

“REDEMPTION AND NEW MORALITY IN THE MODERN WORLD– A REVIEW OF JOSEPH HELLER’S NOVELS”

Author:
Sreenivasa N.T,
Research Scholar
Roll No.1601180032,
Department of English,
Annamalai University

Co-Author:
Dr.R.Vijaya,
Research Supervisor,
Department of English,
Annamalai University.

Abstract:

The current paper focuses on the works of Joseph Heller which present the dehumanizing impact of authoritative powers on the civilians whose rational survival would be compromised by the inhuman institutions. The actual purpose of the paper is to lay emphasis on the fact that the writers during these times of unbearable turbulent times recorded the unfortunate absurdities of human life.

Thus critical riders of the paper would be to arrive at how Heller regarded that "entire society is nuts" and how he embarked to look for a response to the essential inquiry, "What does a normal man do in a crazy society?"

Keywords:

Redemption, absurdity, pessimism, social institutions

Introduction:

As a convenient starting point to briefly outline the theme of redemption in Joseph Heller’s works, the current paper would like to focus on the emergence of the themes of existentialism and absurdism in America as they cast a huge influence on American Novel. Existentialism, during the time of Sartre and Camus seemed the intellectual necessity of the generation. And the international impact of Existentialism in the post-war years undoubtedly owed much to the fact that both Sartre and Camus came from a country that had suffered war.

They tried to understand and explain social development not from the stand point of society as a whole but from the stand point of perception and understanding of the existent. They placed man's problems in the centre of their philosophies.

Unsurprisingly, at the war's end, pessimism was widespread. Art was not adequately supported. The reading bourgeoisie were disappearing. During this time Sartre and Camus joined hands to form a resistance group called "Socialism and Liberty". Camus joined an undercover resistance cell known as "Combat" in October, 1943. It was also the name of the organization's newspaper. The writers at the time were so in danger that Camus smuggled copies of the paper which were to be reached to the public. His columns and reports revealed an existential illumination containing all the tragedy of human existence. He counseled the people to act in accordance with existential communion and set great hopes on the strengthening of trust in the world. The anguish with which he says that war will lead to universal destruction and that we must do everything we can to save the world is perfectly understandable. Sartre and Camus spoke of their desire to free man from external factors of life that exert compulsion on him. They constantly tried to find the root causes of man's behavior within the human personality.

The reference to Jean Paul Sartre's philosophy becomes essential in the current paper as it emphasizes an action of estranging or state of estrangement. This sort of alienation is seen as being estranged from the knowledge of God, as from His mercy or His worship. This is mainly because of the development of an 'artificial civilization'. Broadly speaking, artificial civilization is where all attributes of consciousness are exteriorized to an abstract mode of production. This false objectivity results in an over emphasis on the deterministic value of material forces. Apart from artificial civilization, capitalism and Bourgeois family have produced alienation.

Newness in the American Novel:

An attitude to attack everything which seemed to provide a basis for established order was apparent in the postwar novel. The public schools, the church, sexual relationships and puritan restraints came under its massive onslaught. What makes postwar novel 'Modernist' is a certain heightened consciousness. Moreover there is an excess of imagination directed towards an understanding of the principles of life rather than attempting siege and render its inner quality. The writers propagated that Sanity and Mediterranean view of life found their chief enemies in religion and philanthropy. They brought it to the awareness of people that

religion had infected the people with preposterous ideas of good and evil to lure them to quarrel about them. Christianity was rejected because it was dualistic and perpetuated conflict between flesh and spirit. The new myth of blood consciousness was encouraged against the celebration of spirit. The Post war novel acts as a reminder of Hume's rejection of abstract ideas of "Self" and "Soul".

Heller's penchant for introducing a new mode of expression in American creative practices in the twentieth century did not concern either surrealistic world of dreams or the world beyond the 'natural'. He, in line with the novelists of the time, skillfully attempted to side step what had by then become an abiding favourite of most of the playwrights then. He tried to steer clear of the realistic and pseudo-realistic trends that the novelists were obsessed with. The influence of the philosophy of absurdism on the writers such as Heller in America was further augmented by the release of *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Albert Camus's infiltrating examination of the illogicality of the human condition. Coincidentally, it was during the same time that Heller was composing his masterpiece *Catch-22*.

In addition to the influence of Camus and Sartre, almost at the time when Heller was composing *Catch-22*, he was significantly influenced by *Journey to the End of the Night* by Louis-Ferdinand Celine. The influence was so huge that Heller, quite similar to Camus started to posit the individuals in his works who would be in a constant struggle with the absurdity of the world to eventually arrive at a purpose behind living. Martin Esslin depicts that the individual in question will stay content only if he can sustain his tenacity in the face of what apparently is a mechanical life. (Esslin, 2000, p.6-9)

The time during which Heller was writing was ripe for nurturing the absurd philosophy as Heller had been a keen observer of the society around which was dominated by the feelings of alienation and madness. The core question of the paper hence stems out of the understanding that Heller's works are directed towards posing an individual's existence which is constantly in a struggle for negotiating its presence with the society around. In addition the theme of redemption in the current thesis draws its material from the fact that the absurdist writers like Heller in America always felt that the human beings were always under the spell of a deceptive feeling of conviction that the authority deciding the structure of the society in which they are living is trustworthy and dependable. Having had this conviction for a while, the writers like Heller contend that, at least for certain

individuals, a time emerges when the mechanical flow of his everyday life is to be checked to investigate into the apparent craziness lingering behind his or her life.

Redemption – The Absurdities of the Modern Life:

The theme of redemption becomes significant here because, like David M. Craig (Craig, 1997) contends, Heller never admits defeat. The conclusions of his books emphasize the possibility of such victory in the face of the unreasonable world. In an attempt to put forth his perspective, Heller counsels his readers to experientially acknowledge the harsh realities about the world. He continuously drives the reader to experience the Absurd just like how his characters do. Heller's books methodically negotiate with themes like the military, the American Vision, Western way of thinking, Western faith etc. to eventually uncover the ravenous desires of human beings for money, fame and power. When the readers manage to understand the characters of Heller, they consequently will encounter a merciless universe.

Heller's works present the brutalizing and unhinging impact of authoritative powers on person whose rational survival would be threatened by these unyielding human institutions. Heller, like the authors composing during these times of social disturbance, responded to the unfortunate incongruities of American life and had arrived at a conclusion that the entire society was nuts. Thus the thesis embarks upon the theme of redemption which stems out of a very critical question raised by the authors of these times: "What does a normal man do in a crazy society?" (Pinsker,2002,p.156.)

If we regard a revisit to the great works of the twentieth century with an analytical consideration, we can scarcely miss the disaster of war which gives the works their mood of despair and a sense of loss. Exact descriptions of the horrors of war have been a fairly familiar feature of the works. It was made plain in a whole sequence of books by writers like Gunter Grass' "*The Tin Drum*" (1959) and Camus's "*The Fall*" (1956) etc. that the war had left its survivors and successors in a world that was not only shattered and unmanageable but totally a directionless world.

The mood of generation change was apparent. Modernist experience was fashionable to emphasize the observable concern of writers about menacing problems like civilized misery and class uncertainty. These two problems could in fact be seen as residual of an earlier phase of European history: the liquidation of aristocracy.

The modern world was supposed to be characterized by an increase in production which created its civilization and its material excesses but also simultaneously a generalized decrease in productivity which created its misery. Many writers of this period latched on to this fundamental and what was for most of them a profound paradox of bourgeoisie capitalism.

The world of sixties in America was a world of pointless battles and aimless struggles. Joseph Heller lamented at the brutal dehumanization of life that was ridden with chaos and confusion. The writers like him witnessed a continuous decline of mankind and reasonability. Heller, more predominantly, regrets the crumbling of the traditional family structure. Love and affection were seen to be replaced by brutality and hostility. Nonetheless, Heller's world isn't one of sadness and depression. Instead, his books are a calling for the common man to endure this franticness.

Joseph Heller's utilization of fiction to alert the readers about the unreasonable social institutions can be situated in *Catch-22's* treatment of Great Depression period. In spite of the fact that the record of Mr. Major's tricky agrarian practices at first seems to be all the more an analysis of covetousness than a prosecution of administrative questionability, a closer thought of the section uncovers Heller's call for the reader to scrutinize the social institutions.

In almost all his works, Heller works out a connectedness between morality and reason. The concept of reason surfaces in all his works when the characters experience the absurdity of the world in the form of exploitation, victimization etc. Thus this kind of inhuman act by certain institutions or individuals will constitute the absurd which is eventually experienced by the reason of the concerned characters. Later, redemption is symbolized by the moral perspective Heller holds aloft in the course of making his characters negotiate the absurdity of the world. Heller's *Something Happened* (1974) gave him adequate recognition in the realm of American Literature. If *Catch-22* follows Yossarian's battle for survival in a battle-torn world, *Something Happened* projects Bob Slocum, a prosperous corporate man's endeavors to live in spite of his scepticism, fatigue, tension and suspicion.

Conclusion:

The overall summary of the paper thus indicates that the element of absurdity and discontentment about the modern world is pervasive in all the works of Heller. However, a close scrutiny of Heller's works indicates that a majority of the researchers examined in this section of the review have emphasised Heller's experience in the war which is largely related to motivation for his writings. Further, it may also be added that apart from monetary benefits Heller in fact wrote his works to counsel the American mind about the imminent peril due to too much addiction to war.

Works Cited:

David M. Craig, *Tilting at Mortality: Narrative Strategies in Joseph Heller's Fiction*, *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 4 (Winter 1998), pp. 1008-1010.

Esslin, Martin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, A & C Black Publishers Ltd., London, 2001.

Raymond M. Olderman, *Beyond the Wasteland: A Study of the American Novel in the Nineteen Sixties* (New Haven : Yale University Press, 1972), p.96.

Richler, Mordecai, *He Who Laughs Last*, The New York times, Sunday, Late City Final Edition Section 7; Page 1, Column 1; Book Review Desk

Ruderman, Judith, *Joseph Heller*, Random House Value Publishing, London., 2002

Sanford Pinsker, *Understanding Joseph Heller* (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 1991), p.8.

Stephen W. Potts, *Catch-22: Antiheroic Antinovel*, Boston: Twayne publishers, 1989, 172.