



Theme and Idea Directions of Joseph Heller's Novel “Something Happened”

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Summary

Joseph Heller was a significant writer who played an important role in the literary process of the United States in the second half of the 20th century. His novel *Something Happened* presents a remarkable example of black humor in American literature by addressing socio-political and socio-psychological issues against the backdrop of the tense events of its time. Due to the novel's prolonged writing process—spanning over a decade—it was influenced by major political developments in the country and the world, particularly the Vietnam War (1955–1975). The novel elevates a typical representative of Heller's contemporaries to an artistic level. It stands out for its satirical and ironic style. The plot does not follow a linear progression; the narrator constantly shifts between the past and the present, focusing on different subjects. The central moral-psychological theme of the novel is the "fear of losing everything." Heller expresses this fear through the style and tone of black humor. In *Something Happened*, Heller argues that human life is shaped by things we cannot face.

Keywords: Joseph Heller, *Something Happened*, American literature, black humor, fear.

Introduction

Joseph Heller (1923 - 1999) was a prominent writer who played a significant role in the literary process in the United States in the second half of the 20th century. In the history of American literature, his name stands alongside the names of the most famous American writers of the World War II generation, such as James Jones, Irwin Shaw, Norman Mailer, and Kurt Vonnegut.

Josef Heller was one of the writers with a successful literary heritage, coming forward with unique artistic qualities in each of his novels. “The writer, who set the goal for himself not to be repetitive at the very beginning of his successful career, consistently followed this principle throughout his entire work. This feature of Heller's work indicates his evolution, which can be traced at different levels” (Салимов, 2010: 154). It is no coincidence that the second novel of the prominent writer,

after “Catch-22”, published in 1961 and considered the most famous novel of his time, had a different character in terms of its essence, content and forms of expression.

“Something Happened” as an Important Novel in Heller's Work

J. Heller's novel “Something Happened” (1974) represents an important example of dark humor in American literature, expressing socio-political, socio-psychological problems against the backdrop of the critical occurrences of its time. It is known that in American literary criticism, the concept of “dark humor” was accepted as the theoretical basis of artistic creativity of the late 60s and 70s. J. Heller's novels were one of the main sources referred to by the theorists of “dark humor”.

Since the work was written over a period of more than a decade, the novel was influenced by important political developments in the country and the world, especially the Vietnam War, which lasted from 1955 to 1975. “Joseph Heller spent more than a decade writing the novel, and he was so confident in its success, that he hid manuscripts all over Manhattan so that he could preserve ‘Something Happened’ if his apartment burned down. When he was finally bringing the finished draft to his agent, he had forced his daughter to accompany him on the trip, so that she could deliver the pages in case he had a heart attack or accident” (Petaccio).

It is known that the Vietnam War was a war involving the Eastern Bloc countries - North Vietnam, China and the Soviet Union on one side, and the USA and the anti-communist South Vietnam, which supported the USA on the other side, with USA being an important party to this war in 1963-1973. The war, in which about 60 thousand soldiers died, resulted in contradicting public opinion in society. Therefore, after the war, a pessimistic and anti-American mood prevailed in the country, as like in most wars, the Vietnam War was accompanied by the killing of civilians and the use of chemical weapons. The aforementioned aspects also determined the general picture of J. Heller's novel “Something Happened”, and it is no coincidence that K. Vonnegut characterized the book as “terrible pessimism” (Vonnegut, 1984: 95): “Something Happened” is actually so amazingly pessimistic that it can be called a courageous experiment. In literature, depictions of utter despair have hitherto been accepted only in small doses, in the form of short stories, as in Franz Kafka's “The Metamorphosis”, Shirley Jackson's “The Lottery”, or John D. MacDonald's “Night Watch.”

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As far as I know, J. Heller is the first major American writer to deal with insurmountable misery throughout a novel" (Vonnegut).

The writer also interestingly expressed the difference between J. Heller's second novel and the first novel: "The company that made a film out of Joseph Heller's first novel, *Catch-22*, had to assemble the 11th or 12th largest bomber force on the planet at that time. If someone wanted to make a film out of his second novel, "Something Happened" however, they could buy most of their props from Bloomingdale's - a few beds, a few tables, a few desks and chairs. In this second book, life is completely smaller and cheaper. It's shrunk to the size of a grave, almost" (Vonnegut).

The eminent writer also draws attention to the similarities, mentioning that both books are full of great jokes, but neither is funny. Taken together, they tell a tale of the pain and frustrations experienced by well-intentioned middle-class people (Vonnegut).

J. Heller, in a broad sense, mocks the "misfortune" of the reality he is dissatisfied with, which he also voiced from the tongue of his hero in the novel: "Misfortune is a much-reproached social disease, there is no justification or pardon for it" (Heller, 1997: 482). The researcher A.N. Salimov logically analyzes the mentioned character of the novel: "In "Something Happened", the present is condemned, but there is no hope for the future, no renewal or rebirth (Bob Slocum bows to the system). The hopeless pessimism of the novel, noted by critics, stems from this" (Салимов, 2010: 56). "... Here, misfortune was a story. Here there was a narrator whose only definite quality was apparent honesty: he knew nothing for sure. He, and, it seems, his creator, did not care whether we liked him or not. He told his story in long, unbroken paragraphs, amazed the reader with their repetition, going into parentheses throughout the page, but always returning to his favorite subject: himself" (Self).

The chapter titles of the novel also confirm the aforementioned aspects: "I get the willies", "My wife is unhappy", "My daughter's unhappy", "My little boy is having difficulties", "It's not true", "There's no getting away from it", "My boy has stopped talking to me", etc.

The prominent writer J. Aldridge evaluated the work as "psychological realism" (Олдридж, 1975: 267-268). "In the process of creating such a character, the author uses methods characteristic of realistic psychological prose" (Салимов, 2010: 51). Researcher A. Mulyarchik, while discussing

the novel, described the reality experienced by the hero Slocum as “the rise of political violence, a wave of racial and youth movements, and a “sexual revolution” (Мулярчик, 1978: 10).

We noted that the novel was written in a tense historical period. However, the artistic reflection of the contemporary political and social reality in the work manifests itself differently. Thus, although the novel has a known historical context, it does not specifically mention the Vietnam War. Although the names of F.D. Roosevelt, R. Nixon, the Kennedy brothers, M.L. King and other political figures are mentioned in the work, the political events related to them are not described. Even though the hero of the novel, Bob Slocum, recalls his service in the army during World War II, the war is not mentioned in the artistic example. J. Heller, with his dark humor and ironic style, wants to highlight the changes caused by the historical stage and the damage it causes to the moral and psychological layer of society.

The title of the novel is taken from a small phrase in the speech of the hero's moral and psychological state. “In the novel, there is a clear discrepancy between the hero's behavior and his feelings. The hero's own attempt to analyze this contradiction is manifested in the phrase “something happened”, which he many times repeats, expressing his amazement both at his behavior and at the unpleasant changes taking place in public consciousness” (Салимов, 2010: 53). L.Y. Ginzburg also supported this idea (Гинзбург, 1976: 286).

Main features of the novel

The novel describes a typical representative of a group of people with whom the writer was a contemporary on an artistic level. Researcher T. Rotenberg notes that despite the similarity of J. Heller's worldview with the worldview depicted in the works of absurdist writers, the work differs significantly from them, the writer clearly draws a line between farce and tragedy, creating a complex and convincing image of his contemporary (Ротенберг, 1975: 63).

J. Heller himself characterized the work and especially its hero as follows: “While writing the book, I told several people that Slocum was perhaps the most vile character in literature, and even before I finished it, I began to feel sorry for him. Many of the friends to whom I showed the book not only felt compassion for him, but also found in him a strong personality” (Self).

The novel attracts attention with its satirical and ironic style. "In the novel "Something Happened" ... there is undoubtedly a satire realized in irony, which Bob Slocum express with his ironic, and "poisonous" language. Here, irony is the American reality of the 70s, presented through the prism of the hero's inner experiences with all its urgent problems - social, political and general ideological problems" (Салимов, 2010: 56). Grotesque occupies an important place in the poetics of the work. "Grotesque is the expression of the world in a dark and terrible, frightening tone" (Бахтин, 1990: 56). According to М.М. Bakhtin, contemporary modernist grotesque is connected with the traditions of romanticism and develops under the influence of existentialism.

The plot and events of the novel do not develop in a certain line, the narrator continues to switch between the past and the present, focusing on different objects. In a sense, Bob Slocum is the only character in the book, although he talks about others - his family and colleagues, past and present. He, like many, spends all his time either at work or at home. His thoughts are self-critical, terrible, funny and true.

In the novel, the "fear of losing everything" (Canaday: 1984: 102) is at the forefront as the main moral-psychological point. The principle of fear, which is mostly reflected in the thoughts and behaviors of the hero, is also expressed in family, love and work relationships, emerging as an example of the grotesque. The internal and external inconsistencies of the characters also stem from the characteristics of the grotesque.

The novel's protagonist, Robert Slocum, a forty-five-year-old Manhattan firm employee with a "restless and rough nature" (Мулярчик, 1978: 5-7), is a typical representative of the "middle class." "If Catch-22" appeared years before Americans were ready to read it, "Something Happened" was decades ahead of its time, and its comically bleak view of upper-middle-class life had already been forgotten by the time it became a major work of fiction" (Petaccio).

Robert Slocum lives in a wealthy mansion in Connecticut with his family - his wife, daughter and two sons, one of whom is disabled. However, the hero's material well-being creates a contradiction in his inner world: "We have a magnificent wooden mansion, white colonial shutters ... and I hate this mansion" (Heller, 1997: 317). The writer curses the rich American way: "We live in a first-class neighborhood in New York City, damn it ..." (Heller, 1997: 317). Fear is also at the forefront in family relationships: "I am afraid of four people in my family. Three of these four are afraid of

me, and each of these three is afraid of the other two. Only one in my family is not afraid of anyone, and the other is weak” (Heller, 1997: 317).

But the fear of loss, especially the fear of losing his son, follows him throughout his life and prevents him from being happy: “The fear that something will happen to him haunts me constantly” (Heller, 1997: 305). The hero’s story begins with a description of the fear he has experienced behind a closed door since childhood: “Perhaps something terrible is happening behind this, something that will make me feel bad” (Heller, 1997: 5). Researcher James M. Mellard explains the hero’s spiritual turmoil, that is, the most attractive aspect of his inner life, as his psychological immaturity (Mellard, 1984: 112).

The novel consists of nine chapters and its first sentence contains the words “when I see closed doors, I think of it.” This is the first confession of the hero and narrator Bob Slocum’s fear. He is afraid of closed doors, of those happening behind closed doors, of his wife, children, neighbors, coworkers, the government, the army, the Pentagon, the police, of being demoted, of divorce, of being abandoned. Bob Slocum does not know the reason for his fears and simply expresses them with the words “maybe, something happened to me before” (Heller, 1997: 15). The hero’s transformations are reflected in his internal monologue.

Slocum's character is also interesting in terms of its contradictions. Such aspects as mercy and cruelty, hatred and remorse, arrogance and self-absorption find their artistic expression at the same time, giving rise to comparison and contrast. These features are also the main indicators of the hero's incomplete character. The writer confirms this with the language of the character: “I am not one of those people who live easily” (Heller, 1997: 457). The hero answers the question of who I am: “... there is a discord, a conflict inside me, as if some blunt tools made of bone, stone, glass, rusty iron cut, saw, dig, destroy themselves...” (Heller, 1997: 458).

Bob Slocum is a successful, mid-level executive at a corporate advertising firm in 1960s Manhattan. However, the name of his employer is not disclosed, nor are its products or services described. He is also a war veteran. Bob has a family of “lies,” “alcohol,” and “sex,” but this life does not make him happy. The third chapter, “My Wife Is Unhappy,” shows that Bob’s wife spends all day walking the children, drinking wine, and often drinking whiskey when she comes home in the evening. She flirts with other men at parties. What happens surprises Slocum, who then goes

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on to reminisce about all the "fun" they had in the early days of their relationship (Heller, 1997: 201).

Slocum hates his daily job but cannot bring himself to leave it. "His hyper-awareness of his own and his family's misery paralyzes his ability to resolve it" (Petaccio).

Bob Slocum is a character defined by impotent rage and idiopathic resentment. He hates his family, his coworkers. He hates his neighbors, their horses, and the municipal laws that allow neighbors to own horses. He never expresses his hatred outwardly. He wallows in emptiness in search of the reasons for his hatred. He thinks for a long time about nothing, predicts terrible things will happen, experiences their fear, and terrible things do happen.

He mourns his lost youth, his fading love for his wife, his son's difficulties at school, and his daughter's unhappiness. He says of his wife: "I want to be free from her before her health deteriorates. I see a divorced wife in the future" (Heller, 1997: 198). When his daughter tells him she is unhappy, he says: "I told her I am not happy either and no one has the right to expect that" (Heller, 1997: 250).

Slocum is a modern man, but he lives with the disappointments of the world. He also misses the happiness he lost in the context of his daughter: "There was a cheerful little girl in my house, sitting in a high chair, eating and drinking with full appetite, laughing a lot with spontaneous enthusiasm; she is not here now; and there is no sign of her anywhere" (Heller, 1997: 232).

However, Slocum's pessimism, expressed through humor and irony, brings a different quality to the novel. The whole book is a deeply sad, deeply amusing observation, born from the artistic reflection of the fact that the hero is being forced to be unhappy not because of the flaws in his character, but because of the facts of his life, giving rise to satire. The novel is a monologue of the hero's thoughts about his workplace, his memory, and his home.

Robert Slocum is a smartly dressed, witty middle manager. He is restless. He grieves for the missed opportunities of his youth. Although he despises his company and the work he does, he strives for a salary increase and promotion. The hero periodically commits unpleasant betrayals at sales conferences in resort areas, during long lunch hours, or when he pretends to be overworked in the office. He is afraid of getting old.

As noted, J. Heller's novel is built based on Bob Slocum's monologue, and researcher M.M. Bakhtin rightly characterized the writer's style as an “internal monologue” (Бахтин, 1979: 87).

Bob Slocum's satirical portrayal is presented through his contradictory character. He is also cruel to the family he protects and loves, pushing his wife away, squeezing his daughter's arm, and covering his disabled son's mouth with his hand to “smother the incomprehensible sounds and cover up the meaningless chatter” (Heller, 1997: 349).

Slocum witnesses his eldest son being hit by a car, causing his son, who was slightly injured and would not die from the accident, to be strangled when he embraces him, seemingly showing mercy. The hero's actions, expressing his excitement and fear with the words “don't tell my wife”, create the impression of a dark comedy rather than a shocking tragedy. Against the background of the hero's paradoxical behavior, between comedy and tragedy, the readers laugh while they would normally cry. K. Vonnegut rightly wrote: “Mr. Heller is a first-rate humorist who deliberately cripples his jokes with the misfortune of the characters. He also insists on dealing only with the most annoying topics” (Vonnegut).

Or, in order to send his mother to a nursing home, he falsely describes it to her and others as a magnificent establishment, a new, comfortable, almost ultra-modern hotel (Heller, 1997: 231). “Another technique of psychological prose is that one of the hero’s inner voices finds confirmation in the external world. The voice that justifies his unseemly actions is more likely to merge with the voice of society, with the prevailing public consciousness. The voice that opposes him is the voice of the hero’s conscience and repeatedly coincides with the voice of his mother, wife, and young son, whom the hero rejects as enemies and whose purpose is to humiliate and insult him” (Салимов, 2010: 52).

Bob Slocum's fear stems from his spiritual emptiness and arrogance. The highest level of this fear is related to his fear of death. For example, he does not go to the hospital when his friends are sick, lest he receive the news of their death and then be forced to attend the funeral. All this serves the purpose of not interfering with his comfort, his ego: “I do not allow myself to be involved in such human misery, I refuse to admit it, I push it into the subconscious and close the lid with all my might” (Heller, 1997: 349).

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Bob Slocum expresses his success in life through the game of golf, in this way the writer tries to show ironically the conditions of a "successful career" : "When old age envelops me in impenetrable darkness, dries me up, turns me into something small, insignificant, I will still remember: "I sent the ball into the hole with one stroke," I will be able to repeat this to everyone and everyone endlessly" (Heller, 1997: 347).

The novel reflects the protagonist's conflict with both his family and his social environment. "Despite the scale of the prevailing entropy caused by external events, the society with which Bob Slocum interacts still has a certain ideology. Throughout almost the entire novel, Bob Slocum's inner voice conducts his endless dialogue; Bob Slocum finally comes to terms with it, losing his individuality" (Салимов, 2010: 54).

Bob Slocum, without any regrets, takes over his friend Chagla's position and removes him from the service. He solves all his family problems by forcing himself to tell his wife that he loves her, giving his daughter a car, letting his wife look for a new house for them, and finding a suitable nanny for his son while he is at home. He starts playing more golf and getting invited to dinner at the homes of people of higher status than him.

J. Heller mocks many issues of socio-political and social life through the character of Bob Slocum: "We all lie a lot. We call it being competent" (Heller, 1997: 330).

J. Heller expresses fear in the style and manner of "dark humor". The writer expresses the manifestation of fear in society with mathematical precision: "Each of these five people is afraid of four. There are twenty in total, and each of these twenty is afraid of six, there are one hundred and twenty in total, at least one of them is afraid. Each of these one hundred and twenty is afraid of the other, one hundred and nineteen, and each of these one hundred and forty-five is afraid of the twelve who founded and created the Firm, and now own and manage it" (Heller, 1997: 11).

The family in the novel, in fact, represents a society that the writer thinks is experiencing a moral crisis, where more love is needed. J. Heller assigns the mission of expressing it to the disabled son of the family and wants to draw attention to the disabled society's need for love: "He awakens in each of us the great need and ability for love hidden within us, like a wound of emptiness, forcing us to remember who we are, perhaps the ability to love each other and thus bring us closer together again, stopping us in time, not allowing us to completely disable each other, if we have not yet do

so. With resentment and joy, stubbornly, rudely and irreparably, we disable each other” (Heller, 1997: 145).

The novel reveals that Robert Slocum served in the Air Force in Italy during World War II. By remembering this, he demonstrates his bravery to immoral women. The hero represents the middle-class veterans returning home from war, their family and work worlds, and their futile attempts to find happiness. The writer created the morally repulsive and socially useless hero as a metaphor for the moral void in society. Slocum was an old soldier who had suffered the emotional devastation of civilian life. The novel expresses this aspect as follows: “Something happened to the men of Slocum’s generation when the war ended, and they faced a lifetime of restlessness; something happened to everyone” (Heller, 1997: 403).

The novel is written with a unique language and style in the protagonist's narration: “Slocum's sentences are so identical in form and texture from beginning to end that I imagined a man making a giant sculpture out of sheet metal. He was shaping it with millions of identical taps of a ball-peen hammer” (Vonnegut).

Conclusion

In conclusion, J. Heller's novel “Something Happened” is an original work in terms of its structural and formal aspects, narrative style, approach to the problems it poses, and the simple manifestation of various themes on the same plane. Using the literary techniques of dark humor, satire, and irony, the writer has created a very thought-provoking and relevant work.

In the novel “Something Happened”, J. Heller defended the idea that human life is determined by things we cannot face. Although the aforementioned thoughts were expressed in Hemingway's short stories in earlier stages, J. Heller expressed this idea differently and more vividly. The work's indifferent view of the absurdity of war and the existential crises it causes in society was also a form of expression of black humor.

“Something Happened” was a darkly humorous account of the powerlessness of people in the post-war period, in the midst of the tragedies and misfortunes of the writer's time. The novel is “a perfect example of transforming the story of the soul into a complex but useful story” ([Millard](#)).

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The writer waits for the lost hope throughout the work, the hope expressed in extremely ironic lines: "I finally know what I want to be when I grow up. When I grow up, I want to be a little boy" (Heller, 1997: 498). The turning point occurs in the last chapter of the novel. The hero is completed, and with this dialogism gives way to monologism. The novel owes its deep psychology to its dominant dialogic part, where the deceitful hero arouses sympathy and even love. "The hero's reasoning sounds like a denunciation of public morality, in which humanity, love for each other, kindness are completely absent" (Heller, 1997: 55).

The novel "Something Happened" is distinguished by its modernist pessimism, but also reminds of the realist classics with its deep psychologism and criticism of reality. J. Heller critically exposes the internal and external contradictions of the generation of the seventies in the traditions of the realist school.

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