that Slocum's malaise is derived from an unresolved Oedipal complex and the book is a working out of this problem; "[Slocum] has at last internalized the values of his culture and assumed his place in the Oedipal structure not as the child but as the father." [10]

Basically, Mellard's article is accurate. Slocum's problems are caused by an unresolved Oedipal complex (and a positive resolution of this complex is the "thing" he searches for). However, Mellard's position that the end of the book offers a resolution of any kind is not justified. I believe the way the complex is presented makes resolution impossible.

Although Slocum searches for that thing, he also prevents himself from finding it. "What ails Slocum is his inability to come to terms with the duality of the Oedipus: desire to possess the phallic plenitude forever lost at the separation from the mother, and fear of the consequences of possessing that which will represent the plenitude." [11] Within the artifice of the novel, Slocum cannot come to terms with that duality. The book is about attempting to resolve something that cannot be resolved.

Within this context, there are seven women who are important: Penny, Slocum's long standing girlfriend; his wife; his daughter; Virginia, the twenty-one year old secretary in the office where Slocum worked as a teen-ager; Marie Jencks, a twenty-eight year old woman in that same office; Old Mrs. Yerger, the office manager; and his mother. Slocum considers and reconsiders all these women. He draws parallels between them. Slocum states, "Every older woman I find myself afraid of reminds me of Mrs. Yerger. Every feeble old woman I see reminds me of my mother. Every young girl who attacks my pride reminds me of my daughter." (p. 130) Slocum does not realize that six of these women are manifestations of his mother in one way or another and his relationship with all of the women casts him in the role of Oedipus.

Heller's use of the Oedipal Complex is important to an understanding of his fictional statement. Therefore, it is necessary to consider the basics of Slocum's complex.

Heller does give Slocum an opportunity to resolve his problem. Significantly, though, this opportunity was in Slocum's past and is one of the few events he obsessively repeats throughout his monologue. The story is about Slocum's unsuccessful attempts to have sex with Virginia which is central to Slocum's Oedipal crisis. First, though, it is best to explain Slocum's relationship with his wife, with Penny, and with the unnamed women with whom he did have a sexual relationship.

Slocum feels he must dominate the women in his life; either by showing his superior physical and mental strength or by pretending the women cannot emotionally affect him. Simply it is a question of power. "I've learned from experience that it's always better, and safer, and more effective, to preserve the distinction between executive and subordinate, employer and employee, even in bed." (p. 42) Slocum is most comfortable with the dominant/submissive type of sexual relationship.

He describes his sexual relationship with his wife early in their marriage as one of dominance, even rape. "I was always struggling to get her clothes off, and she was always struggling to keep them on... I was always ripping open her slacks... I didn't care whether she enjoyed it or not; just as long as I got mine. I was always trying to jump her." (p. 119)

His ambivalence towards his wife's present aggressive sexuality {"[My wife] is almost always amorous nowadays,..., and ready to take chances that horrify even me... I'm not sure I like her this way...I'm really not sure I want my wife to be ...lustful and compliant..." (p. 125) } stems from his inability to properly and definitely assume the role of the conqueror and his wife as the conquered. If she is now acting as a willing sexual participant, he can no longer make her submit to his will.

Slocum's loss of sexual power (i.e. forcing some woman to have sex) manifests itself as a form of submission. If Slocum cannot be in complete control during sexual encounters, he feels the need to revert to some pre-adolescent state. For example, he says his long standing girlfriend, Penny, reduces him to a babbling idiot. "Penny diminishes me into a gargling, blabbering imbecile every time, and I love it." (p. 365) Considering that Slocum equates speech with power, this is significant.

His recurrent nightmare of the "dark stranger" breaking into his room to either kill him, rape his wife (or both) has been connected to his obsession with his and his older son's tonsillectomies. The "surgical procedure produces temporary difficulty in speaking and entails the risk of accidents leading to permanent loss of speech." [12]

DelFattore, basing her analysis on Freudian theories, also associates this dream with Slocum's fear of castration; a symbolic fear of losing the power to dominate. "...I think [the dark stranger] is carrying a knife; I try to scream but can make no sound." (p. 169) The dream is consistent with Slocum's remark that Oedipus' father wanted to kill him. Slocum links speech, language, and oral fixations with sex and consequently with power, especially the power of the father figure.

Slocum dominates his daughter with language. "I can outfox my daughter easily just about every time. (Even when I don't want to. I can't keep my mouth shut.)" (p. 185), and, "Why must I show off for her and exult in my... more expert command of language...?" (p. 199) Jack Green (Slocum's boss who has the "whammy" on him) is described as articulate, verbally abusive, and has the power to keep Slocum from making a speech at the company's annual convention. All the speech represents for Slocum is a chance to display his lingual gifts, to prove to everyone that he

can indeed speak, and confirm his power over language. For Slocum, being speechless (which is literally how Green leaves him) is representative of being diminished by a father figure (Green or the dark stranger), a loss of power, and obliteration of the self.

The most striking example of speechlessness is Slocum's son Derek. Everyone in the family is afraid of him and wants to forget him. However, Slocum sees himself in Derek; representing a part Slocum does not like to admit. "I can picture Derek..., slobbering, a thickset, clumsy, balding, dark-haired retarded adult male with an incriminating resemblance to a secret me I know I have inside me and want nobody else ever to discover,... I have the potential for turning myself inside out into a barbarous idiot." (p. 391) Slocum resists this image he has of himself, this lurking brain-damaged barbarous idiot, but his enjoyment of Penny's ability to turn him into a "blabbering imbecile" shows that he has conflicting desires.

Slocum reveals his desire for speechlessness with, "I think I may want to stutter. What a liberating release it might be from the life-long, rigorous discipline of speaking correctly." (p. 437) and, "When I grow up I want to be a little boy." (p. 340) Mellard states that Slocum often wants "to return to the condition of somatic, speechless immediacy... [that]... Derek represents" (which is symptomatic of the "fear" of the earlier Mellard quote) but this is "most contrary to the plenitude Slocum seeks."[13]

For Slocum, plenitude is represented by male "adult-like" behavior of "taking command." He is caught between his desire to regain the comforting, liberating, and oblivious world of the child (who is not separated from the mother) in which he would not have any

responsibilities or control over his surroundings and his inability to "possess the phallic plenitude."

A few sentences after stating that when he grows up he wants to be a little boy, he contradicts that wish, "When I grow up, I want to be someone dignified, tasteful, and important who does things because he truly wants to and enjoys his work." (pp. 340-41) His perceived inability to become this "dignified" adult who has complete command of his life creates his sometime wish of being like Derek and it is this wish that creates his inability to take command and resolve his Oedipal Complex.

The opportunity for Slocum to resolve the Oedipal crisis occurs in the office where he worked as a teen-ager. Mellard believes Slocum substitutes the office for his unstable family life (and his indeterminate position within it) in an attempt to define a determinate position for himself within a "familial" setting. "Paradigmatically, the office situation replaces the family situation because it can produce substitutes for the authority of the father..." [14] The office is also an analogy for the family life. The expected role in the office for each member is more clearly defined and Slocum admits that he feels more at home at work than he does at his actual home. The familial roles are easily distributed among those involved, as Mellard points out, "...the father (here it is the figure of authority, the commanding presence of Mrs. Yerger...), the mother (represented by Virginia, an "older woman", who is both innocent and seductive, nurturing and threatening), and... "the child" (seventeen year old Bobby Slocum)." [15]

Slocum's relationship with Virginia was an opportunity for positive resolution of his Oedipal complex. Virginia was older, experienced, and Slocum may have been able to seduce her. However, he never

consummated his desires with this seemingly "seducible and nurturing" mother figure. She would tease him into believing that she would allow him to sleep with her, telling him what they would do to each other, and relating her past sexual adventures.

Their conversations would excite the Young Slocum and they would escape the office for the basement or the stairs and make-out, symbolically leaving the rigid, familial structure where such seduction was not allowable or even possible. Before anything happened, though, she would become terrified and leave him by lying that someone was coming and they would be caught in their sin. She would then tell him if he only got them a hotel room she would allow intercourse, thereby placing the responsibility and power of fulfilling their desires into his hands. Slocum would meekly reply that he did not know how to get a room or that he did not have enough money, both being acknowledged by Slocum as pathetic attempts to cover up his inability to perform and take command of the situation. "Virginia was wide open for me then and I did know it. That's probably the reason I always shrank back from her... whenever she seemed to be sweeping me past a point I felt able to go. (As soon as I realized I could do whatever I wanted with Virginia, I lost my power to do anything at all.)" (p. 364)

Slocum's transferring responsibility to Virginia ("sweeping me") parallels his fear of the knowledge that closed doors may reveal and his dread of having to do something about it, thus creating a possibility of exposing his failure to perform.

Slocum realizes he cannot and does not want to fulfill his Oedipal crisis because of his fear. Virginia says she will help him get a hotel room but he side-steps the issue. During the rape scene in the basement

when two other boys who seemed intent on forcing Virginia into sex, it is Slocum who stops them; partly because of Virginia's obvious fear and partly because of his own fear of exposing his weakness. Slocum finds Virginia completely out of his grasp. He can neither seduce nor rape her.

His attempt at being heroic leaves him bitter when he sees Virginia flirting with one of the would be rapists. Slocum says he hated her and his feelings were hurt. He feels as if the boy "had just shoved [him] out of the way" and he compares him to his son's P.E. teacher, Forgione, who intimidates Slocum and makes him feel "less than a man." [16] In short, his pride was attacked. His heroism, however, was a cover for his fear of action which could give some kind of resolution to his complex. Whether or not Slocum was "successful" with Virginia hardly matters; the result of any kind of action could possibly mean an end. In this case, it is fear which keeps him from a resolution.

Slocum still prefers the safety of remaining a voyeur, fantasizing about Virginia's past sexual escapades. Mellard writes, "Virginia has given Slocum the chance to act out his Oedipal fantasies, but, he feels fortunate to admit, he never had to act on them with her in any conclusive way. Thus, never having had her, he can forever dream of her as the object that would provide him complete satisfaction to his desires." [17]

In Slocum's thoughts, Virginia always remains the twenty-one year old girl/mother who might have solved his conflicts, the mother figure he could have slept with. However, his inability to do so and (in his desire for that Derek-like "speechless immediacy") his propensity to shift power and responsibility away from himself creates an association between Virginia and young girls who attack his pride. Slocum begins to connect Virginia with his daughter, who often triggers his memories of

Virginia. "My daughter will soon be the same age as Virginia." (p. 383) and he speculates (fantasizes) about all the sexual escapades she will experience.

More important, Slocum's daughter and Virginia are also associated with his mother (or a mother figure) by his wish for the dependent, speechless oblivion that capitulation of his "self" and regression represent for him, the type of existence Penny gives him every time.

When considering Marie Jencks, he says, "I wanted to be absorbed into her embraces also." (p. 480) implying that this was what he wanted from Virginia as well. While describing his actions towards his daughter when she hurts his feelings he says, "I will sulk (and it is almost as though my daughter is the adult and I am the child). Our roles are reversed;... I depend on her. I wanted security from her; I do not get it. Instead, she troubles me with her problems." (p. 187) Slocum wants to be both the child (meaning, in Slocum's mind, an irresponsible and obliterative speechless existence) and lover (meaning the authoritative plenitude of the father) of his mother figure; a dichotomy that is unresolvable.

The authority of Mrs. Yerger, who Slocum says drove him out of his office as a teen-ager, originates from the mother figure but also contains the threatening authority of the father.[18] Slocum admits she intimidated him. "Mrs. Yerger bullied us all" and "I lost [my speech] with Mrs. Yerger -- I never once believed I could say anything that would make Mrs. Yerger smile." (p. 364) Mellard believes Mrs. Yerger represents all authority for Slocum, [19] but Slocum's statement about not being able to make Mrs. Yerger smile is telling. He often seduces women through

laughter and he remarks that he used to make Virginia laugh. Slocum subconsciously thought of seducing Mrs. Yerger, thus seducing and overpowering both mother and father figures. For Slocum, Mrs. Yerger is androgynous, "indistinguishable from" her husband. Mrs. Yerger represents indestructible and diminishing power and Slocum equates her with the intimidating father he never knew.

Slocum's father died when Slocum was very young. As a result, he could never direct his anxiety of authority towards a tangible, concrete being. Much like Catch-22, which could wield unlimited power because of its indeterminate definition, the father figure becomes some supernatural, unapproachable, diminishing, all-powerful entity that denies any kind of conclusive end.

Individual assertiveness (seen as rebellion and a positive resolution to Slocum's problem) is denied through fear of castrating or destroying the usurper by simply not allowing rebellion to cause any effect. Slocum wonders, "What would happen if... I disobeyed?" He answers "Nothing would happen. And the knowledge depresses me... My act of rebellion would be absorbed like rain on an ocean and leave no trace." (p. 20) He would not cause a ripple because, in effect, there is nothing there to be disturbed. Again like Catch-22, Slocum's father does not exist but he thinks he does, and that is much worse for him.

Slocum's father acts as an invisible and impenetrable barrier which covers and protects any mother figure in Slocum's life. His father prohibits him access in a way he cannot explain or overcome. Slocum's mother's last words to him were "You're no good," confirming his belief in his inability to replace his father. Complicating matters, the mother

figure is always associated with the father's power, either by implication (as in Virginia) or direct indication (as in Mrs. Yerger).

Slocum's mutual and contrasting desires to be absorbed by as well as to overcome this father figure cancel each other out, leaving only the possibility of remaining the same. Furthermore, even if he decides to try to resolve his problem, he cannot because his father figure is elusive and has no definite form. In one instance, the father figure will take the form of Green, or the dark stranger, or Mrs. Yerger. In another, it will take the form of his mother, or Virginia, or his daughter. For Slocum, this omnipotent ghost is all encompassing, swirling past his comprehension and preventing resolution.

The problem is that Slocum sets up this scenario within his own mind. The possibility for resolution is created with his active linear search through his past and present for that thing that must have happened to him. He simultaneously denies resolution with his desire to not find that thing and then returns to consider this or that event, stopping any kind of progression. An antagonistic figure develops that does not exist and that is beyond a determinate definition so it can mutate into any form Slocum imagines. It is simply impossible to successfully (or unsuccessfully) come to terms with his Oedipal Complex.

When his son is hit by a car, Slocum finds him lying on the ground. Slocum says that "He is dying... [and]... I can't bear to see him suffering such agony and fright." (p. 562) In an attempt to save him, Slocum hugs his son so tightly that he asphyxiates him. Symbolically, this was Slocum's last chance for redemption by bringing back the little child inside himself by saving his son's life. Slocum is so desperate and filled with conflicting emotions that he allows his passion to overwhelm both of

them resulting in his son's death, and the termination of the child inside of Slocum.

Mellard's conclusion that Slocum has "internalized the values of his culture and assumed his place in the Oedipal structure...as the father" [21] derives from Slocum's killing his son. [22] His nine-year old boy "...is Slocum's pre-Oedipal self... [and] is representative of that self that Slocum longs to regain..." [23] as well as "... the desired opportunity to remain in the place of the child." [24] Mellard writes that the boy's death is an "allegorical sacrifice" [25] which symbolizes an end to Slocum's anxiety about "taking command," resolving his Oedipal crisis, and "fitting in" with his culture.

The boy's death acts more like an "allegorical sacrifice" than an actual one, [26] but it does not resolve Slocum's problems. His son, a "bright reminder" of Slocum's conflict, offers another possibility of some kind of resolution to his complex. If Slocum embraces his son's pure, pre-Oedipal values, he will then come to terms with his problem by both accepting the hopelessness of his struggle as well as rejecting that struggle. [27] Susan Strehle-Klemter states this action would be "... to reject the adult's stultifying determinism and regain the child's responsible freedom." [28] On the other hand, if Slocum had rejected the "child's responsible freedom" and accepted the "adult's stultifying determinism," he would then have "internalized the values of his culture and assumed his place...as the father," which is what Mellard believes he does.

Actually, he does neither. What Slocum does do is reject the possibility of any resolution much like he did with Virginia. The

asphyxiation of his son gives the appearance of action and resolution, but the result offers no conclusive end.

At the end, Slocum says he has taken command. He gets his promotion and makes his speech. He makes decisions about his wife, his daughter, and Derek, all of which gives the impression of progression.

In fact, there is none. Slocum never resolves his conflict in any way. All he does is give his son the same status as Virginia. On the penultimate page, out of nowhere Slocum says, "I miss my boy." (p. 568), indicating his son will become another object of which "...he can forever dream of... that would provide him complete satisfaction to his desires."[29]

Slocum's missing his boy undercuts any assertion that he has resolved anything and leaves him in the same place he was at the beginning of the novel.

If taking command means nothing more than ignoring outside influence (ironically portrayed in Something Happened as Slocum's internal struggle) and carrying on within a non-progressive system, then Slocum fails to do even this. This reading is supported not only by Slocum's statement about missing his little boy but also by his actions when he verbally crushes his subordinate Johnny Brown.

"[Brown] was afraid... He was dissolving... All his truculent bravery was vanishing, and I saw him slipping away from me someplace from which I knew I would never see him return. 'Johnny!' I wanted to cry. 'Johnny Brown! Where are you going?'" (p. 567)

Slocum's reaction is the response his nine-year old son would have. The reaction of concern and fear indicates the removal of his "bright reminder" is superficial. So, the struggle within Slocum continues.

Heller's presentation of Slocum's problem firmly denies resolution of any kind. Slocum's actions after he seems to make some kind of progression denies that progression has taken place. The title of this novel states that something will happen within its covers. The novel itself contradicts that claim. Heller uses Slocum's story to point out there are no conclusive answers or resolutions within fiction. Furthermore, that story (Slocum's unresolvable Oedipal crisis) is a literary cliché itself.

Something Happened marks the point where Heller leaves behind the "realism" of Catch-22 and moves towards the "non-realism" of Good as Gold. He offers the reader a story which may be interpreted as an analogy of a fictional conundrum. Slocum remains within the covers and the reader responds to him as no more than a fictional character and an analogy of a fictional statement.

In Good as Gold, though, Heller continues with his investigation into fiction but draws the reader into the story by creating a character, Bruce Gold, who is analogous to that fictional statement but also to the reader. Something Happened is a novel which keeps itself as a novel. Good as Gold, through an ironic use of unreal characterization, expands that boundary between fiction and reality and propels the reader into Heller's fictional world.

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2) Amis, Martin. "Joseph Heller in Conversation with Martin Amis" New Review, 2, 20 (November 1975), p. 56.

3) I would not say Heller ever actually forsakes his story, just that it takes a supporting role in his following novels.

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5) Heller, Joseph. Something Happened. New York: Knopf, 1974. p. 8. All subsequent quotations are from this edition and are indicated by page number in parentheses.

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7) cf. Davis, Gary. "Catch-22 and the Language of Discontinuity." Novel, 12, No. 1 (1978) p. 66.

8) For the purpose of this thesis, resolution and closure will be interchangeable terms.

9) For example, see Mellard, DelFattore, Seed, LeClair, or Strehle-Klemter. I have not found one critic who denies the presence within the book.

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10) Mellard, pp. 152-53.

11) Mellard, p. 142.

12) DelFattore, p. 132.

13) Mellard, p. 149.

14) Mellard, p. 145.

15) Mellard, p. 145.

16) While discussing his dreams, Slocum finds Jack Green often turns into the Dark Stranger and the Dark Stranger often turns into

Forgione (p. 400). Slocum describes Forgione as having a "dark, swarthy complexion."

17) Mellard, p. 146.

18) cf. Mellard, p. 149.

19) Mellard, p. 145.

20) Mellard, p. 149.

21) Mellard, pp. 152-53.

22) There is much dispute as to whether Slocum does this intentionally or not.

23) Mellard, p.150.

24) Mellard, p.153.

25) Mellard, p.153.

26) Slocum asphyxiates his son and is the actual cause of his son's death, though no-one finds out about it. In reality, it is highly doubtful that the cause of death would be kept a secret.

27) Slocum's son is often described as being helpless and at the mercy of many different people. Simultaneously, he is described as not caring about his powerlessness.

28) Strehle-Klemter, p. 112.

29) Mellard, p.146.

CHAPTER 4
GOOD AS GOLD

In comparing Something Happened to Catch-22, Kurt Vonnegut writes: "Life is a whole lot smaller and cheaper in this second book." [1] He is right. Heller is on a noticeably downward course with his compassion towards life. At least Catch-22 offers some kind of redemption, even though it is a highly unlikely one. Something Happened offers nothing. Good as Gold is even meaner. At the end, it is obvious that Bruce Gold is redeemed and finds a "salvation of sorts in the personal commitment to family, friends, ..." [2] His redemption is so obvious that it is startling; and it is so empty that it is incredible. Gold's final salvation is nowhere supported by the text and this Bildungsroman becomes antithetical to its own definition. In Good as Gold, Heller exploits that popular genre, subverts it, and writes a bitter novel about the failure of everything, especially the failure of literature.

John Aldridge points out that "... the deeply lodged suspicion in Something Happened ... is that there is no one at all in charge,... [there is] no order behind organization, no system behind bureaucratic structure, no governing principle behind government,... and the very idea of responsibility may have lost all meaning." [3] He states that this is the same "radically nihilistic perception" that is behind Good as Gold.

Aldridge's article centers on Heller's satirical method, concluding that "[Good as Gold] is all about a society that is fast going insane, that is learning to accept chaos as order, and unreality as normal." [4] His statement could apply to Heller's "nihilistic" fictional intentions in general.

Nihilistic is put in quotes not just because it is a quote but also because I do not believe it is exactly precise, at least not the way Aldridge uses it. In Aldridge's sense, Heller's social nihilism suggests an active choice. Aldridge believes Heller uses a particular satirical method (Aldridge calls it absurd, black comedy) to best express his beliefs in that "radically nihilistic perception." However, this perception is chosen to present a certain belief system, to present a belief that society is going insane fast. Regardless of how well Heller might present his argument, there is room to refute it.

Heller's fictional nihilism, however, disallows argument. His fictional statement is presented to transform the belief into a definite and irrefutable physical law, which is nearly the only definite in all of Heller's fiction. (Unfortunately, though, even this definite is questioned in God Knows and is proven indefinite in Picture This.) In Good as Gold, Heller continues with his fictional statement that literature can yield no definitive conclusions. In Something Happened, this statement is supported by the literary artifice of an unresolved and unresolvable Oedipal Complex. In Good as Gold, it is supported by a structurally thematic repetition.

The theme of Good as Gold is, perhaps, the American Jewish Experience and the plot, the education of Bruce Gold in the American Jewish Experience. The structure is another circular one, crucial to concluding the plot, and non-conclusive since it brings the story back to the beginning and allows it to repeat itself.

Aldridge seems to believe this story's social commentary deserves heavy emphasis, and in at least one instance, Heller agrees with him.[5] I do not. If the story does deserve it, then I believe the book is

unsuccessful.[6] With this in mind, the story of Good as Gold is considered as an extended metaphor for that fictional statement and also of the relationship between reader and text.

The novel is divided into two worlds: New York and Washington. Most critics believe the book can be understood by juxtaposing those worlds. According to Aldridge, "Both represent aspects of the same condition: the collapse of those values that once made humanity and rationality necessary," [7] while Wayne Miller believes "... that the notion of ethnicity... is at the heart of the moral vision of Good as Gold and [Gold] finds a salvation of sorts in the personal commitment to family." [8]

Miller presents the novel as a Morality Play whose hero has to choose between good and evil, with Gold's family representing the good and Washington, the evil temptation. [9] Robert Merrill agrees but thinks this creates structural difficulty within the novel: "Indeed, the real problem with Good as Gold is that the contrast between New York and Washington is finally too great, not too small (as Aldridge implies)." [10] For Gold, New York represents his family, his ethnicity, plus all the implied limits and ambivalence he feels are inherent within his family. Washington represents freedom and success, an escape from those familial confines by entering the fantasy world of power and prestige that Gold feels is within his grasp. The tension between the two worlds is the impetus for the fiction as Gold continuously compares the merits of these two worlds while trying to understand them.

Those statements are mostly based on reading Good as Gold as a socially satirical educational novel and are rather useless for my purpose. However, they are useful in pointing out that there are two worlds in the book and Gold has to choose between them. At the end, Gold chooses

familial commitment, which is New York. His morally correct decision allows Miller to call it a "salvation of sorts." Also, that dialogue suggests that the differences between the two worlds is one not so much of style and content but rather one of moral values and personal worth. I agree.

The similarities Gold finds between Washington and New York are important. These similarities are derived from the impossible caricatures who populate both worlds and alienate Gold, and from Heller's depiction of yet another mysterious and inaccessible authority which may offer resolution. In Good as Gold, that authority is symbolic of language.

To understand the fictional nature of the novel, it is necessary to understand why Gold is alienated by the people who surround him, such as his family and the people who make up Washington's bureaucracy. Ruderman states, "[Good as Gold] is unabashedly literary, by which is meant that its frame or reference is ultimately not the world of politics or the Jewish family but the act of creative writing itself." [11] The world within the novel is a direct result of Gold's chronic fictionalization and internalization of his contact with the world.

Heller uses Gold as a symbol for the reader. The world Gold struggles in is meant to be read as his text. The narrator is caught between Gold's perception of the world and the task of narrating a "textual landscape."

The observations made by the narrator coincide with this reading of Gold as an analogy for the reader and the world within the book as a text. Thus, ridiculous caricatures and impossible events are presented as being "real". It is not Gold who gives us the information but the narrator,

who is a traditionally reliable source of truth within a novel. A "novel reality" is suggested that is obviously fictional and therefore false.

Heller creates a story that challenges our belief in fictional realism and offers an argument that such realism is impossible. Gold's struggle, and ultimately the struggle within the fictional process of the novel, questions and re-evaluates the merits of fictional authority. The argument within this struggle offers the irrefutable conclusion that fiction can give no conclusions. Any claim of fictional authority is undermined and eventually negated since there is no stable foundation for that authority.

A passage in Paul de Man's Allegories of Reading is extremely useful for my analysis. "The paradigm for all texts consists of a figure (or a system of figures) and its deconstruction. But since this model cannot be closed off by a final reading, it engenders, in its turn, a supplementary figural superposition which narrates the unreadability or the prior narration. As distinguished from primary deconstructive narratives centered on figures and ultimately always on a metaphor, we can call such narratives to the second (or the third) degree allegories." [12]

Hillis-Miller explains, "First comes the assertion of an unjustified and aberrant metaphor, then the 'deconstruction' of that metaphor, the revelation of its aberrancy, then the 'allegory', that is, the expression in a veiled form of the impossibility of reading that revelation of aberrancy." [13] Elsewhere, Hillis-Miller comments "In de Man's model 'deconstruction' is a name for learning from experience, and 'unreadability' is a name for the impossibility of doing that once and for all. The 'unreadability' is indicated by the re-use of the figure or some new version of it even when it has been shown to be illusory or deceptive." [14]

Gold's education lends itself very well to de Man's theory. The text becomes unreadable or without a conclusive final reading when the primary figure which drives the book seems resolved but really is replaced by a "supplementary figural superposition."

In the beginning of the book, Gold is ignorant and naive of both worlds. The novel tells the story of Gold learning that his preconceptions of both worlds are erroneous and aberrant. Gold loses his ignorance and naiveté as he develops an understanding of both worlds along with respect for the world of his family and heritage, represented by New York. With this new respect, Gold rejects his impulse to abandon New York and commit himself to Washington. His education ends here because he has learned his lesson. Progression and resolution are possible now as the deconstruction of the "unjustified and aberrant metaphor" is complete.

Gold's decision is based on juxtaposition. The knowledge he gains is derived from reference and this referential nature is the primary cause of his ignorance. Therefore, his final decision is erroneous. More important, his decision to explain the New York world through a referential medium (Gold plans to write a book on the Jewish Experience) proves his education is far from complete. This "allegory" is veiled as Gold believes (and at the end, the narrator implies) that he has progressed and learned.

However, his actions and return to the initial "aberrant metaphor" prove otherwise. Gold might feel that his commitment to his family and the implications of that commitment resolve his crisis, but his final thoughts show he has never left his negative and ultimately futile approach to resolving his situation.

The primary conflict in the novel is Gold's inability to access the "central core" of either world. In Washington, that core is the President. In New York, it is understanding and accepting his heritage. I will show that the basis to this inability is lack of understanding caused by a barrier that prohibits access to knowledge.

In keeping with de Man's model, the initial figure of Good as Gold is Gold's attempts to access knowledge, perhaps thinking: "How can I understand either of these worlds." His attempts to comprehend are of primary importance to de Man's system.

Gold tries to access this knowledge in two different ways. In Washington, Gold tries to resolve this figure by making it in the big leagues and becoming Secretary of State. In New York, it is by writing a book on "The Jewish Experience in America," which he hopes will answer his questions and bring peace of mind. Although he sees both worlds as wildly imperfect and alienating (mainly due to the inaccessibility of the "central core" of either world as well as the "unreal" caricatures who populate both places) he concludes that New York is where he fits best and hints that this is his salvation.

Gold's trying to find his true place in his heritage through writing still remains a concern. Though it appears he has learned enough to write his book, he still does not understand that the fictional form of the book is fundamental to his problem. "[Gold] owed Pomoroy a book. Where could he begin?" [15] is how the novel ends. Heller himself agreed with Reilly that "... to an extent, Good as Gold is a book about the composition of the book Good as Gold." [16]

So, if Good as Gold does tell the story of its own creation, and if the book Gold owes Pomoroy is actually this book, then Heller's satirical

technique (which Aldridge calls "radically nihilistic", calling the caricatures "grotesques") supports the author's fictional nihilism even more. The caricatures Aldridge refers to are a direct result of their fictional existence, which will never yield a firm resolution. Their fictional existence creates no final reading, so there is no assimilation or final understanding. Values collapse because Gold is unable to access either central core. He cannot understand Washington or New York while he is alienated and separated from the elusive, ridiculous caricatures he believes hold definitive answers.

Gold's struggle to find his place in the power structure and his implied failure (although he believes he has succeeded) represent the problem of fiction. Fiction seems to offer conclusive resolutions within the text. When outside consciousness is brought in to create meaning, the resolutions along with the entire system of text and reader crumble as two discordant forces come into contact.

The problem, as stated before, is that there is no foundation on which to base conclusions. There is no way to substantiate anything except insubstantiation. Heller portrays the nature of definition and meaning as being entirely referential.

In Good as Gold, there is no clear definition; everything is compared to something else. Critics attempt to understand, i.e. define, the book by juxtaposing the two worlds. Gold's moral choice ultimately derives from comparing them. The thought process within the book is akin to "A is like B; B is like C; ...." Unfortunately, what A or B actually are is elusive and unknowable. The comparisons continuously spin outward, leaving Gold feeling that something primary is missing. The fundamental something is conclusive definition without reference.

Heller makes this point with Gold's analogical nature. Gold is the ultimate referential creature. He defines himself in relation to Kissinger. He prefers universal, nondescript titles over actual names. At one point, while his family is having one of its many dinner arguments, Gold "loses track of the voices" [17] and assigns his family fictional names such as "Old Karamazov," "Lady Chatterly," "Cinderella," and "Clytemnestra."(p. 247) This is how Gold "knows" things, but what these things actually are is not knowable. Even "Gold as an analogy for the reader" is not what Gold actually is. He is defined in relation to something else.

Heller seems to say that knowledge is based in language and language has no way of defining except through referential definition. Language circles around the truth but will never conclusively reveal that truth. Language can only refer to more language and it is this which Heller portrays as so disturbing.

The inconclusiveness of language, of literature, proves that nothing can be ascertained as language continuously spirals past conclusion. For Heller, the failure of literature, which uses language as its foundation, is caused by its failure to resolve anything with any degree of certainty. Or to quote Hillis-Miller again, "Language cannot think itself or its own laws... Nor can language express what is outside language. It can neither know whether or not it has reached and expressed what is outside language, nor can it know whether that 'outside' is a thought, or a thing, or a transcendent spirit, or some linguistic ground of language, or whether it is nothing at all, since for de Man, as for Rousseau, sensation, perception, and thought are not separable from language, cannot occur separate from language. They are permeated by language through and through, or they are language." [18]

In Good as Gold, the uncertainty of "whether or not [language] has reached and expressed what is outside of language" is less important than the fact that language cannot express conclusive knowledge and the uncertainty that it brings. Since we only know things through language, we must return to it and repeat the same initial error of trying to "know" in linguistic terms. Heller presents this problem in an analogical manner.

Within the New York sections, the workings of Heller's analogy may be explained more briefly than the Washington sections. Basically, the problem lies in Gold's alienation from his family. Throughout the novel, Gold is presented as an outsider within his own family and by implication, he is detached from the entire Jewish people and his own heritage.

Gold's father, Julius asks "What does he know about being Jewish?" (p. 21), and Gold finds he cannot disagree that he does not know much.

The Jewish experience in America, as portrayed in Good as Gold, is what Gold's family experiences when they first migrate to New York. Gold is the second youngest in a large family and cannot remember the hardships, prejudice, poverty, and sacrifice the family goes through when they arrive. By the time Gold is of age, his family achieves some stability which alters the Jewish experience to something it really is not.

Gold is oblivious to most of his tempered Jewish experience. He can neither remember nor understand the past that makes up so much of what his family is. As minority immigrants, they suffered hardships that Gold responds to with surprise (p. 207) or sympathy (p. 271) but never with a sense of connection. Their past is not his, and never can be, but

Gold still bases most of his existence and identity on his place in a family where he has no substantial connection, and he never will. The answers in New York lie in a past which is irretrievable.

This unchangeable reality is not Gold's fault. Gold's family is created and defined by the past. That is their source and it is where their referential nature ends. It is important to recognize that Gold's family is only referential for Gold. Significantly, only he and his younger sister Joanie/Toni have trouble understanding the family and compare its members to fictional figures. Gold's crude stereotypical portrayal stems from his inability to understand the family in terms that are not referential.

As an analogy for fiction, Gold's family is a closed system like the Air-Corps in Catch-22. The family members, like the Air-Corps commanding officers, understand each other. Gold is an outside consciousness who will never understand his family's closed system.

The family acts like a text that can only yield referential meaning: for example, his father is like Old Karamazov, Ester is like Lady Chatterley Gussie is like Clytemnestra. Gold considers his relatives through comparisons with the result that they become as self-referential as language and literature. The individual members are defined by something they are not. Gold is denied true definition because that meaning is inherently alien to him; he is irrevocably separated from its source, from what A or B actually are.

Conclusive resolution is impossible as there can be no foundation for stable definition and meaning. Referential definition yields more references, spinning outwards as definition continuously mutates, defies its own end and implies unlimited possibilities. Stable definition yields

conclusive meaning and achieves resolution as the perpetual wandering of definition ends. Gold's family yields nothing but referential definition for him and consequently cannot offer any kind of resolution.

The book implies a resolution with Gold's "conversion" beginning with Sid's death. His first response is: "He does this to me every time. He'll ruin my whole day, my whole weekend." (p. 471) During the Shivah, though, Gold begins to develop a spiritual connection which is reinforced in an epiphany on the last page of the book. Here the assumptions and beliefs Gold has about Jewish people are proven erroneous. "As Gold watched, the catcher, a muscular, redheaded youth with freckles and sidelocks and a face as Irish or Scottish or Polish as any Gold had ever laid eyes upon, moved wrathfully toward the pitcher with words Gold for a minute had trouble believing. 'Varf!' shouted the catcher. 'Varf it, already!" (p.488). At first, it is a transcendent moment which Gold cannot believe or explain but it does move him to some sort of revelation. However, like everything else in the book, it is another referential moment in which the catcher is like an Irishman, or a Scot, or a Pole. Gold really believes this is a life-changing moment but he returns to the impossible task of explaining it through language. The reason why it is impossible is graphically demonstrated by the Washington sections.

In Washington Gold has ambitions in the public sector, and realizing them would offer the conclusion and resolution he seeks. The President holds the key and the power to make Gold's ambitions come true. Gold learns the President is the only one who can appoint him to a public office such as Secretary of Treasury, Attorney General, or Secretary of State. It seems Gold can have whatever position he wants as long as the President gives it to him. Naturally, Gold wants to meet the

President to discuss the possibilities and ensure an appointment. In fact, Gold never succeeds in seeing him throughout the book.

If the President is the source of conclusive knowledge, and if that knowledge is being presented as elusive and unobtainable, then nothing could be more obviously supporting than Heller's depiction of a president who is not depicted at all. The President is talked about, written about, and he makes decisions others pass on to the public. He is about to arrive here and just left there, but he never shows up anywhere. Heller does not offer any kind of physical description or direct quotes. The President simply is not within the novel.

What we do get are second-hand descriptions of a man who is a "very early riser. He is up at five every morning, takes two sleeping pills and a tranquilizer, and goes right back to bed for as long as he can sleep." (p. 184) and who works twenty-four hours a day, even while sleeping. Gold's attempts to meet with the President are continually thwarted by situations beyond his control. Even the narrator, during a self-reflexive intrusion, states that "[He] would shortly hold out to him the tantalizing promise of becoming the country's first Jewish Secretary of State, a promise [he] did not intend to keep." (p. 278) (Gold thinks he could be the first Jewish Secretary of State because even though Kissinger's presence is acknowledged and prevalent throughout the book, Gold and his family do not believe Kissinger is Jewish.) Furthermore, at the beginning of that paragraph, Gold thinks to himself "that he was spending an awful lot of time in this book eating and talking." Heller establishes Gold's awareness of his fictional existence and further supports a reading of this novel as a novel whose main concern is itself.

David Seed writes, " In Good as Gold the President's role is veiled, muffled and reduced." [19] The President is believed traditionally to hold the power but for Gold he does not, except in a cryptic, enigmatic way. Yet Gold believes, or is led to believe, the President is powerful. Gold is continuously being told that the President has just promoted him from one unnamed position to another equally obscure position or, the President is considering him for this appointment or that.

Gold has no other choice but to believe that the President (who may not even exist) has the power to influence Gold's future. While the President remains shrouded in mystery, isolated, and impossible to reach, the people Gold thinks are mouth-pieces for the President are the ones who truly influence Gold's life.

Of all these people, "Ralph Newsome is the front man of government,..." [20] Newsome explains his job: "I'm in the inner circle and very little of what I do gets outside." (p. 37) and that generally is all he says. Newsome acts as Gold's bridge from the outside to the inner circle but becomes more of a barrier than anything else. As Newsome says, very little gets out of the inner circle and certainly nothing gets in. The barrier, constructed entirely of words, is impenetrable.

Newsome is Gold's intermediary with the President but when they discuss what the President has in mind, Newsome bombards Gold with vague non-answers in language so circular Gold cannot interpret it. Newsome says things like, "This President doesn't want yes-men. What we want are independent men of integrity who will agree with all our decisions after we make them." (p. 42), "You can just about have your pick [of an appointment] now, unless you can't." (p. 185), and "... you'd be much more valuable to us as an independent voice in our control,"(p. 309).

Every statement is followed by a qualification that cancels out the statement before it making everything Newsome says as meaningless as if he had said nothing at all. "We have no ideas, and they're pretty firm." (p. 171) is possibly the best indicator Newsome gives of his world.

Instead of revealing concrete information, Newsome offers mysterious allusions backed up by nothing meaningful for someone on the "outside". Seed states, "Ralph's rhetoric constantly tends to close off external reference and to become a self-contained system." [21] Walter Nash makes the same conclusion. "Ralph's character is nothing that can effectively be described by words. It resides in words; his soul is a self-adjusting verbal frame-work which is never allowed to pull out of balance..." [22] Being "pulled out of balance" would mean allowing an opening in his rhetoric, a space through which Gold could get in, and destroying the "self-contained system."

Gold is continuously frustrated trying to make sense of Newsome's verbal gymnastics and tries finding meaning where there is none. None, at least, for him.

Gold assumes Newsome is trying to communicate. But the end result is empty phrasing and senseless dialogue. Communication (specifically words) is used solely as a verbal work-out that seems to have no purpose except to strengthen verbal facility. The appearance of proper communication is given, placating those involved, but offering nothing more than nice sounding speech. [23]

Gold does not understand this. He believes there must be some sense to the words and if he could understand them he would rise to the top, allowing a conclusive end and a final understanding.

But this is impossible as a self-contained system is also a self-referring system and this is the essence of a text. Like the Air-Corps' linguistic system, Newsome's rhetoric impedes progression and denies resolution by defying stable definition. Also, like the Air-Corps' language, Newsome's rhetoric makes sense within the system.

Newsome responds to Gold's complaint about his speech with surprise and states, "Maybe I do seem a bit oxymoronic at times. I think everyone here talks that way. Maybe we're all oxymoronic." (p. 127) Since Newsome is oblivious to Gold's confusion and does nothing to relieve it, Gold will never be able to break through the language barrier and reach the central core -- a president who does not even seem to exist.

In Good as Gold, Newsome becomes analogous to language and literature as Gold tries to define the world through interpretation. Gold's attempts to meet the President symbolize trying to reach a stable definition by cutting through language (Newsome) and confronting the central core (the authority) on its own terms. However, this central core does not exist for Gold. He cannot escape the limits of language and its self-referential nature.

Gold's interpretation only "sediments one layer of language upon another" but does not offer even an illusion of something beyond words. For Gold there is nothing but words that deny resolution. The central core does not exist because Gold is an "outside consciousness" trying to make sense of a system which continuously refers to itself, like language refers to more language ad infinitum. What is beyond language is also beyond Gold.

There is no resolution because nothing can be established for what it is. Everything is established by reference to something else. And in effect, everything is established by what it is not.

The failure of literature is caused by its necessary reliance on language. The failure of language is derived from its inability to adequately "reach or express what is outside of itself". The whole system is a circular labyrinth as a consciousness (or reader) will arrive at a definite conclusion about a text, then realize that the conclusion is just another referential definition, or just another way of expressing what is already there but "in the veiled form" of a resolution.

There is no progression, just a return to the beginning. And so Gold returns to the beginning of the book as he finally decides to write his book on the Jewish Experience in America, still not realizing this book cannot reveal that experience.

At the end, as if caught in some time loop, Gold is free to start over again and write Good as Gold -- his explanatory book which is unable to explain anything.

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4) Aldridge, p. 163.

5) Reilly, Charlie. "Talking with Joseph Heller." Inquiry Magazine, May 1, 1979. pp. 22-26. Reprinted in Nagel, pp. 176-182. During this interview, Heller agrees with a review by John Aldridge that "[Aldridge] focused largely upon the Washington episodes and speculated that what Heller is imagining today may well be happening tomorrow. He also commented upon what I have in there, perhaps unconsciously, about the decline of the contemporary family." p. 176.

6) Pearl K. Bell writes "That there is a difference between wild invention [and satire does] not seem to trouble Heller... Nothing in Good as Gold convinces us that Heller is genuinely engaged with grave implications of his 'jeremiad.'" As an example of social satire, I agree with her.

Bell, Pearl. "Heller & Malamud, Then and Now." Commentary, June 1979, p. 72.

7) Aldridge, p. 160.

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9) ibid.

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23) Significantly, one of the reasons Gold has seemingly become so popular in Washington is his gift for coining such meaningless jargon as "contemporary universal constituency", "you're boggling my mind", and the prize-winning "I don't know."

CHAPTER 5
GOD KNOWS

If the self-contained nature of Catch-22's Air Corps, Slocum's unresolved Oedipal complex in Something Happened, and the entire world of Good as Gold can all be read as extended metaphors for literature, then it is safe to say Heller's attention is turning towards the nature of literature more in each successive book. Literature's inability to offer a conclusive end takes larger and larger portions of Heller's novels, culminating in Good as Gold. There the problem dominates every aspect of the book in dramatic proof that fiction can give no final reading.

God Knows takes this argument to the next logical step: How can one be sure literature or language can give no conclusive end and, by implication, no final understanding?

A passage from Hillis-Miller helps: "[Language] can neither know whether or not it has reached and expressed what is outside language, nor can it know whether that 'outside' is a thought, ... This means that though language cannot help posit its referentiality, it can neither verify nor disqualify that referentiality, though any piece of language necessarily puts in question the validity of its referentiality." [1]

A primary concern of God Knows is language and specifically that language cannot "verify nor disqualify that [necessary] referentiality". Good as Gold's premise begins and ends in the first part of Hillis-Miller's passage. The referential nature of language alone sends Gold reeling into an abyss of alienation and misery.

God Knows' more resigned tone takes the referential premise, as illustrated by the relationship between God and King David, as a given. In referential terms: "How can one know God?" If the answer "One cannot know God" is taken for granted, as it is in this book, then the question Heller is concerned with becomes "How can one know that one cannot know God?" (Or, how can one be certain of uncertainty?)

To further his concerns with language, Heller uses his familiar techniques such as repetition, circular language and theme, "non-structural" structure, and a formless and elusive power structure in God Knows. He resurrects several themes and approaches to those themes from earlier novels. The dramatic difference is his slant.

Both Something Happened and Good as Gold emphasize language, but their linguistic concerns are derived mostly from a literary viewpoint. They are literature about literature, and language happens to be a major aspect of Heller's literary argument. The primary concern of those books is language's inability to perform within literature. Therefore, their circular and non-progressive structure and theme argue first for the failure of literature, and second for the failure of language.

The same can almost be said for God Knows. David's monologue is filled with repetitions, much like Slocum's, and like the previous books, God Knows offers no conclusive end. Since language, not literature, is the primary concern in God Knows, Heller concentrates on investigating its nature through David's stories and there are quite a few of them. David says, "...I honestly think I've got the best story in the Bible." [2] and "[His story has] suicide, regicide, patricide, homicide, fratricide, infratricide, adultery, incest, hanging, and more decapitations than just Saul's." (p. 9)

Although David plans on telling us about all these horrors, I will focus this chapter on his relationship to God.

Within this metaphorical relationship, Heller depicts a fairly intricate linguistic philosophy. He uses a structure to explain David's relationship to God similar to that utilized in Catch-22 and Good as Gold -- a self-contained, non-progressive linguistic system that prevents firm resolution by the protagonist. Heller adds an interesting twist to this pattern by using a monological narrative in God Knows to imply a separation within David similar to Slocum's.

The differences between Slocum and David are derived from the book's different objectives. Slocum is a symbol for the literary process; David, for the linguistic process. In God Knows' linguistic system, the separation within David becomes analogous to the discontinuous nature in the relationship between language and people, rather than to the inconclusive nature of literature.

Good as Gold offers alienation as a metaphor between reader and text. The alienation is caused by dividing language and people, resulting in an insurmountable barrier between interpreter and object interpreted that distorts the subject beyond recognition. God Knows offers a more subtle approach to the same problem. David's conflict is not so much with caricatures and an inability to interpret them as it was for Gold. David's struggle is not being able to know whether or not his interpretation is correct. He struggles with uncertainty.

David wants to be both interpreter and thing interpreted, creating a self-invented, self contained system by claiming a language, a literature, that is completely and unequivocally his own. Ultimately, he battles to

master the language barrier between the interpreter and thing interpreted.

Epstein-Levy observes that "David's self-presentation is inseparable from his textual performance, and what marks that performance above all else is its parodic activity. Using the Biblical Ur-text, which itself seems to encompass so much of the human drama of subsequent and derivative literature, he works both within and against tradition using parodic forms to imitate, mutate, deform, transform." [3] Seed compares God Knows to Mark Twain's A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court, calling David's textual performance a "palimpsest." [4] The narrator of Twain's novel writes his story on an Arthurian manuscript, blotting out that story with his own and trying to "mock Arthurian narratives out of existence." [5]

David "writes" his story on the Biblical manuscript and tries to "mock the Biblical narrative out of existence" and replace it with his own. But David is not blotting out the original Biblical text entirely; his palimpsest owes much to the prototype including many quotations as well as a large majority of his story, but it is a palimpsest.

David writes over the Ur-text by mutating the original language or filling in the narrative gaps. For example, "When the words which David spoke were heard, they repeated them before Saul; and he sent for him. And David said to Saul, 'Let no man's heart fail because of him; your servant will go and fight with this Philistine...' When Saul saw David go forth against the Philistine, he said to Abner, the commander of the army, 'Abner, whose son is this youth?' " [6] The question is, why does not Saul recognize his own lyre player?

In God Knows, David explains: "Saul gave no sign of ever having seen me before. And tactfully I betrayed no memory of any earlier meeting. He had aged very badly in the two years since I'd been brought from Bethlehem to play for him." (p. 68) In other words, a passage that takes up only 18 words in the Bible ("When the words...he sent for him", I Samuel 17.31) is expanded (in David's account in God Knows) to about 200 words.

Ruderman states, "Whatever their approach, readers often recognize that the Bible is a bare-bones account, with many spaces left for the reader to fill in." [7]

David not only fills in those spaces, he also interprets his own story. If the reason Saul does not recognize his own lyre player is actually because this part of the Bible is put together from two different source manuscripts, then that meaning eludes David. David assumes the reason, the real textual reason, is because Saul is beginning to show signs of the weariness that eventually drives him mad.

David's interpretation allows him to understand Saul's otherwise inexplicable question, "Abner, whose son is this youth?" Working solely from within the Bible, David can only make sense of textual inconsistencies by interpretation and interpolation, as if any reason which may lie outside the text is not even a possibility.

And it is not. David's entire existence is within texts. "I've led a full long life, haven't I? You can look it up. Samuel I and II. Kings. Chronicles,..." (p. 4) or "Moses has the Ten Commandments, it's true, but I've got much better lines." (p. 5) David also says that he "... could live forever on my famous elegy alone, if I wasn't already dying of old age." (pp. 5-6)

The first quote could mean the Bible is simply David's biography. The second is more complicated. David is explaining that he has much better lines, thereby indicating that his life may be a creation of the Biblical text. The word "lines" implies that someone wrote these lines for David but the sense of the passage is that David's life emerges from that person's better lines.

Since David says, "I've got much better lines"; not "I said"; it is implied that his life may be found in the text. It is as if David owns his life like he would own some object, and his possession of this object is tentative at best. There is a separation between David's life and David himself. Epstein-Levy proposes, "That David is text is never in doubt." [8] David's statement that he could live forever on his elegy supports her proposal but separation intervenes and allows for the second part of the sentence. David is text and yet, at the same time, he is not.

Separation of life and self may be best expressed in the separation between interpreter and subject interpreted. David's consciousness is derived from Biblical text, but this gives rise to a consciousness that is outside of the text. To quote Epstein-Levy again, "Heller simultaneously anchors [David] in a particular situation and has him transcend it temporally and spatially." [9] David is as aware of modern day events as he is of Biblical events. "Some promised land... To people in California, God gives a magnificent coastline, a movie industry, and Beverly Hills. To us He gives sand. To Cannes he gives a plush film festival. We get the PLO." (p. 40)

David's transcending his own "particular situation" in this way graphically demonstrates his separation from his own source, the Biblical text. This matter of self-reflection allows Heller to metaphorically

demonstrate the enigmatic division between language and people. By creating David as a character who is entirely textual ("I could live forever on my famous elegy alone") and simultaneously giving that character an outside consciousness ("if I wasn't already dying of old age"), Heller can study the division between interpreter and subject interpreted.

Heller creates division not so much by distortion, as in Good as Gold, but more by evaluating that relationship and even questioning whether there is a relationship at all.

The Biblical text is David's source and its textual communication of David's life (Samuel I and II, Kings) is all that he is. David's existence is caused by the text, as if the words on the page give him life.

As in Catch-22, language alters reality and creates its own world. However, David's interpretation and interpolation of the " bare-bones Biblical account" indicates he is also separated from his textual life (like the soldiers who confronted the Air-Corps' linguistic system). A division exists between the David who is outside the text, and the David who is solely text. In this case, the textual David is the subject interpreted. The David with the outside consciousness is the interpreter. The anxiety David feels about this division is evident as he fills in the blanks left by the Biblical text.

Another parallel between God Knows and Catch-22 is David's struggle to make sense of a linguistic system he is outside of. In this respect, God Knows is also similar to Good as Gold, but with one crucial difference: David is a creation of the linguistic system. There is no world for him outside the system. Yet, he is able to distinguish himself as separate from that world. Essentially, David is alienated from the very language that gave him life.

That separation is shown when David attacks the text of the Bible. Friedman and Ruderman observe, "To the rabbis of the Talmud, the Torah was the perfect, immutable word of God." [10] David attacks the "immutable word of God" by writing his own story in his own way. For example, David asks God, "Will Saul come down to Keilah after me as Thy servant believes?" God replies somewhat less formally, "You bet your ass." (p. 188) Changing God's reply from "He will come down" [11] to "You bet your ass" is a childish and ineffective attack on the "perfect, immutable" Biblical language.

Mutating the original text in his attempt to control the telling of his story is futile. David seems to think he can erase his textual source and substitute one of his own creation. The inescapable problem is that David's interpretation is necessarily contained in the boundaries of the source text.

Donato writes, "Interpretation does not shed light on a matter that asks to be interpreted, that offers itself passively to interpretation, but it can only seize violently an interpretation that is already there, one which it must overturn, overthrow, shatter with the blows of a hammer -- ... Interpretation then is nothing more than sedimenting one layer of language upon another to produce an illusory depth which gives us the temporary spectacle of things beyond words." [12]

Donato's statement aptly describes David's attacks on the perfect, immutable word of God and, by extension, on God himself. David's story, his monologue, is reduced to nothing more than an interpretation of a story that is already there. He can only add footnotes in his frustrated and futile attempt to dominate and possess a language of his own.

What David is actually doing with his narration is trying to gain his own self, which means joining his life with the communication of that life. What David is against and what he tries to overcome is another elusive authoritative figure, namely God. God and language become basically the same thing in the novel. David experiences God only through language, either directly through His voice or through the voice of a prophet. God never appears in tangible form; He is only a voice, a language, that demands interpretation. Yet interpretation (or rather conclusive interpretation) continuously eludes David because of the enigmatic nature of God.

David has no idea who or what God is. At times, He seems to be nothing more than David's subconscious. "Without fail, the answers I received from [God] were those I wanted most to hear; and it often seemed I was talking just to myself." (p. 19), or, "I asked a question, He gave me a civil answer, invariably supplying the one I wanted to receive. Our talks went smoothly." (p. 187)

At other times, God is antagonistic. "...I offended Him the first time, then he offended me, and later we offended each other." (p. 8), or, "But that may be because I am Jewish, and God is not." (p. 96) Sometimes God seems to not be there. "[Saul] talked to God. He got no answer. Now there's a hollow state to be in, isn't it -- to believe in God and get no sign that he's there." (p. 97), and, "I never did get from Him the justification I wanted... I received instead the answer I least expected. Silence." (pp. 288-9)

God's continuous character transformations are undermined by profound uncertainty. While Saul is grieving about God's silence, David

tries to comfort him with, "Maybe God is dead." Saul responds, "If God was dead, could I feel this bad?" (p. 151)

While commenting on Samuel's statement that Saul died because of his destiny, David says, "That's bull... Character is destiny." (p. 56) and when David asked Samuel if Moses was in heaven or hell, Samuel tells him, "There is no heaven. There is no hell.... That's all in your mind." (p.55) Taken with David's statement that his conversations with God often seemed that he was just talking to himself implies that God exists solely within the mind.

This conclusion is undermined by uncertainty as well. David asks, "Wouldn't it be tragic to find out that He really has been here all this time?" (p. 42), and David's final plea, "I want my God back; and they send me a girl." (p. 353) Both these statements point towards a God that exists while others affirm God's non-existence. God, too, transcends His "particular situation" by simultaneously being there and not there.

However, the picture we get of God is characterized by fluidity and self-containment. God acts like the Air-Corps, (He is the self-contained, self-invented system) and language acts like His Catch-22. In God Knows, though, God is not openly malevolent, just binding. God has no tangible form and He may or may not exist. God is all David has.

Saussure's concept of the nature of the linguistic sign as a "two-sided psychological entity" necessarily consisting of a "sound-image and concept" (signifier and signified) [13] is a helpful analogy for David's relationship to God. In God Knows, God is the linguistic sign.

If God is the creator and controller of all things, then He is the creator and controller of language. More important, God's total linguistic depiction and his omnipotent reputation bonds God to the essence of

language and language to the essence of God. In God Knows, God is language. David attacks language, particularly the Biblical language, even though language is the basis for David's existence.

The "perfect, immutable word of God" and David's reaction to his Biblical story as if he came after the text, furthers the connection between Saussure's linguistic concept and Heller's God. It also helps explain the futility of David's attack on language and the impossibility of creating his own linguistic system. "The signifier, though to all appearances freely chosen with respect to the idea that it represents, is fixed, not free, with respect to the linguistic community that uses it. The masses have no voice in the matter, and the signifier chosen by language could be replaced by no other.... No individual, even if he willed it, could modify in any way at all the choice that has been made; and what is more, the community itself cannot control so much as a single word; it is bound to the existing language." Saussure continues, "No matter what period we choose or how far we go, language always appears as a heritage of the preceding period." [14]

Language seems to be completely out of David's control; he is unable to "modify in any way at all the choice that has been made." [15] Like Slocum, David is completely subject to the laws of a system that is the source of his life. David had no hand in making the system, which was passed down. Yet he must use it to understand his world.

By itself, there is nothing inherent in the linguistic system to cause David's ongoing anxiety. Saussure states, "Even if [people] were aware of these laws, we may be sure that their awareness would seldom lead to criticism, for people are generally satisfied with the language they have received." [16] However, Heller's concern is with the limits of language

and with language's inability to adequately substantiate or deny any conclusion. For Heller, limitations arise because of the referential nature of language, and because knowledge of anything is actually a knowledge of language.

Language refers us to more language, not to the object itself, and it is this which demonstrates the discontinuity between the signifier and the signified. Donato states again, "The relationship that the order of the signifier maintains to the order of the signified, of words to their semantic content, or more simply stated, of words to things, is a paradoxical one, for it is a relationship that has to be defined simultaneously by two propositions which are contradictory: the word is the thing; the word is identical to the thing which it represents, and the space between the two is continuous. Yet, words are different from things, words do not merely represent things; the two orders are discontinuous, their relationship is one of difference." [17]

But in God Knows, it does not seem that either a relationship based in difference or the discontinuous process between signifier and signified is the source of anxiety. Heller's concern is with the significance of the discontinuity which derives from three inter-related principles:

1. Language is unable to adequately define a subject.
    a) words are different from things
    b) language has no stable foundation on which to base itself
2. Language refers to more language (the self-contained, self-referential nature of language).
3. Language is the sole source of knowledge.

The significance of these principles is that language is unable to perform adequately for us. God Knows demonstrates all these principles. In fact, they are inseparable. All three feed off of and feed each other.

The impetus for the novel is found in the first subheading of the first principle (1a). David believes he is misrepresented in the Bible and his attack on the Bible, his palimpsest, is his attempt to represent himself correctly. He feels the separation between himself and the textual David. However, David's version of his Biblical story continuously refers back to the original story either by direct statement ("You can look it up. Samuel I and II. etc."(p. 4)) or by interpretation and interpolation of the original story. Therefore, David's interpretation and interpolation does "nothing more than sediment one layer of language upon another." [18] David's version "cannot help posit its referentiality" to the original text and becomes nothing more than derivation.

This demonstrates the self-referential nature of language as David's version must necessarily defer to the original source. David's version is completely contained within the Bible's version and, because of the Bible's self-contained nature, it is controlled by it as well.

Hillis-Miller explains this control as "...the predicament of being perpetually within language, spoken by it rather than being able to use it as a tool of power,..." [19] David is unable to escape from his original source, which is the Bible and the Biblical language.

If the text of God Knows is seen as being an interpretation of the Biblical text, then it becomes one layer of language upon language. Heller's text offers nothing new, nothing that was not already there. Since God Knows is contained within the Bible, it is necessarily dependent upon the Ur-text.

David's attempts to create his own system becomes futile as the only possible way to understand his text is through reference to the original. David's text is inherited from the preceding text, which already sets limits David's text cannot exceed. The texts continuously refer to each other. But it is the original that controls the nature of the references since there is no other language for David except the language that is already there.

The outside consciousness Heller gives David causes a break between the self-referential and self-contained texts. A rupture is caused by an awareness of a linguistic control (the Bible's control) on David's presentation of himself. Without that consciousness there is no rupture because the self-referential system is circular, -- a self-contained, self-supporting system that thrives on fluid definitions. It is a system made completely of signifiers, and whatever is signified actually is another signifier. Language in this system refers to more language, and causes no anxiety because there is nothing but language.

God is language and this is what separates David from God. David, with his linear nature, has to contend with the separation of the signifier and the signified. His outside consciousness allows him to see them as two distinct things. The relationship between the two is not linear, continuous, or substantive enough to say "A is like B" or that a signifier rationally correlates with what is signified. Saussure writes that the nature of the sign, the nature of the entire system, is arbitrary and, consequently, "...language lacks the necessary basis, the solid ground for discussion." [20]

Language may not always have been arbitrary, but since it is beyond the user of language to trace its origins back to its source, it is impossible to determine why words mean things. Something supremely

and mysteriously authoritative about language supports the futility of David's intentions.

Hillis-Miller agrees with Saussure, "Of the laws of language language cannot speak except in language that disqualifies itself as knowledge in the moment that it posits itself as language." [21] This is caused by language's refusal to confirm or deny conclusion since nothing substantive supports that this signifier is not rationally correlative with this signified. Hillis-Miller calls this the "potentially aberrant" nature of referential statements, which is language, and concludes that "All we may know is that [the referential statement] may be in error." [22]

In God Knows, all David may know is that he might be wrong. His uncertainty about God's existence, coupled with the deference David pays to God and His correlative, language, supports a reading of Heller's novel as a book about the nature of language. Heller's penchant for writing about a protagonist confronted by a circular and self-contained system naturally lends itself to a linguistic theory based in discontinuity and separation.

David is on the outside of a system he is unable to get into and simultaneously is unable to free himself from the machinations of that system. The self-referential nature of the linguistic system protects itself from ruptures while its derived, inconclusive nature prevents any kind of firm resolution. Heller's God dramatically demonstrates the mysterious and omnipotent nature of language and his David shows it is impossible to conclusively understand that language.

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CHAPTER 6
PICTURE THIS

Heller's first four novels are linked together by an expanding progression of a singular theme that uses a similar structure as an analogy for that theme. Basically, the theme is irresolution caused by inconclusive definition. In Catch-22, this develops from a self-contained system that denies conclusion, and the theme of irresolution expands as Heller begins to view literature's nature as inconclusive.

The inconclusive nature of literature is presented in Something Happened and Good as Gold not so much as a result of a self-contained, and self-referential system, but more as the cause of that system. God Knows increases the scope of this theme as it concentrates almost exclusively on language.

Heller uses a circular narrative structure as a metaphor for his predominant theme of the inconclusive nature of literature and language in the earlier novels. In Picture This there is no such structure. No discernible conflict is apparent between an individual and a self-contained system (the hallmark of Heller's first books), nor does it have the repetitiveness characteristic of Heller's previous novels.

Picture This has a steady linear progression of two stories that alternate in the narrative. It has, as David Seed points out, "... a double subject -- Rembrandt and Dutch culture in the seventeenth century; and the development of Athenian history from the Peloponnesian War to the death of Socrates..." [1]

Heller concentrates his narrative in the mid-5th to mid-4th century B.C. Athenian world revolving around Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle.

Then he bypasses two millennia to examine the later stages of the decline of the Dutch economic power, using Rembrandt's painting of "Aristotle Contemplating the Bust of Homer" as a connection to the ancient world. Heller uses this painting as a guide through the next three centuries, briefly relating its journeys and misadventures until the painting finds a home in New York City's Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The previous description sounds as if it would easily lend itself to Heller's re-occurring inconclusive motif. Most notably, it draws parallels to the circumstance of God Knows where David's transcending his own situation gives the novel an odd sense of timelessness, and furthers the theme of being trapped in a self-contained system while separated from that system. Seed implies a direct connection between Picture This and Heller's other novels: "It is characteristic of Picture This to follow what might be called an amplificatory rather than simple narrative method, whereby one section explains the details of another." [2]

Heller utilized this method exclusively in all his novels (except Good as Gold). This method takes the form of a narrative repetitiveness that expands the details of earlier scenes. Seed believes the alternating story-line (that is one section of a chapter being devoted to Athens, while the next two are devoted to Amsterdam, then back to Athens, etc.) is a modification of Heller's earlier repetitive technique. Ruderman agrees and likens this modified technique to the timelessness of a painting that depicts three linear events occurring simultaneously. Ruderman continues that the repetitive simultaneity "frees the reader from expectations that chronology will be ordered and sequential," [3] implying that Heller is once again working with another self-contained and self-referential system.

In a way, what Seed and Ruderman propose is supported by the text. The alternating story-line allows one section to explain the details of another and gives the impression of a repetitive simultaneity. But it is more important to note that each individual story has a linear structure. For example, the Athens and Amsterdam narratives begin with A and continue to B and so on until the end of the novel. However, there are no narrative repetitions within each story-line. For this reason, Picture This cannot be directly categorized with Heller's other novels.

Picture This is even distinct from Good as Gold, which has the most linear narrative of all four books although the end reinstates the initial, primary figure. In contrast, the narrative in Picture This ends at the end of a linear story-line. Picture This ends at Z.

Accordingly, the primary concern of Picture This is not with the self-contained nature of literature, language, and by extension, it is not a self-referential novel about itself. Picture This is contained within a closed system, but it is not meant to reflect an analogical relationship between the story, the narrative, or text and language.

Also, unlike the other books, there is progression in Picture This in the sense that an individual story does not solely refer to another story and negate itself through that reference. The connections between alternating sections are never meant to be read as a denial of the distinctiveness of each age (however slight), but act more like a manifesto of a most banal principle: history repeats itself.

And history is the heart of this novel. The shift in interest from a linguistic, non-human subject to one that is historic and human-oriented makes a linear story-line possible. However, the linear story-line does not

necessarily mean the end of the novel is at a different place than the beginning.

Good as Gold first illustrated how a progressive, non-repetitive narrative could circle back to its beginning. Picture This does not follow this method. The use of history as a primary subject necessitates that the end must be at a different place than the beginning. (One way to avoid that progression is if each age were fused into one, but Heller does not use that approach. He could introduce the subject from a linguistic standpoint, as in Good as Gold, but that is not the standpoint of Picture This.) Although Picture This progresses linearly and contains a conclusion that does not circle back to the beginning, the end of this novel curiously denies that anything happens or that any progression occurs.

This denial is not supported by any literary-oriented artifice within the novel, which is odd since Picture This is the most literary-dependent novel Heller has written. The book is built from a mass of texts such as Simon Schama's The Embarrassment of Riches and Plato's Symposium. Seed actually gives a list of fourteen classical texts that are freely used throughout the book. [4] This novel is so dependent on other books, Ruderman feels obliged to write,"...there is a lot of Gary Schwartz in Picture This and only a little Joseph Heller." [5] Heller could easily create a scenario to further his linguistic philosophy as he did in God Knows. But as Heller's primary interest is history, Picture This has little to do with his previous literary concerns.

Ruderman states, "History becomes both plot and character," [6] and her statement is correct. History is the protagonist of the novel and historical documentation causes Picture This to become a logical progression in Heller's work.

Heller documents history, offering comments and opinions on historical events throughout the book, drawing striking parallels such as, "From Athens to Syracuse by oar and sail was just about equivalent to the journey by troopship today from California to Vietnam, or from Washington, D.C., to the Beirut airport in Lebanon or to the Persian Gulf." [7] He writes blatantly satirical attacks on historical interpretation, such as: "With the invention of money in the seventh century before Christ, people became free, like Rembrandt, to borrow at interest and go into debt." (pp. 59-60) Historical accounts are slipped into the text so unobtrusively that the reader is apt to take the interpretation as fact. Seed comments, "Heller ... uses an unnamed narrator with an open identity who can shade easily into the voices of quoted texts." [8]

Sanford Pinsker describes the effect on the reader as follows: "The result seems more akin to a textbook (albeit one rendered from a bitterly satirical perspective) than a novel." [9] I agree, though "bitterly satirical" may be an exaggeration.

The novel's tone sounds like that of a very bored newspaper journalist at work which gives the book no emotional stance whatsoever. The satirical remark about the invention of money strikes the reader as a wisecrack of the most unenthusiastic nature. The language is flat and the sentence is deliberately structured for minimum impact. The language has no punch. For a writer who is known for writing punchlines and one-liners, the narration is startling only for its mundane style.

For example, a quotation taken almost at random describes the man Rembrandt uses as a model for "Aristotle": "This man was tall, olive-skinned, with a long black beard, black melancholy eyes, and Slavic,

Eastern, perhaps Semitic features. He had posed for Rembrandt before. They talked easily. They talked of real estate." (p. 185) The description of the model seems to offer the promise of judgment on the man, which is what the readers expect from Heller. However, the indifference towards the man's origin, represented by the careless inability to pin down his ethnicity, refuses judgment. A person could very well be Slavic, Eastern, and Semitic, but the narrator does not seem to care whether the man is all, one, or any of these.

The next paragraph stops the reader's interest in the man's origin by offering unrelated information and implying the previous information is no longer important and perhaps never was. "They talked easily." As a sentence it sets up a tantalizing possibility for character insight, but this is belied by dull conversation and the flat, matter-of-fact style in which this information is offered.

The narrator's tone carries the detachment of an objective reporter to an extreme, bordering on indifference. The informational details are presented in such an unadorned, unaffected, and straightforward style that it inverts the readers' expectations of extended interpretive prose and subverts their sense of gaining historical knowledge. Readers are left with the odd feeling that what is described is factually correct but sounds strangely unreal.

Yet, the only obviously fictional invention used in the novel, the only device which actually hints that the book is not just a synopsis of other history books, is Rembrandt's ability to raise Aristotle's consciousness as he paints him. Once Rembrandt finishes the painting, Aristotle decides that 17th century Holland is not much different than his native world. The economic imperialist expansion which countries like England and

Holland are involved in reminds Aristotle of "... grasping Athens and her scores of prowling triremes," and he concludes that "... the same earthly and dreary cataclysms as were occurring in Plato's Athens were occurring in Rembrandt's Netherlands two thousand years later..." (p.186) The distinctiveness of either age is not denied, but it does give the sense that the period between 4th century B.C. and 17th century Holland is completely uneventful and mundane.

The only word that gives emphasis to the sentence is "cataclysms". However, this word is modified by "earthly" and "dreary" which cancel out any possible emphasis. The result inverts the explosive connotation into an implosion of a most resigned and uninteresting quality.

Also, the juxtaposition of the similar relative distances between Athens to Syracuse and Washington, D.C. to Beirut as well as the reasons for the Peloponnesian, first Anglo-Dutch, and Vietnam Wars, and by implication all wars that have ever been or ever will be fought, are reduced to a four word sentence, "They fought over money." (p. 131) The sense is that the only thing that can possibly change in the history of human activity is the setting, and this realization is very obvious and banal.

The generalizations the narrator uses to describe important historic events reveal disinterest and distance between the narrator and subject. The detachment, along with the use of concise paragraphs, connotes a scientific approach to the historical analysis. However, the lack of extended interpretation denies that any analysis has taken place, and the curt, often pat and trite conclusions undermine any traditional scientific approach.

Picture This proposes to be a novel, history lesson, or phenomenological analysis of art, or it promises to offer extended, reliable information, or it threatens to lapse into biting satire, but the book never delivers on any of these premises. It shifts style, genres, and subjects without developing or committing to any of them. As Seed states, "At one point Heller will meditate on money; at another he will mimic a chronicler; and at yet another he will condense a Platonic dialogue and then suddenly shift it to burlesque." [10]

This makes Picture This difficult to categorize as if the novel itself actively resists categorization. A final determination remains elusive with so much information and so many different styles. The massive amount of information which this novel tries to incorporate within its covers makes adequate explanation of particulars impossible. The narrator persists in trying to span 2,500 years almost in spite of himself.

Heller handles historic events with a halfheartedness that is remarkable only when compared to the subjects of his other novels. Heller's attitude toward the content in Picture This is surely intentional.[11] It seems the mass of information leaves the narrator no other choice but to be brief, distant, and ultimately unconcerned. The effect of so much information results in a state of near perfect equilibrium, where the distinctiveness of particulars are glossed over and the possibility for non-progression, even stagnation, becomes much greater.

Symbolically, Picture This is the culmination of all of Western civilization. The novel begins with Classical civilization and ends with modern times. The detachment with which the narrator relates information indicates he views history as something separate from

himself which can be confronted. In this way, the portrayal of history is similar to that of linguistic systems in Heller's other books. History becomes another closed system but, significantly, does not contain the self-referential nature characteristic of the other systems.

History closes itself in other ways. Most obvious, history separates itself from the narrator (and, by extension, everyone else) by being elusive and distant. History can never be regained or recovered except through language, which is the second way it closes itself.

The separation between people and language explored in previous novels is implicit throughout Picture This evidenced by flat, dry, and unemotional writing. Language is utilized as nothing more than a tool for relating information, completely devoid of feeling or inventiveness. Although language becomes something familiar, it also is unsettling and strange. In this way language not only reflects the narrator's attitude towards history, it also shapes history, alienating the narrator and the reader, proving inadequate for conclusive substantiation.

The only authority Picture This bases its information on is other books. If language proves inadequate as a foundation for knowledge, then the entirety of Picture This is based on assumption. The title itself disclaims any pretense of authoritative truth.

Knowledge derived from language cannot be substantiated. The way in which the novel is based on language hints at the third way history uses to close itself: the instability of knowledge. Aristotle says, "If we demand a proof for everything... we shall never be able to prove anything, since we shall not have a starting point of any proof." Shortly after, Heller comments: "Obviously, Aristotle saw, it is impossible to prove that anything is obviously true. Even that." (p. 288)

Throughout the novel, Heller records historical events with a style so incompatible with the subject that any sense of a true depicti lost. As Ruderman writes, "[Picture This] undermines itself as a history text by questioning the very premise on which history is written, that one can record the truths -- limited and biased though they may be -- and reconstruct the past through them." [12]

On the last page, Heller takes this idea further through a straightforward denial of the authenticity of a central image: Rembrandt's painting of Aristotle. "The Rembrandt painting of Aristotle Contemplating the Bust of Homer may not be by Rembrandt... The bust of Homer that Aristotle is shown contemplating is not of Homer. The man is not Aristotle." (p. 351) The final deconstruction of the novel's primary image confirms the idea that history is based on nothing but assumption and words. Truth, then, becomes an impossibility.

This theme is common in Heller's novels. What distinguishes Picture This is the absence of conflict. No anxiety or anger is directed towards the system. Only the sense of resigned acceptance and a dull sense of sameness is prevalent. Picture This seems to be a study in entropy with history acting as the closed system. As the mass of information increases, randomness sets in to distort that information and concentration suffers.

The fact that the novel spans the entirety of Western civilization is significant as a study of history. Unfortunately, the source of history as well as the source of language is unknown, and attempting to trace their beginnings is futile. The undefinable starting point increases the ambiguity of the information and furthers the sense of detachment and closure. As Tucker writes, "As information became more abundant

when the message was longer... it attained a state of equilibrium characterized by probability." [13]

Historical equilibrium is the result of the closed system in Picture This, and the narrator's attitude towards the subject is a logical response. Heller describes a world that is indescribable because it lacks a stable foundation and has a propensity towards ambiguity.

The world Heller envisions is in a state of heat-death caused by its own nature. History is presented as it own closed system and although there is progression, the progress is similar to Cathcart's raising of the number of missions in Catch-22, advancing in name only since there can never be an end or resolution. In such a system, meaning becomes subordinate to information and information accumulates to the point where meaning is impossible. Picture This distrusts its own sources and, at the end, proves those sources are wrong.

Picture This presents the unsettling picture of a world without progression, regression, or any movement at all. As Heller writes, "You will learn nothing from history that can be applied, so don't kid yourself into thinking you can." (p. 350) For a novel based on history, that statement alone negates the entire book. The statement represents complete resignation and acceptance that knowledge and human action are futile. The "same earthly and dreary cataclysms" occur throughout history, wearily repeating themselves until the point where one age is no different from any other age. The same cataclysms happen over and over again, and there is nothing that can be done about it.

Picture This takes the nihilistic literary and linguistic philosophies of Heller's previous novels and carries them to the outside world. From such a perspective, there can be no other language to describe that world

but the language found within Picture This: a language mired in heat-death for a world which has died of the same.

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2) Seed, p. 192.

3) Ruderman, Judith. Joseph Heller. New York: Continuum, 1991. p. 122.

4) Seed, p. 216.

5) Ruderman, p. 132. Ruderman is referring to Schwartz, Gary. Rembrandt, His Life, His Paintings. New York: Viking, 1985.

6) Ruderman, p. 131.

7) Heller, Joseph. Picture This. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1988. p. 208. All subsequent references from Picture This are from this edition and are indicated by page number in parentheses.

8) Seed, p. 216.

9) Pinsker, Sanford. Understanding Joseph Heller. Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1991. p. 156.

10) Seed, p. 215.

11) Various reviewers did not think so and rejected the novel accordingly.

12) Ruderman, pp. 133-4.

13) Tucker, Lindsay. "Entropy and Information Theory in Heller's Something Happened". Contemporary Literature, 25, 1984. p. 325.

CHAPTER 7
CONCLUSION

Perhaps the most distinguishing features of Joseph Heller's fiction are self-negating sentences and logic, a repetitive story-line, and circular structure. He adopts and personalizes these characteristics for Catch-22 [1] and it is not hard to imagine why he believed these methods best suited the content of that novel.

Heller states he intended to "... give [Catch-22] a structure that would complement the content of the book itself, which really derives from our present atmosphere of chaos, of disorganization, of absurdity, of cruelty, of brutality...." [2] He also says, "I deliberately seeded the book with anachronisms like loyalty oaths... to create the feeling of American society from the McCarthy period on," [3] implying that the novel sediments one era upon a previous one, alienating both the reader [4] and the characters.

The Air-Corps' qualities of self-containment, self-created reality, absurd logic, and fluid definitions are a perfect fit for Heller's intentions. Inside its closed, non-progressive system, all these qualities (which seem silly and senseless to outsiders) are perfectly logical. The novel's structure and style reflect the Air-Corps' system and force the reader to react to the book the way the characters react to the Air-Corps. Heller explains that readers should "experience the book rather than simply read it."[5] With this, Catch-22's connection with Heller's subsequent novels becomes easier to understand.

Catch-22 introduces a self-contained system in a novel that is based upon the intricacies of that system. The book does contain some self-reflexive literary elements, but not as the over-riding theme which it evolves into later on. Heller lays the groundwork for that evolution by using the qualities of the Air-Corps as an analogy for literature, language, and finally knowledge. His books then become stories about those subjects and books about themselves.

Something Happened offers a theory that the nature of literature shares the same qualities as the Air-Corps. Since literature then is also a self-contained, non-progressive system, it cannot give a conclusive resolution to outside consciousness either. Good as Gold comes to the same conclusion, offering an extended argument about why this theory is true.

God Knows examines the nature of language in more depth than Heller's other books, and presents that nature as another self-contained, alienating system. The conclusion of this novel is the bleakest, since David is left physically and mentally alone when the language barrier proves impenetrable. David's hopes for ever resolving his conflict with God and language are abandoned when he realizes there was never any hope in the first place. God Knows ends with profound loneliness and grave implications. The book presents literature as something separate from the basic human condition, whereas God and language (however interchangeable) are intrinsic.

David's inability to resolve his conflict implies a fundamental break within the human condition; a separation that cannot be repaired. Since that separation occurs between existence and expression, David is left

mute. Since speech defines humanity, his loss of speech removes him from humanity, and he is left alone and desolate.

Heller's steady implosion finally breaks away from itself as he wearily turns his sights to the outside world in Picture This. Here, the loneliness and separation first seen in God Knows create an ominous sense of disassociation. At best the narrator sounds half-hearted; at worst, mechanical, making this book the most inhuman novel of the Heller canon.

As for the author, perhaps the most distinguishing features about Joseph Heller are that he is a novelist who writes about writing, one who tries to understand exactly what he is doing, while keeping good humor about his job. And I think he is also trying to let us in on his joke. For if Heller really wants readers to "experience" Catch-22, then it can be said his subsequent novels attempt to explain that experience. Perhaps his explanation mocks the reader as Heller slyly leads us to believe this or imagine that, then undermines the whole process by denying any validity fiction may have.

Ultimately, the entire relationship between Heller, his work, and the reader strikes me as something of a put-on we voluntarily participate in, a joke in even his most serious work. Heller seems to be a comedic writer almost in spite of himself. Probably it is this trait, Heller's mindset not to take himself too seriously, that makes him such an entertaining writer and accounts for his ongoing success.

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