

【연구논문】

Identity as Nidus: A Polyphonic Reading of Joseph Heller's *Good as Gold*

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1. Introduction

Joseph Heller (1923 - 1999) is remembered as a popular and respected writer in America. He has shown an engaging response to the socio-economic-political events of the postwar decade that mark the contemporary, postmodern period. Heller's tragi-comic vision of modern life, found in his novels, focused on the erosion of humanistic values and the ways in which language obfuscates and puzzles reality. Joseph Heller not only engages the attention of students of literature and academics but also of the general readers because of the choice and treatment of the theme reflecting society in all its authenticity. His protagonists are anti-heroes, who search for meaning in their lives and struggle to avoid being deluged by such institutions as the military, business, government, and religion. The implication throughout Heller's career is that institutions are responsible for

turning what might have been individuals into two-dimensional characters, in fact into caricatures. David Buehrer rightly pointed out that Heller is “consistent in many of his works, however, is the theme of the individual in conflict with monolithic systems and institution and one’s quest to make sense out of the chaos and absurdity of contemporary existence” (616). This sensitizes Heller’s growing skepticism towards life and has influenced his works from the traditional genre to parody.

Heller was born in Brooklyn, New York, to first-generation Russian-Jewish immigrants. His father Issac Donald Heller, a bakery truck driver, died after a bungled operation when Heller was only five years old and he was parented by his mother Lena, halfbrother Lee and half-sister Sylvia, all considerably older than him. Heller’s graduation from Abraham Lincoln High School in 1941 coincided with his entry into World War II, where he served as a bombardier in the Army Air Corps and was discharged in June 1945. Heller’s first and most popular novel, *Catch-22* (1961) was largely based on his experiences in World War II. Over the course of his writing career, Heller’s novels displayed increasing pessimism over the inability of individuals to reverse society’s slide toward exploitation and disintegration. Some critics claim that Heller’s later work pales in comparison with *Catch-22* and *Something Happened* (1974), but others maintain that his canon viewed as a whole displays his continued evolution as a writer. In this context David Craig opines that:

Heller’s next novel (*Good as Gold*) combines elements from both *Catch-22* and *Something Happened* in a bitter indictment of political

ambition. It presents an ironic and bleakly futile version of a success story pursued by its Jewish protagonist Bruce Gold in his efforts to penetrate the world of Washington politics. (129)

Marshall Toman pronounces that:

In this novel, the tension between the necessary subject matter of Heller's fiction – modern society or sensibility – and his preferred ethic stands out in a particular clear light. (223)

In this sense, the postmodern novel increasingly speaks about the individual attempting to deal with the turbulence of the period and thereby to find an identity.

2. Mikhail Bakhtin's Polyphony

Despite the critical attention paid to the fiction of Joseph Heller labeling it as fantasy, black humor, grotesque, absurd and so on, it can be perceived that no detailed examination of Heller's fiction can be found from the perspective of polyphony. The term "polyphony" has been used initially in music, wherein concurrent existences of various nodes ensue simultaneously, in which moment attention is paid normally to the quality of each node rather than to the resulting coherence. A careful analysis of Heller's *Good as Gold* (1979), in the light of Mikhail Bakhtin's¹⁾ theory of polyphony, reveals interesting

1) The concepts of the Russian literary theorist and critic Mikhail Bakhtin have provided new tools of analysis for the study of fiction in the post-structuralist context. The "dialogic" the "carnavalesque" and the "polyphony" are Bakhtin's

insights. Bakhtin's idea on the novel promises to be a fascinating when plotted on Heller's literary world. Though Bakhtin's theories of the "dialogic" and the "carnavalesque" have been profusely applied for critical understanding in literary world, his theory of "polyphony" has not been established as much. The term polyphony has been used by Bakhtin in his very first book on *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1929), wherein he states that the "essence of polyphony lies precisely in the fact that the voices remain independent and, as such, are combined in a unity of a higher order than in homophony" (21).

Consequent to the onset of New Criticism with its affirmation of the autonomy of the text, followed by both Structuralism and Post-Structuralism periods, has caused the desertion of the author from literary criticism. Against these critical fluxes, Bakhtin's paradigm of polyphony has invigorated the author in the text generated by him. Thus, in polyphonic fiction, the author's voice remains as one more in the text. Neither his voice nor his ideology is endorsed to dictate over those of the characters created by him. Instead, they are presented as independent subjects who are capable of even surprising their creator. In the words of Bakhtin, a work of art will live only if it is engaged in a dialogue, which is possible only in polyphonic works wherein their authors do not retain the final word about their characters. The dialogue in such a work is facilitated by highly independent characters that are capable of interacting with each other as well as with their author.

The new positions of the hero in polyphonic novels require a

key concepts.

totally new method of artistic representation. The author does not highlight the hero in a polyphonic novel, instead, he delineates the arguments of the hero:

The author constructs the hero not out of words foreign to the hero, not out of neutral definition; he constructs not a character, nor a type, nor a temperament, and in fact he constructs no objectified image of the hero at all, but rather the hero's discourse about himself and his world. (85)

It implies that despite leaving the hero with complete autonomy, the author still has his distinct voice in a polyphonic text.

At this juncture, Joseph Heller's notion about the locus of the writer in his novels is quite similar to Bakhtin's idea about the non-interfering position of the author in polyphonic novels. Both these writers see the author as remaining more or less passive and hidden in comparison to their fully independent and self-conscious heroes. As such, Heller's *Good as Gold* is selected for the present study for critical analysis through Bakhtin's lens of polyphony. Heller's unusual expression of anti-establishment themes extending from revolt against traditionalism to pastoral sanctuary, explain its widespread appeal. It is hoped that the study would offer deeper insights into the times by highlighting the polyphony aspects of Heller's fiction.

3. Identity and Multiple Voices

Good as Gold marks Heller's use of his Jewish tradition and childhood experiences in the Coney Island section of New York City.

Many critics believe that Heller developed sardonic, wisecracking humor that marked his writing style while growing up in the said Island. Geoffrey Green's article "Joseph Heller: From Your Mouth to God's Ear!" provides an overview of the novel:

In *Good as Gold*, Heller takes on two additional furtive targets: the assimilation of American Jews, and the pervasive euphemistic linguistic distortion wreaked by politicians and the political establishment for narrow and selfish purposes. Heller's antihero, Bruce Gold, epitomizes those who, estranged from themselves, yearn for an elusive identity that entices by its surreptitious unattainability. (123)

The protagonist, Bruce Gold, is a dissatisfied college professor who was offered a job in the presidential administration. He finds himself in Washington surrounded by bureaucrats who speak a confusing, contradictory language. Gold's struggles with his own ambition are developed in scenes alternating between Washington and his large, garrulous Jewish family in New York City. In this sense, Stephen Potts opines that:

Good as Gold is ostensibly a satire directed at our (American) politicians and political institutions ... At the same time, the novel is Heller's response to the requests he had received from his Jewish-American readers to write about the Jewish experience in America. (80)

The present study traces Gold's individual experience from the lens of polyphony as a writer, teacher, suitor, husband, father, member of a large family, and sometimes particularly when Gentiles remind him as a Jew. As the novel opens, Gold finds himself mired in the

mundane. To pay for his three children's expensive private schools, Gold accepts two commissions to write on the American Jewish experience. One editor, Lieberman, wants a spicy bestseller with plenty of sex between Jews and Gentiles; the other, Pomeroy, wants a more scholarly work emphasizing psychology and sociology. Gold never writes this book during the narrative, however, because of a call from Newsome, who has become a Presidential aide. As a result of Gold's favourable review of the President's book, *My Year in the White House*, Newsome invites Gold to Washington with the promise of a high government post, possibly Secretary of State. Gold jumps at the chance to become an insider and flies to Washington ready, even eager, to sell his intellectual skills and to dump his Jewish wife and family if his patriotic duty so demands.

He soon finds that getting the promised job depends less upon his intellectual performance than his skills as a suitor. Newsome explains that in order to "fit in" he must increase his "stature" by persuading Andrea Conover, the tall blonde daughter of a powerful Gentile millionaire, to marry him. Then Conover will use his influence to get him the post, even though he despises Gold as a Jew and takes every opportunity to insult and humiliate him. Worse still, Gold finds himself in a Catch-22 dilemma that Andrea won't marry him until he has the post, and Conover won't get it for him until he is married to his daughter. Numerous trips to Washington to court Andrea and the political and social establishment bring him no closer to his goals until finally spurred in part by the family crisis of his older brother Sid's death where he gives up his ambitions.

In partially fulfilling both scholarly and popular criteria, Gold's

novel/memoir, which he calls his “abstract autobiography” (313) reveals the polyphony that pervades theme and structure. The foundation of this duality is the two worlds between which Gold alternates: that of his New York Jewish family on the one hand and the Protestant political-social establishment of Washington, D.C. on the other. The differences between these worlds, particularly in their values, outlook, and problems, provide the novel’s thematic opposition like man vs. matter or human reality vs. the materialistic and ultimately dehumanizing forces where Gold seeks to join. Thus, throughout the novel it can be sensed that Gold moves with his hero and registers even the minute movements of him in order not to give any finalizing definition of him. He is as per Bakhtin’s hero in *The Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*:

Literally fettered to his hero; he cannot back off from him sufficiently to give a summarizing and integrated image of his deeds and actions. Such a generalizing image would already lie outside the hero’s own field of vision and on the whole such images presume some stable position on the outside. The narrator does not have access to such a position; he has none of the perspectives necessary for an artistically finalizing summation of the hero’s image or of his acts as a whole. (225)

The title, *Good as Gold*, suggests a thematic and structural polyphony with its play on the word “gold”, which names both the hero and the symbol of his quest. For gold represents not merely material wealth but the “glittering new social circles awaiting him” (275) in Washington, so that it comes to symbolize the totality of Gold’s ambitions. By balancing Gold and gold, man and matter,

against the word “good”, the title also poses questions about human values and priorities in Gold’s materialistic surroundings.

The interaction of other consciousnesses is a crucial factor for polyphony in fiction. This means that various characters in the novel possessing different consciousness do not stand apart from each other. Instead, each of these unrelated consciousnesses is allowed to come and interact with the other and thus contribute to the all-pervasive polyphony of the text. The author brings the truth of one character into the field of vision of another character and thus the two get a chance to agree or disagree or even argue with each other and also with the author resulting in a true polyphony or dialogue in the text. All the discussions that take place in the text on various issues are somehow related to the main issue in question and hence are of importance to the protagonists. These various secondary dialogues stem from the dialogic nerve center, i.e. the focal point of all dialogues. None of these discussions converge at any point. These remain as isolated opinions of different people, sometimes merging with other’s voices, sometimes clashing with other’s voices. There are numerous such related events in the text and in fact the whole text is based on the interrelatedness of various consciousnesses.

Gold’s response to these “peccadilloes” and problems shows that what he wants to leave behind in his family is not merely the “Jewishness” that he considers an obstacle to his ambitions, “Every instinct instructed him he could never introduce a single one to Andrea or the glittering new social circles awaiting him in Georgetown” (275). What he really wants to escape are the inevitable problems of living in a mutable, human world. Although he doesn’t appear aware

of this assumption when he first goes to Washington, he envisions there not only the achievement of his desires but an escape from entropy into a world immune to the ravages of time.

Thus at the beginning of the political plot, Gold's first view of Washington shows him imposing on it a vision of paradise, where no one ages, gains weight or has problems:

He glanced out the window at official Washington and caught a glimpse of heaven. Through the doorway, the view of the open office space was a soothing pastoral, with vistas of modular desks dozing tranquilly under indirect fluorescent lighting that never flickered; there were shoulder-high partitions of translucent glass, other offices across the way as imposing as Ralph's, and the dreamlike stirrings of contented people at work who were in every respect impeccable. The women all were sunny and chic not a single one was overweight--the men wore jackets and ties, and every trouser leg was properly creased. If there was a worm at the core of this Garden of Eden, it escaped the cynical inspection of Gold, who could find detritus and incipient decay everywhere. (121-22)

In this "Eden" untouched by physical decay, Gold can even give up his obsessive concern with his own health, while all his dreams of success will magically come true if he can just pluck the golden apple from this garden - the promised government post. But the pastoral imagery undermines Gold's vision even while expressing it. The artificiality associated with the pastoral form suggests both the falseness of Gold's vision and of Washington's myth of immunity to human conditions that it seeks to project about itself, a myth that is the root of Gold's illusion.

In this artificial world of the political plot, even the problems that

Gold must solve take on an unreal, fairy tale hue. To enter this paradise, for example, Gold must marry the fair princess (Andrea) and win over the “dragon” at the gates (Andrea’s father), who will then use his “magical” power to get Gold the promised prize. Moreover, the “Catch-22” dilemma blocking his ascent adds a touch of comic absurdity to Gold’s adult fairy tale. Such difficulties at the gates of paradise are a far cry from the dilemma of what to do with his aging father, and the difference in problems says something about the nature of the two worlds. In the family sphere, Gold’s problems are realistic, ordinary, and human, revolving around the struggle with time and decay; whereas in the political realm where Gold imagines an exit from entropy and mundane realities, the problems are fantastic and seem to promise, if solved, a blissful and permanent state of perfection that includes all the riches, power, and prestige he could ever desire.

In shifting from political satire to his family, Gold changes from satirical caricature to a style of comic realism. “Characters become more three-dimensional, a mixture of attractive and less-than-admirable traits that give them human complexity”²⁾ (16). This comic realism is at its best in the dinner scenes, where family conversations about down-to-earth matters, such as burial plots, become hilariously insane, revealing the absurdity that underlies the ordinary. These people, with their absurdities and flaws, resemble the “realistic” characters of the 19th-century European novel (because of Gold’s European immigrant roots), whereas the broadly outlined and simplified caricatures of

2) Larry Grobel became an established historian of celebrities and culture. In this process Larry’s techniques of interviewing assisted him to develop knowledge over various fields of study.

Washington could have stepped out of a political cartoon or comic strip.

This polyphony style of comic realism and satirical “in-realism” is also an integral part of the novel’s central theme of human vs. nonhuman realities. The realistic characters are clearly embedded in a recognizably imperfect human world, while the satirical caricatures reinforce the idea that Gold’s image of Washington is based not upon a realistic appraisal of what it is, but upon a mythical version of Washington that denies human reality altogether. Yet Gold can hardly be blamed for his intoxicated expectations, for he has merely imbibed the myth that Washington promotes about itself: that of a perfect world, where those who have power possess and it not because they grabbed or inherited it, but by virtue of natural superiority. This myth denies human reality by elevating the power elite’s status until they believe in their immunity to the problems and conditions that plague other human beings.

A long harangue delivered by the president during their meeting is a powerful polemic against Jewish oppression. What appeared to Heller as the ravings of the lunatic the idea of Diasporic notion takes on a new perspective when president presents the problem of Washington and American Jews, he points out, condemn in one breath White oppression of native population in American, and in the other, approve whole heartedly of Washington. The meeting creates polyphony of voices through which an idea is sounded. What Lunacharsky³⁾ discovered in *Dostoevsky’s* novels, and quoted by Bakhtin,

3) Anatoly Lunacharsky (1875 - 1933) was a Soviet politician, writer, translator, critic and art historian who was the first Soviet People’s Commissar of Education responsible for culture and education. He was active Marxist during his time.

applies equally well to *Good as Gold*:

Different vital problems [are put] up for discussion by these highly individual ‘voices,’ trembling with passion, ablaze with the fire of fanaticism—while he [the author] himself, as it were, is merely a witness to these convulsive disputes and looks on with curiosity to see how all of it will end, what turn the matters, will take. (331)

As the President’s emissary who lures Gold to Washington with the promise of political preferment, Ralph Newsome plays the role of satanic tempter and guide to the false paradise. It is he who gives Gold his first “glimpse of heaven”, the essence of which is the physical perfection and order of his office. Gold first thinks this perfection indicates a world without entropy, but later it becomes symbolic of the moral stagnation underlying the flawless veneer: Newsome turns out to be as morally sensitive as the “modular desks dozing tranquilly in his office” (122). His conversations with Gold as he advises him in his quest define the Washington elite’s morality. His ethic is one of pure self-interest that reduces other people to disposable items: when he tires of one wife, he gets another. His definition of a government policy that does “no harm” is one that doesn’t harm him (347). And in response to Gold’s comment on the “cynicism and selfishness” of this outlook, Newsome tells him breezily, “I know that feeling of good conscience, Bruce, and I assure you it will fade without a trace when you’ve been working here a minute or two” (347). But the full implications of his ethic appear in his comment, “Let’s build some death camps” (122). That this remark occurs right after Gold’s ‘glimpse of heaven’ reveals not

only the potential depths of moral decay in this “Eden” but the “worm at the core” the anti-Semitism⁴) that permeates the Washington elite, from Newsome to the Texas Senator, who tells Gold that “every successful American should own a Jew” (431).

Another significant distinction is made by Bakhtin in this context between dialogic discourse and Hegelian dialectic. To Bakhtin, dialogic does not mean dialectic. The polyphonic novel, to him, is profoundly anti-Hegelian:

It presents an opposition, which is never cancelled out dialectically, of many consciousness's, and they do not merge in the unity of evolving spirit Within the limits of the novel the heroes' worlds interact by means of the event, but these interrelationships are the last thing that can be reduced to thesis, antithesis, synthesis The unified, dialectically evolving spirit, understood in the Hegelian sense of the term can give rise to nothing but a philosophical monologue (26).

Newsome's manner of speaking also echoes the moral emptiness of Washington, as well as the stupidity that reigns there. He speaks a language of negation consisting of words and phrases that cancel each other out, such as “we want Independent men of integrity who will agree with all our decisions” (53).

Ralph makes language meaningless and thereby contributes further to the moral decay by using words to obscure truth rather than reveal it. Newsome's smooth and slippery way with words is, in fact, his

4) Anti-Semitism is a belief of hostility towards Jews. This arose as a form of religious teachings that proclaim the inferiority of Jews. The Holocaust is an extreme example of antisemitism which involved state-sponsored persecution and murder of European Jews by Nazi Germany during 1933 and 1945.

chief characteristic, appropriate in one who plays the role of tempter. And after bringing Gold into Eden, Newsome uses his doubletalk to point the way to Eve. Gold should marry someone taller than he is, Newsome explains, because “You would make *her* look taller. And that would add more to your stature and make her look smaller. Andrea Conover would be perfect” (120). Andrea’s character, personality, and mind prove as empty as Newsome’s doubletalk, and she becomes the epitome of all that first attracts and later repels Gold in Washington. Initially she means to his ambitions, she eventually becomes the focus of Gold’s growing disillusion. Wayne Miller in his Paper on the novel opines that “Gold vacillates between, on the one hand, the moral death of public success with its power and pleasures and, on the other, the possibilities of a personal alternative that he hardly understands” (4).

As time passes, even Andrea’s physical perfection pales, making her bland. In contrast to the members of Gold’s family, she lacks individual character or “salt”. More and more she resembles a vapid ideal of feminine beauty defined by the Protestant aristocracy. This perception begins to dawn on Gold in a scene that recalls his first vision of Washington as Eden, only this time the paradisiac gleam has tarnished. Like Adam after he ate the apple, Gold ‘hid with his face in his hands in a corner of the garden until Andrea had returned,’ and, looking up, he finds her “once more feminine, familiar, gorgeous, and dull” (371). Gold’s vision of Andrea and Washington has “fallen” from its original Endemic idealism, and finding Andrea “dull”, he can no longer lose himself in the pretense that he loves her. The enchantment is over, and Adam/Gold once again falls back

into the alienation he had hoped to escape.

As a result of the decay at the core of the nation's capital in *Good as Gold*, all social and political institutions are declining, victims of neglect and indifference. As Gold notes of this trend:

Neighborhoods, parks, beaches, streets, were falling deeper into ruin and whole cities sinking into rot. It was shoot the Chutes into darkness and dissolution, the plunging roller coaster into disintegration and squalor. Someone should do something. Nobody could. No society worth its salt would watch itself perishing without some serious attempt to avert its own destruction. (326)

Washington's rot has become epidemic. The self-serving behavior of the President, Conover, Newsome and other Washington figures of power and authority demonstrates that the presumed forces of social "order" have become agents of destruction and fragmentation. Their organized irresponsibility contributes to the social and moral malaise. Their implicit denial of democratic ideals and human values embodies what Gold describes as "the most advanced and penultimate stage of a civilization when chaos masqueraded as order" (325).

Gold's sleight-of-mind has turned his youthful exemption from economic necessity into an assumed right to immunity to human conditions. Ironically, his illusion of natural superiority, in its denial of what his family has done in creating his special position, is not unlike the power elite's claim to superiority, which also overlooks what the network of inherited wealth and social prestige has done in creating their privileged position and power. But in writing his "abstract autobiography", Gold parodies his inflated assumptions by

revealing their contradictions, “Everything I received I earned for myself, except what I got from my father, my mother, and my brother, and from all four of my older sisters ... I inherited from people other than those persons purporting to be my parents” (167). Besides acknowledging the self-imposed alienation that derives from his desire to be superior to his family, Gold also comes to see that even as a child he was something of an outsider by nature. When he talks to Spotty Weinrock and other childhood acquaintances, he learns that they never considered him a part of their group--and not, as he thinks, because they thought he was smarter, but because they thought he was a schmuck:

You were an outsider, don't you remember? That's probably why you got so smart in school. You wouldn't play ball and you had no personality .You did a lot of boasting and sometimes you'd go out of your way to make yourself a pain in the ass. (168)

After this confrontation with his childhood peers, Gold can no longer blame his alienation solely on being a Jew (Spotty and the gang are Jewish), or even ascribe it to natural superiority, which more and more comes to seem an egotistical delusion that grew out of his being a loner instead of causing his alienation.

Gold's writing and his role as writer, in fact, are what unify the novel's double-ness. First, Gold's writing joins the two worlds of family and politics that is his review of the President's autobiography is the first link in the chain that pulls him to Washington, thus initiating his zig-zag odyssey between two worlds. Second, Gold's writing circumscribes the novel as a whole and its close he still has

his book to write on the Jewish experience, which brings the reader back full circle to the first chapter, “The Jewish Experience” - implying that the novel is Gold’s commissioned book. By making the hero the putative author of the novel as well, Heller focuses on the act of writing itself, which is part of *Good as Gold’s* concern with language, literature, and writers. Through Gold’s eyes the novel satirizes the state of language and literature in Gold’s world. Because of the self-interested pursuit of “gold”, another more valuable means of human exchange - language - has been debased. The numerous autobiographical scribblers peopling the narrative in *Good as Gold* care less about the truth or literary quality of their work than self-promotion and easy money.

4. Conclusion

This study reveals that how Heller’s *Good as Gold*, when read through the lens of polyphony, satirically attacks the issue of identity and the desire to succeed in a situation where modern man is caught within the powerful tentacles of the society. He was a witness as well as a victim of the socio-political-economic-psychological circumstances in which he found artistic capital that he exploited to his fictional advantage. As such, his works have become profound transcripts of a life and a vision that had lost its ideals. As has already been analyzed, Heller while reflecting a crisis-ridden society employed the polyphonic device that set him and his works apart in the true spirit of Bakhtin theory. After establishing the traits in the novel, as an important representative of the postmodern American fiction, it can be construed that the novel is characterized by polyphony.

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Abstract

Identity as Nidus: A Polyphonic Reading of Joseph Heller's *Good as Gold*

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Joseph Heller is acknowledged as one of the prominent writers of twentieth century. His works have received great critical acclaim for his engaging response to the socio-economic-political events of the postwar period. As such, his works have become profound transcripts of a life and a vision that had lost its ideals. Also, he provides a satirical commentary of life through his novels which focus on the erosion of humanistic values and the ways in which language obscures and confuses reality. The present study attempts to analyze Heller's *Good as Gold* (1979), through the lens of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of polyphony, which offers a rich exploration of the multiple voices of the text. At other end of the spectrum, the novel deals with the issue of identity and the desire to succeed in a situation where modern man is caught within the powerful tentacles of the society.

Key Words

Identity, Nidus, Family, Society, Polyphony