Joseph Heller and the Errors of Comedy:
From Heller’s Catch-22 to Portrait of an Artist, as an Old Man

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by

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1. Introduction: Heller’s Comedic Endeavour and Vonnegut’s Commemoration

Joseph Heller first worked as a filing clerk, was born of two poor parents that were from Russia in 1923, and went on to become a Jewish “war hero” and subsequently a famous author. This career was ruined for him as his first novel was just too good to be true – nothing he ever wrote after it was as successful. He joined the Army Air Corps in 1942. He was a bombardier for the 488th squadron where he flew 60 combat missions. He famously remarked that the war was “fun in the beginning . . . You got the feeling that there was something glorious about it” and “I felt like a hero . . . People think it quite remarkable that I was in combat in an airplane and I flew sixty missions even though I tell them that the missions were largely milk runs” (qtd. in Mallory). These ideas set in motion the creation of a novel that would not only change the way Americans view comedy, and war, but also change the way Americans speak forever. This novel, of course, is Catch-22 – Heller’s first novel, published in 1961.

It was love at first sight. After picking up Joseph Heller’s Catch-22 I knew that I had found something special. Something that nobody else knew about – something that was just for me. And that thing, that thing that was just for me is Heller’s six other books; because while everybody reads Catch-22, they never read Good as Gold, or Picture This. I believe it is time for these books to stop just being mine, and for the world to understand what went wrong with Heller, how to fix it, and how to prevent it from happening in the future. Heller is criticized, most famously in the anecdote in which he is interviewed on this subject, for not having written anything as good as his first novel, to which he hilariously responds: “Who has?”

One illustrative example of how reviewing and advertising shaped the reception of Heller’s works can be seen in discussions of Heller’s second novel, Something Happened, and most specifically, Kurt Vonnegut. Vonnegut remains well-known for all of his short novels and
essays, and was one of Heller's contemporaries and friends. It is Kurt Vonnegut that first pointed out the fatal flaw. In his review of *Something Happened*, he deems that the problem of the lack of positive critical reception of Heller's book was not because of the reader's expectations themselves, but rather the marketing *mixed* with the reader’s expectations. He says that:

> The book may be marketed under false pretenses, which is all right with me. I have already seen (British) sales promotion materials which suggest that we have been ravenous for a new Heller book because we want to laugh some more. This is as good a way as any to get people to read one of the unhappiest books ever written (2).

One can market a funny book as a book that will make you cry (for instance, *Catch-22* has moments that may) and people wouldn't feel cheated. But, if you market a bleak book as one that will make you laugh, people will take issue with this – even if there are several hilarious moments. Vonnegut even remarks that Heller’s second novel is “black humor indeed – with the humor removed” (2). If people are told it is humorous, they are going to expect humor all the way through – not just some shining moments of comedic gold. They want the whole thing to be hysterical, which, for the better, *Something Happened* is not. It is exactly this expectation that made Heller’s works past his first novel fail; because he became immediately associated with comedy, his future works would always be marketed by the publishers as, and expected by the people to be, comedic. After *Something Happened*, Heller tried to return to comedy, but by then it was already too late.

It is the problem of comedy, I argue, that is the first mistake that both Heller and the people of his time made; they expected each other to understand. Heller made the mistake of trusting the people to understand that not everything that he writes would be as funny, or even in
the same genre, as his first novel, and the people made the mistake of expecting Heller to write the same type of book with the same type of story and the same type of characters over and over again for the rest of his life.

This argument will draw on reception theory as a way of analyzing audience reactions to Heller's work; the readers expected a specific thing that came out of their previous experiences, and they were given a different one. The critics, and therefore, the public, were unable to reconcile *Something Happened* with *Catch-22*, so it faded into obscurity. I will use a couple *Kirkus* reviews, alongside reviews from other publications, so that it is easier to complete the critical narrative of Heller’s works. Many of the reviewers will refer to and describe the marketing materials used for Heller’s works. These descriptions and references will help make clear the problems that Heller faced because of the advertising. With the rise of the affective fallacy and reader-response theory during Heller’s career, Heller’s post-*Catch-22* novels were seen as failures. In the 1960s and 1970s, reader response criticism encouraged readers to derive the meaning or success of a novel based on their own emotional responses; this impulse, coupled with the false advertising of *Something Happened*, lead to reader dissatisfaction. Heller was never able to fully recover, for as reader-response and reception study developed, Heller’s novels were thematically opposed to them.

2. Overview of Reception Study and Reader-Response Theory

Philip Goldstein and James L. Machor, in *New Directions in American Reception Study*, highlight and evaluate the various different critical theories and how they evolved around the time Heller published *Catch-22*. They seek to explain both the critical theories themselves and how they changed over about a fifty year period – the same period in which Heller was
publishing novels. They begin with a clear definition of reception study and its counterparts. They explain:

Reception study, which says that an audience’s interpretive practices explain a work’s meaning, has grown remarkably because it accepts this vast explosion of literatures and interpretive methods. Initially scholars believed that reception study was an aspect of an author’s development, not an independent form of literary history. They assumed that, since an author’s work often responds to commentary provided by friends, reviewers, or formal critics, the study of these responses helps explain how and why the style, ideas, aims, or forms of a writer evolved (xii).

As Goldstein and Machor explain, reader-response criticism formed in the 1960s as a reaction to critical trends from the previous decade. More specifically, reader-response critics disagreed with the method of the New Critics, who argued that the emotional reactions of readers are not only less important, but should not play a role in the analysis of literary texts at all. New Critics were so insistent that two critics, W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, coined the term “the affective fallacy” as a way of singling out critics who relied on reader emotions as an interpretive tool, stating that “the outcome . . . is that the [work] itself, as an object of specifically critical judgment, tends to disappear” (31).

While reader-response criticism opened up new avenues of scholarship, it also has its flaws. In 1980, Wolfgang Iser warned reader-response theorists and critics through his article “Interaction between Text and Reader,” that while yes he felt that the duty of discovering the meaning of a work rested on the shoulders of the reader, there was a miscommunication. He notes that “interpretation is the construction of another’s meaning,” not of some sort of
necessary meaning that is inherently present in the world. He says: “It is natural to speak not of what a text says, but of what an author means, and this more natural locution is the more accurate one.” He concludes his essay by reminding the reader that: “Furthermore, to speak in this way implies a readiness . . . to put forth a whole-hearted and self-critical effort at the primary level of criticism – the level of understanding” (Iser 1532). Iser laid the groundwork for the return of the author in the discussion, and the notion took hold and evolved by the time Heller died in 1999.

But reception study requires looking at all of an author’s works and interpreting them not against each other, but as part of a coherent whole. It explores the way an author’s hand in their story works and whether or not it remains consistent with the reader’s interpretations. There should be no comparison between Heller’s books and his first, because while it is a good way to view how he has changed as a writer, it is in no way a good indication of the value of the books on their own.
3. *Catch-22* and the Comedic Foundation

“There was only one catch and that was Catch-22, which specified that a concern for one's safety in the face of dangers that were real and immediate was the process of a rational mind. Orr was crazy and could be grounded. All he had to do was ask; and as soon as he did, he would no longer be crazy and would have to fly more missions. Orr would be crazy to fly more missions and sane if he didn't, but if he were sane he had to fly them. If he flew them he was crazy and didn't have to; but if he didn't want to he was sane and had to. Yossarian was moved very deeply by the absolute simplicity of this clause of Catch-22 and let out a respectful whistle.”

—*Catch-22*, Joseph Heller

“Chief White Halfoat”

“*Catch-22*” is the basic idea that *something* partakes in a vicious circle. This idea that the novel centers around is not a new one; but the terminology comes from Heller. His random selection of words and numbers, “catch” and “22”, have somehow become completely incorporated in our vernacular. *Catch-22* was initially a bit more polarizing than one might think, but it was undeniably something new, fresh, and interesting. In a National Public Radio article commemorating the 50th anniversary of *Catch-22*’s publication, Lynn Neary explains that it was primarily popular among college students and critics who appreciated the social commentary and political satire. Neary explains that since the novel was about something as serious as war and was a black comedy, it made some reviewers angry. But, when it came time for the paperback version to be released, the book became a best-seller because of word-of-mouth – not just critical buzz. Neary also notes that the novel also increased in popularity during the rise of the Vietnam War, as it connected with both the soldiers and the people who saw the absurdity in the war.
The prose is pristine; every word has a place and every sentence plants a comedic seed that returns at some point in the novel. *Catch-22* is not only well-written, but hilarious and never ceases to be relevant. The story is told in a multitude of circles and logical conundrums, with the reader often receiving the punchline of a joke before the setup; it challenges the reader to not only remember every little detail, but to trust the author to give them what they need . . . and he does. This story is funny, but also meaningful and, often, dreadfully serious. The events are so hard-hitting that it brings out a side of the reader that they might not be used to, one that questions their own existence and where exactly in the machine of the thing they call a world they fit into. The eloquent vocabulary does not feel unnecessary; no words are superfluous. Even though the writing involves some frequently-used challenging words (a few notable examples are “pernicious” and “obsequious”) the reader never feels lost. They feel safe in the hands of Heller, and it is an earned feeling. The characters are as outlandish as the setting – Italy during World War II – and as Yossarian, our main character, likes to say, everybody is out to kill him.

Much of the comedy comes from two distinct points of view of the war: the bureaucratic side of things and the survival side of things. Yossarian’s struggle to survive the war is sometimes not even as daunting as his struggle with countless characters, which have more power than him, capitalizing on their power. But these two different perspectives are given to us through the eyes of Yossarian – as more and more characters are introduced into the fictional squadron, their personalities are filtered through Yossarian’s own fears and disdain. Yossarian, the man that the reader is supposed to root for and feel completely connected to, is broken; and that is why this novel works.

Yossarian is a man in his late twenties who acts as if he has been around for fifty years more; bitter about death – afraid of it, even – and willing to do anything he can to prolong his
life. He and his friend Dunbar even discuss that being bored makes things last longer, so that might just be there preferred state of being, as one might feel as if they live forever if they are. As Heller so masterfully puts it: “[Yossarian] had decided to live forever or die in the attempt” (29). Yossarian uses his fear of death to the reader’s delight as he escapes various other-worldly scenarios that, as the loose excuse of a plot unfolds, become a little bit more terrifying than hilarious. The horror of war is on full display here as people nonchalantly blow off character’s deaths, and even the reader is forced to do this on occasion alongside Yossarian who is not ever given enough time to grieve, except over the man who was never really in his tent. This fear of death that makes some moments with Yossarian so much fun to read can also make them heartbreaking – Heller’s brilliant use of both sides of this primal instinct to fear death is genius, and leaks into his future works as well.

This book, an innovative concept with an innovative plot, was published in the same year as J. D. Salinger’s Franny and Zooey and John Steinbeck’s The Winter of Our Discontent, and was not initially considered to be as important as it is today – at first it was merely a silly war novel, and has now become touted as one of the books one must read before they die. Heller formed a brand of comedy that seemed fresh, although heavily inspired by early “one-liner” comedians; “The Texan turned out to be good-natured, generous and likable. In three days no one could stand him” (9), “The case against Clevinger was open and shut. The only thing missing was something to charge him with” (75). This bureaucratic-centered and pessimistic writing is what sets Catch-22 apart from most other books – which, later, became a real problem for Joseph Heller.

Over the last fifty years, a specific way of reading Catch-22 developed; to compare the characters within the novel to the real people from Heller’s life. In 2012, Patricia Chapman
Meder published her book, called *The True Story of Catch-22* which attempted to detail just which people in Heller’s life (including her father) led to the characters in the novel. While definitely intriguing, this is of course problematic when trying to look at the novel objectively; when one explains the novel in terms of Heller’s life, it becomes less of a fictional masterpiece and more of a sad look at a man’s attempts to survive. This view of course came after the move into new reception studies, but it was what helped keep Heller’s story alive for as long as it did, and perhaps what made it most interesting to write about, leading to the plethora of articles interpreting *Catch-22*.

One masterful look at Heller’s novel is an article called “Formal Experiment and Social Discontent: Joseph Heller’s "Catch-22",” by Brian Way in the *Journal of American Studies*. Way argues that Heller’s work, while new and improved with its rhetoric, is still obviously radical, anti-militarist and anti-capitalist in its message and preaches the necessity for justice and freedom. But, amidst his discussion, he makes a point that serves as the beginning of Heller’s end: Way says that while Heller is inventive when it comes to creating comedic scenarios, he fails at creating moments of emotion. He uses Nately and his “whore” as an example to show how love is portrayed as non-serious (269). He finally concludes by explaining that Heller’s notion that all sides of a war are equally bad is ultimately false and that Heller should stick to comedy, rather than emotion (269). This is the exact line of thinking that led to Heller’s career failing. Even in discussing *Catch-22* on its own, there seems to be this emphasis on “comedy, not feelings.” The fact that Heller wants shift focus from comedy to emotion should not be considered a failure, but a welcomed transition. His second novel was an attempt to do just that – develop an emotional story, rather than a funny one.
Comedy, it seems, makes it impossible for the reader to separate a new novel from the previous works by the same author – if Heller’s later works were published either before *Catch-22*, or under a penname, they would have been, undoubtedly, more successful. But what is it about comedy that makes this distinction between past work and current work impossible for readers? It is the fact that Heller’s comedic style and the advertisements for his newer novels misled readers into expecting more of the same that led to his failure; it is not simply that his later works were bad. This hatred for Heller’s second novel is unfounded; it is a shame, too, because it is one of the best tragedies of the last fifty years.

**4. *Something Happened* and the Problem with Sorrow**

“It’s a real problem to decide whether it’s more boring to do something boring than to pass along everything boring that comes in to somebody else and then have nothing to do at all.”

*—Something Happened*, Joseph Heller

“The office in which I work”

It would seem quite challenging for a novel to begin with the words “I get the willies” and not be funny. *Something Happened* is a dreadfully serious and frightful character study of Bob Slocum, published in 1974 (about thirteen years after Heller’s first novel), that takes the reader from one of Slocum’s horrific thoughts to another, without holding back. Heller took seven years to craft his words, and it shows; the hypnotic repetition of key phrases makes this novel worth the work it takes to read – it is an exceptionally long time to read the internal monologue of one man, and upon reading the finale the reader feels accomplished and sad at the same time.

This novel is a chore. It is almost 600 pages of Bob Slocum telling us all of the awful things he has to say, over and over again, until both he and the reader can no longer take it. The
reward, if one could call it that, is not a boisterous finale with Bob Slocum overcoming his faults and winning the day . . . . but, rather, it is a melancholy, dramatic, and tragedy-filled conclusion. That is what Heller gives the reader after 600 pages of harsh, Stockholm-syndrome-esque dedication to Slocum; his downfall. There is no punchline – there is only sorrow – at the end of the tunnel. But this by no means makes this novel a bad one – in fact, it really is quite good – but it took critics a very long time to see that. When parsing through reviews of this novel during the year of its publication, it is as if when reading it critics took one glance at this book and declared “That is not *Catch-22!*” and threw it away. After reading something as funny as *Catch-22*, the sorrow in *Something Happened* seems amplified – but this is only if you expected anything out of the novel other than tragedy. If the reader expects to laugh and instead cries, they are less likely to be satisfied even if the story is remarkable – they instead might simply feel cheated.

Bob Slocum tells us first about his childhood; to be blunt, it is not happy. “Something happened” to him early on his life that ruined him, and he still is not quite sure what it is. He moves on to describe his office in mundane detail, about who is afraid of whom, and who tolerates whom. There are few people that genuinely like each other, and that is okay. He moves on to describe his wife, his daughter, his son, and his other son, the only family member to be named: Derek. Derek has grown up with severe brain damage, and nobody in the family particularly likes having to care for him. These characters each get their own section: “My wife is unhappy”, “My daughter’s unhappy”, “My little boy is having difficulties”, and, for Derek, “It is not true”. The fact that no family member aside from Derek gets named and that the only section to not reference the family member it covers in the title is Derek’s section speaks volumes without even explaining Bob Slocum’s feelings about these family members; you get a sense of dread when Derek is mentioned, and just the fact that it is the only name we hear tells us
so strongly that it is the only name that Slocum wishes he could go the rest of his life without hearing again.

Heller has crafted a novel full of people that are just awful; Slocum is surrounded by terrible people, and is himself terrible; and yet, as he cheats on his wife, talks poorly behind people’s backs and moves forward selfishly and only really likes one of his children . . . we like him, we root for him, we ask him to do better. And sadly, he does not. Because that it just not who he is. Heller has made us love a character that we would despise in real life, and simultaneously holds a mirror to us and says: “Hey, this guy you hate? That is you.” And that scares us. Bob Slocum is us, and that is impossible for us to imagine.

Bob Slocum is an awful person who stops at nothing to be as terrible as can be; but, we watch for scene after scene as his family constantly tries to get him angry, his daughter tells him she wishes that he and his wife would die, his wife does not paying attention to him, his son fearing him when he is not being frightening. We watch these things unfold through the eyes of a broken man, who is merely trying to be successful, but he is also being a real jerk. It is not easy to figure out quite who Slocum is; one may look at him and see oneself, or one may deny that one sees oneself, or wish that he could just stop what he is doing and make everything okay, but that claim is unfair because life is unfair to him. Perhaps we sympathize with his cries for help, like: “I know at last what I want to be when I grow up. When I grow up I want to be a little boy” (340). Or, we relate to his pangs of sorrow when reminiscing: “There was a cheerful baby girl in a high chair in my house once, who ate and drank with a hearty appetite and laughed a lot with spontaneous zest: she isn't here now; and there is no trace of her anywhere” (205). We all know people like him in real life, but we do not get their full stories; maybe Heller is trying to teach us
to be sympathetic to misbehavior when we do not understand what is going on in people’s heads. Or, then again, maybe not.

One of the rare journal articles to be found about *Something Happened* is “Brisk Socratic Dialogues,” in which Andre Furlani seeks to prove that Bob Slocum is not actually trying to examine himself; he does not, as Furlani explains, do something right poorly, rather, he does this bad thing well. This “thing” that Furlani discusses is his relentless obsession with identifying his and his family’s problems while trying to turn a blind eye to them at the same time; he claims that this process is achieved through elenctic rhetoric, which is rhetoric that serves to refute something with indirect proof. Furlani states: “The three aspects of the Socratic method . . . are inverted, thus Slocum meta-elenchizes the master elenchizer.” He concludes this point by explaining that “the [method] is monstrously disfigured, yet seems intact . . . Herein lies its destruction” (265). Slocum, rather than discover truths about himself with good intentions and failing, avoids discovering these truths perfectly. Furlani further emphasizes this point by considering Slocum’s son to be his Socrates – always questioning his father and using his words against him – ultimately leading to Slocum feeling as if he must rid himself of this philosopher. And, for Furlani, this serves as a mimetic critique of not the narrator, *but the reader*. The fact that this novel was so mimetic was part of the reason that it failed. Furlani explains that the novel might be more representative of the reader than the narrator, which is more akin to reader response theory, which was being criticized and deconstructed around the time of publication. This led the novel to fade into partial obscurity as the literary world was not quite sure how to handle the text.

Some people, though, even just as *Something Happened* came out, noticed its worth. One of these people was Kurt Vonnegut, who sought to explain to the masses that there was
something here that was almost certainly going to be lost on them. He used almost the entirety of his New York Times review of *Something Happened* to argue for its importance and to explain that its failure was not Heller’s fault. He even surmises that “there will be a molasses-like cautiousness about accepting this book as an important one” (Vonnegut). And, unfortunately, he was right. Only late in Heller’s career did critics acknowledge the importance of *Something Happened*. This failure to recognize the novel as important forced a disconnect between the readers and Heller, which led Heller to spend the next few years of his career trying to win back his audience by writing more typical comedies.

5. **The Comedies**

“Once when Gold was visiting in Florida, his father drew him across the street just to meet some friends and introduced him by saying, ‘This is my son's brother. The one that never amounted to much.’”

— *Good as Gold*, Joseph Heller

“Chapter 2”

In 1979, Heller made a choice that was crucial to the success of his next three novels. He went back; he listened to the criticism of his time. He published *Good as Gold*, a government-based comedy about a man named Bruce Gold who is a professor at a university - his favorite students are the ones that do nothing, for he has less to grade. This book was praised as a return to form for Heller in multiple reviews; this was clearly Heller realizing that the audience wants comedy, not tragedy, and giving in. Even though this novel was a product of giving in to the audience expectations, it is remarkably funny and worthy of consideration when discerning Heller’s best – because, honestly, it might even be funnier than *Catch-22*; it is less focused on political satire and simply poking fun at bureaucracy, sure, but still funny.
Bruce Gold is a middle-aged professor trying to write a book about “the Jewish experience in America” – even though, as people remind him throughout the novel, he isn’t the best qualified to do it. Gold runs into a job opportunity at the White House because he reviewed the President’s book fairly, with enough praise to win him over but still being critical of the work. This new job does not in any way affect his family; they are still as crazy as ever, and Gold hates them even more than he did before. A highlight of the novel is the familial bickering that takes place; the first time the entire Jewish family gets together, Heller’s narration makes it evident how truly despicable each and every one of his characters are, including Gold himself. Gold tries honestly to be invested in their lives, but is constantly caught off guard by how insufferable they can be. At a party, Gold watches his insane stepmother knitting. “What are you [knitting?]” Bruce Gold asks her; she answers: “You’ll see.” He then says: “Pa, what’s she making?” and his father replies: “Mind your own business.” He turns to his sister, Rose, and asks “What’s she knitting?” to which his wife jumps in and replies: “Wool.” There is a pause. “I know that,” he responds, “but what’s she doing with it?” Esther, another sister, replies: “Knitting” (23).

Gold’s search for himself, which is thinly veiled as a search for more money, women, and an easy lifestyle, is both funny and scary; watching him take over women was haunting and truly dreadful, but as the story progresses one still can’t help but root for him to find whatever would really make him happy. It’s got a very sorrowful undertone due to its topic, but it is still funny along the way. By the end, Gold learns a terrible lesson upon the death of someone that he thought he hated from the bottom of his heart: there is no way to really be happy, only content. Nobody can ever be as good as gold – they can only try. While this lesson is of course completely sad, it is an important one, and it is not so often the moral of the story. In an era of
“you can be whatever you want to be” and “trying will make you succeed” and “practice makes perfect,” a novel that teaches that failure is almost always inevitable has a lot of inherent value.

At the time of publication, this novel was critically acclaimed and widely considered a return to form. A 1979 review from *Kirkus*, praising *Good as Gold*, begins with a complaint about Heller’s previous work: “Critics rightly complained that Bob Slocum, the ‘hero’ of Heller's last novel, *Something Happened*, was really Jewish beneath his WASP trappings. Well, now Heller atones for his ethnic coverup – with a vengeance” (“*Good as Gold* by Joseph Heller”). The review goes on to explain that the book is at its funniest when the family is arguing, and notes that it does face a particular issue that Heller’s previous two books did not: it is “nearly plotless.”

Yet, for this *Kirkus* reviewer, the “great, sloppy, assaulting, impolite comic energy” well makes up for the novel’s failings. The reviewer then concludes with a small stab at Heller’s second novel. As he started the review discussing the controversy around *Something Happened*'s character’s nationalities, he ends by comparing *Good as Gold* to *Something Happened* and claiming that “Heller's loose now, less focused and taking different sorts of risks” (“*Good as Gold* by Joseph Heller”). By insinuating that going from comedy to tragedy is in itself a sort of risk, this reviewer highlights the big problem with Heller’s early career: everything he wrote was constantly being considered against his previous work in terms of their genres. His second novel being a tragedy should not have been a bad thing, but it was as if rather than taking it on its own, it was compared to the genre *Catch-22*. Since this novel was similar to *Catch-22*, it sold well and was well-received. This reviewer even notes the similarities between this and *Catch-22* as a positive, saying that “the White House here plainly stands for archetypal . . . stupidity, the way
the Army stood for confusion and lunacy in *Catch-22*, with about the same effect: a balloon-y, cartoon-y straw man of manic plenitude” (“*Good as Gold* by Joseph Heller”).

This review only considers *Something Happened* negatively as it was not a comedy. The false marketing of Heller’s second novel as a comedy and the increased focus on affective fallacy in the 70s not only affected Heller’s early career, but his *whole* career. As the world spun into the 1980s, Heller knew that in order to maintain his newfound career momentum, however small, he needed to stick to comedy. And, since his only real problems with comedies is his lack of coherent and linear plotlines, as perfectly stated in the *Kirkus* review, he needed to turn to something that already had a plot laid out for him and let his mind focus solely on the jokes. He used this strategy for his next two novels, borrowing plots from elsewhere, giving him free reign to think of comedic lines but not have to worry about crafting an actual narrative. And, for any novelist attempting to borrow a story, what better place to start than the Bible?

Heller’s 1984 novel *God Knows* flew under the radar when it was published, and continues to do so to this day. This novel took on the biblical representation of David’s life story and made it, well, *funny*. This novel is by no means a masterpiece, and draws no comparisons to any of Heller’s other works in that the novel is difficult to read due to the narration and the actual representation of the voice of David. However, the changes to the typical version of the story and the dialogue are so clever and funny that it makes up for it; and, ironically, the biggest problem with the novel is that it sticks *too* closely to the biblical stories. It is hysterical to watch characters speak as they do in the Bible, then turn around and immediately use anachronistic or modern language in the same conversation, sometimes asking “What did I just say?” to the more confusing Old Testament dialogue. While this is definitely engaging, it is *not* fun to read
paragraphs on paragraphs describing the biblical war as armies capture cities and take over certain lands – stuff that does not matter to David in our version of his story.

The question of David’s character is the difference between being conceited and being right; David presents himself as a great man, a hero, a legend, but he does not always tell the truth. He lies to us, the reader, and sometimes himself. He tells us outright that everything that happened to him is God’s fault, whether that is true or not, in this version. He is stubborn with his relationship to God, but as he describes later in the text, for good reason. The difference is embodied in David’s created character. His wives represent different parts of himself and the children represent different aspects of his desired legacy. Unfortunately, Heller’s choice to not stray from the Biblical narrative hurt this novel in the end. What is ultimately a fine novel, still fascinating, funny, and charming, could have been a masterpiece if it had only given itself more wiggle room – even though he did make Solomon a complete and utter buffoon.

In Jill Beerman’s 1985 review of God Knows in The Antioch Review, the novel is billed as Heller’s ultimate work, in a very humorous way. Beerman says: “In his previous novels, Heller has attacked the military (Catch-22), male middle-age angst (Something Happened), and Henry Kissinger (Good as Gold). In his latest novel, Heller takes on God” (249). This reviewer attempts to paint a picture of Heller’s career constantly climbing up in success, when in reality, his success was spotty. This critically unfounded lie is an overcompensation for the failure of Something Happened – in order to fit Heller’s new novel into the narrative, they must work Something Happened into it as well.

Picture This, coming out just four years after God Knows, takes a similar plot-appropriating historical approach by incorporating Rembrandt’s painting of Aristotle contemplating the bust of Homer. Heller tells the story of Aristotle recollecting Socrates, the
history of Greece, the history of Italy, and the story of Rembrandt, by transitioning from the bust of Homer, to the painting of Aristotle, and to the painter himself. The “main” character, if there is one, is Aristotle – it is through Aristotle’s painted eyes that we get most of the story, but his character is the least developed.

This book is almost as humorous as *Catch-22* but takes a lot more time to get to the ultimate punchline, which is present on the last page of the book. While Heller’s other books reward the reader constantly, this one challenges readers to really understand the history around the characters Heller describes before giving you the gratification of their downfalls and the hilarity that becomes of them. While one might find this satisfying and worth it, others might find it tiresome and boring. He does again shine with the dialogue – no matter how sad the things his characters say are, they are always said with an air of wit and charm about them, particularly between Rembrandt and his friend and customer, Jan Six. Aristotle is also given some fantastic observations, but a large, distinct difference this novel has from the others is that the narrator makes a lot of judgements, observations, and jokes, rather than leaving the job solely up to the characters. Part of this novel reads as a comedian writing a history book, which is endearing in a way that none of his other novels could become.

Ultimately, this phase of Heller’s career shows the market becoming tired with Heller’s genre. An example of this is another review from *Kirkus* that says:

You could as well say . . . that his new book is the worst kind of disingenuous botch, a sad comedown indeed from the author of *Catch-22* and *Something Happened*: an imagination-less, inflated, one-dimensional, and oh-so-cheap routine of historical juxtaposition and smart-alecky asides. . . . You keep waiting for Heller, as he did in *God Knows*, at least to stuff some jokes into the mouths of
the dead . . . Heller, with this novel-length screed against wealth, has produced . . . a swollen between-boards equivalent of a Paul Harvey broadcast. Just terrible – and even a little boorish ("Picture This by Joseph Heller").

The comedic genre is now beginning to hurt Heller; the world could not stand Something Happened when it came out, including critics, and now, at his fifth novel, he is becoming despised for doing exactly what the people asked for: writing comedies. As relativism through the affective fallacy and reader-response was becoming more popular heading into the 80s, these less-intelligent comedies from Heller would have been more easily tossed aside by critics, and could be an explanation for why reviews like this one harkened back to Something Happened so nostalgically. Since the importance of the author’s relationship to the text was becoming part of the discussion again, these critics even use his second novel as leverage, claiming that it was “up there” with Catch-22. Whatever Heller does to pacify the audience, he either does too late or at the wrong time.

Heller’s bout in typical comedies began strong, but wavered as it continued on. This comedic phase is critically his strongest, but it lacks the spark that his “promising” start had to offer. Criticism coming off of Heller’s third novel, Good as Gold, attempted to tell the story of Heller’s career as one of a rise to fame – the “novels get better as they go” attitude – and fooled the world, at the time. But once Heller had begun to use up too much of his capital with the audience, they began to dislike the comedies as they came out. America told Heller that they were getting tired of this type of comedy and that they still loved Catch-22 the best, so Heller ultimately did the only thing someone who was trying to give readers the same sort of experience they had with Catch-22 would do: write a forced sequel that lacks the spirit of its predecessor.
6. The Era of Desperation

“You do know about [the flood]!”
“I’ve heard . . .”
. . . The Vice President regarded him approvingly. “Then you probably also know that
evolution is bunk. I hate evolution.”

“Where did all this animal life we know about now come from? There are three or four
hundred thousand different species of beetles alone.”

“Oh, they probably just evolved.”

— Closing Time, Joseph Heller
Chapter 12: “Noodles Cook”

Closing Time, published in 1994, is Heller’s disappointing return to the characters of Catch-22
and does not quite have the same tone the original had. The novel can be funny at times, but it
does something wrong in translating Yossarian and company into their late adulthood. These
characters are immortalized in Heller’s pages; this revisit should really have not happened.
Alongside Yossarian, Heller tries to introduce two new main characters – Sammy and Lew – yet
their stories never become a part of Yossarian’s and they only serve as reminders for how long
ago Yossarian’s time in the army really was. (There is one chapter where Sammy encounters
Yossarian, and they have a pretty funny chat, but it goes on too long and then they are never
important again.) When Yossarian, Milo, Wintergreen, McBride, the Chaplain, and a newcomer,
Mr. Gaffney, are doing the talking, this book can be just as funny as Catch-22; the problem
rests with Heller’s decision to try and fit Sammy Singer’s story, Lew’s story, and some new
characters’ stories into the mix which just are completely uninteresting and longwinded.

And this is where the divide between Heller and his fans is clearly shown. In an interview
with Charlie Rose, Heller says, on Lew and Sammy Singer: “They’re the only fully realized
characters I’ve ever written . . . I’ve never developed characters in any of my books . . . but in
*Closing Time*, [Sammy Singer and Lew] are three-dimensional characters” (qtd. in Rose). What is so interesting about this interview is that it seems that Heller himself has now bought into the narrative that “everything has been leading up to this” that the marketing and criticism has led the world to believe; in order for this book to be successful, he must claim that it is his best work, that it is the only one in which he has written characters that are truly three-dimensional. But, this claim completely disregards *Something Happened* – which, as I have said before, is a 600 page character study of Bob Slocum. Slocum is Heller’s most developed character – but, in order for *Closing Time* to sell, he must bill the novel as his best. Building up a novel is unequal to making it successful.

The strangest part about this return to his original characters, though, is that at the time of publication, *Closing Time* was critically successful – and only recently has it come to be seen as an abomination in regards to the characters of *Catch-22*. In William H Pritchard’s review of *Closing Time*, which he called “Yossarian Redux,” he praised the novel, saying that it “contains a richness of narrative tone and of human feeling lacking in the earlier book” (Pritchard). Pritchard does point out the problem of Heller’s career as well: “If your first novel happens to have been *Catch-22* – 10 million copies sold and a phrase added to the language – just about any follow-up will be judged a letdown. Joseph Heller's fate was to have his four successor novels invariably compared, usually unfavorably, to their mighty predecessor” (Pritchard). This return to critical acclaim, though, did not last long, and in fact may have served to ruin the success of his final, posthumously published novel, *Portrait of an Artist, as an Old Man*.

A year after Heller’s death in 1999, *Portrait of an Artist, as an Old Man* was published and hit the shelves. This novel is really a “collection” – it is about an old man whose first book was so successful that nothing he wrote after it could compare, trying to write one last book
before he dies, but not coming up with any good ideas. This should of course sound familiar because it is Joseph Heller’s actual life story, wrapped in a façade of a narrative. And, well, to be honest, it is quite funny. Watching Heller’s invented main character, Eugene Pota (P, O, T, A – Portrait Of The Artist) struggle to come up with a good story is pretty funny on its own, but this novel works mainly if the reader knows what Heller’s personal struggle was, and that makes the meta-humor that much more hilarious. Unfortunately, though, Pota’s story ends a little bit better than Heller’s does, as this flop was Heller’s last shout into the void; and, his novels never did live up to the hype that his own first creation set him up for. The ideas in the book heavily rely on James Joyce’s Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, Mark Twain’s The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, and Biblical stories. Oh, and sex — quite a bit of sex.

This “hodge-podge” of storytelling will not gel with most readers because they will not understand the reason why Heller wrote it this way; the book can only be appreciated after having spent a long time discovering Heller’s life, his works, his journey, and his personal struggles. Without that, this story almost does not have a story, and even less so a main character; its only saving grace is that it gives a close reader insight into Heller’s life, and for that, it becomes one of the most important novels Heller ever wrote.

The following Kirkus review of Portrait of an Artist, as an Old Man is incredibly positive. It also summarizes Heller’s career as critics viewed it during its time, offering some clarification and insight. It reads:

One guesses that the late Joseph Heller (1923-99) must have chafed at the irony of a 40-year literary career during which he was identified almost exclusively as the author of his first novel. Catch-22 (1961), which was based on his own experiences as a WWII Air Force bomber pilot, added a phrase to the language,
found the perfect comic metaphor for the insanity of military (and, by extension, most other) bureaucracies, and helped transform postwar American realistic fiction into the hybrid satirical picaresque forms whose influence persists to this day. Heller’s second novel, *Something Happened* (1974), was an underrated work: a bleak deconstruction of the façade of normality that insulates a prototypical man in a gray flannel suit from his cautiously suppressed inmost fears and desires . . . Subsequent books were uneven. Re-creations of the worlds of King David and Rembrandt (in *God Knows* and *Picture This*, respectively) seemed labored. But there was much to admire in Heller’s refreshingly impertinent Washington novel *Good as Gold* (1979) . . . and the recent *Closing Time* (1994), a decidedly autumnal sequel to *Catch-22* (“*Portrait of an Artist, as an Old Man* by Joseph Heller”).

As Heller’s career progressed, *Something Happened* became more and more of a staple; critics note that it is on par with his first novel, yet still somehow find a love for *Closing Time* that no longer exists. Even the *Kirkus* review of *Closing Time* ends with the line: “Be content with the original and pretend the sequel never happened” (“*Closing Time* by Joseph Heller”).

This review however ends by stating that while “[*Portrait*] sounds cloying and self-indulgent . . . it’s actually quite entertaining: a racy, readable amalgam of memoir [and] joke book . . . Heller’s mellowest book recaptures . . . the same strains of plaintive comic madness that made *Catch-22* a permanent contribution to our literature. It’s a terrific swan song” (“*Portrait of an Artist, as an Old Man* by Joseph Heller”). This is quite a statement to make about a very short, only sort-of novel; and it just goes to show that if readers understand what his career was like and how unfair it was to him, the book will become that much more enjoyable to
read. At the turn of the twenty-first century, the biographical interpretation became a widely used tool and the focus on the author and the text became more prevalent. Although the book was already about Heller’s life, the importance of the author became relevant again around the time of publication, so Heller’s life had a lot of reason for becoming part of the interpretation. Because of Heller’s semi-autobiographical narrative, the novel struck a chord with critics. They could see the despair and the hilarity in the life of Heller, and as the reviewer from *Kirkus* puts it, the novel really was a “terrific swan song” as it arrived just in time for Heller’s audience to interpret it the way he intended. Unfortunately, it was all too late.

7. **Conclusions About Comedy, Marketing, and Reception**

What was the reason Heller’s career was unsuccessful? Was it the constant change of reception study over Heller’s life? Was it that combined with Heller’s comedic opus? Or was it simply the marketing that led readers astray? Complexly, it is the all of the above: by binding Heller to a genre – comedy – a ridiculous expectation falls on his lap: “Be funny.” When following up a funny book with a sad one, people become upset – especially when the most popular criticisms at the time focused on the reader’s relationship with text and the emotional responses. And once the audience is lost, it is very hard to get them back. Comedy is the reason behind the downfall of Heller’s career. Comedy is the backbone of the flaw – when you begin telling people what you write is comedic, when you change genres, the marketing will not and when the marketing stays the same, the genre changes, and reception study tells the reader that the meaning of a book is all about their experience with it, your novel is bound to struggle. As Heller’s style progressed from dark comedy to tragedy, the market refused to progress with him, and sold his work as the same as it was before: and people hated it.
Publishing a novel is the author giving his or her thoughts to the world. When the mind of the author and the goal of advertising do not match, there becomes a disconnect between the author and the audience that does not exist if there is no false advertising; reading a sad book that is supposed to be funny would lead the reader to feel cheated, and thus, have a negative experience with the book, whether it was good or not. A prevalent example of this issue is movie trailers; often, indie movies get near-perfect scores from critics who only watched the movie, then terrible reviews from audiences who saw all of the previews marketing it in a way that is not true to the movie itself. Critics in the literary world are unable to escape these “previews” as marketing for a novel begins early, often even in the back of previous books, like for a series. If advertising is not true to the material, then it will generate bad reviews.

This failure of marketing is made worse by the fact that Heller, rather than sticking to what he was working towards, decided to move back to comedy; this is when the second issue arose: genre tiring. Because Heller moved with the critics, his fans became less and less interested in his work, because they all felt the same, and none were “as good as Catch-22” despite critical reviews that attempted to build up his newer novels as if they were better. This led Heller to write Closing Time, and ultimately fail at recovering his career. And this is all because of one simple word: comedy. As Vonnegut pointed out all those years ago, the marketing of the genre was detrimental to Something Happened’s success, and subsequently, Heller’s. Heller should have moved forward and continued to experiment – write novels that could have become classics right alongside Catch-22 – but instead, the world of advertising, literary criticism, and comedy, was unfairly against him.

But, Heller’s staple black comedy, the form that Vonnegut spear-headed, the form that Heller perfected, has been having a sort of renaissance in recent years. And it has been met with
similar criticism, but this time, the critics are praising all of the novels and the wider audience dislikes it. This is most obvious when looking at the career of Joshua Ferris – he has written three novels, *Then We Came to the End*, *The Unnamed*, and *To Rise Again at a Decent Hour*, and all three of them have been likened to Heller’s novels; sometimes, even on the covers. His first was a black comedy that focused on a group of people in an office – similar to Heller’s *Something Happened*. His second was a tragedy disguised as a comedy about a family whose patriarch is unable to stop walking, and his third is about a dentist whose identity is stolen by a religious cultist trying to spread his word. Ferris’s work has been award finalists met with critical acclaim, but have all been given low scores by his readers. This is the problem with literary identity these days – the very back of Ferris’s first book calls it a comedy. Sure, it is funny, but it is incredibly dark and sad.

Perhaps with this revival of black comedy there will come changes in the way that these authors’ work is portrayed; we must shy away from comparing works to previous works by the same author as readers, we must ask the publishing world to give us truthful marketing rather than false advertising, and we must ultimately know that a book’s reviews or reception does not ultimately make it a good or a bad book – the value of a novel cannot be measured by sales or positive reviews or the previous novels by the same author as their work and style will gradually grow and change . . . the duty then comes to us to read the text and come to conclusions about it ourselves.
Works Cited


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