The American Dream Deconstructed: A Study of Hopelessness in Joseph Heller's Something Happened

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تفكيك الحلم الأمريكي: دراسة لليأس في رواية "حدث شيء" لجوزيف هيلر

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المستخلص

تتناول هذه الورقة رواية "شيئ ما قد حدث " للكاتب جوزيف هيلر(1974) من خلال تفكيك الصورة التقليدية للحلم الأمريكي، كاشفةً عن ارتباطه العميق بعدم الرضا الشخصي والشعور باليأس. ومن خلال عدسة نظرية "الاختلاف المؤجل" للفيلسوف جاك دريدا، تُقدَّم شخصية بوب سلوكوم باعتباره رجلًا عالقًا في نظام تتأجل فيه السعادة, والنجاح. تدور أحداث الرواية في سياق أمريكا ما بعد الحرب العالمية الثانية، في قلب مجتمع الشركات، حيث يبدو سلوكوم كأنه يحقق ما يُعتبر إنجازًا اجتماعيًا: وظيفة مستقرة، وأسرة، وحياة مهنية ناجحة. ومع ذلك، يظل غارقًا في القلق والشعور بالذنب . تفضح الرواية زيف الوعود التي يقدمها النظام الرأسمالي الحديث والحلم الأمريكي، مقدّمًا إياهما كأوهام تؤدي في النهاية إلى عزلة عاطفية ويأس وجودي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الحلم الأمريكي، التفكيك، الشركات الأمريكية، اليأس.

Abstract

This paper explores how Joseph Heller's Something Happened (1974) deconstructs the traditional notion of the American Dream, revealing its deep connection to personal dissatisfaction and hopelessness. Through the lens of Jacques Derrida's theory of différance, the novel's protagonist, Bob Slocum, is examined as a man caught in a system where meaning is perpetually deferred—success, happiness, and identity are pursued yet never fully realized. Set against the backdrop of corporate America in the post-World War II era, Slocum appears to embody societal ideals—stability, a career, and a family—yet he remains plagued by anxiety, guilt, and alienation. By exposing the disintegration of meaning within his personal and professional life, the paper argues that Heller uses Slocum's narrative to critique the hollow promises of modern capitalism and the American Dream, positioning them as constructs that ultimately lead to emotional isolation and existential despair.

Keywords: *American Dream, Deconstruction, Corporate America, Hopelessness.*

1. Introduction

1.1 Joseph Heller's life and works

Joseph Heller (1923–1999) was a novelist, short story writer, and essayist who won several honors for his work. He was born in Brooklyn to immigrant Jewish parents. He was noted for his humorous writing and poignant books, as well as his satirical writings that often criticized American culture. Isaac, his father, escaped the Russian Revolution as a socialist from the Czar. On his journey to America, he was joined by his wife and son, Lee. His dad drove delivery trucks for the bakery in Messenger. His new life in America was not an easy one. Soon after the birth of his daughter Sylvia, his first wife died, and three years later, he married Lena, who had recently emigrated from Russia and knew little English. They lived in a poor neighbourhood of European Jewish immigrants in Coney Island, New York (Seed, 1998, p.7).

Heller was born when his parents were 38 years old. This youngest son took his father's image as an active socialist. He later on conveyed it in his critical view of society, and it became an integral part of his aesthetic. Tragically, Heller's father passed away at the tender age of five due to an unsuccessful procedure. Instead of being a solemn time for grief, the funeral lunch that followed seemed more like a celebration. A close friend of Heller's, journalist and historian Barbara Gelb said: "Young Heller was unaware of the event's effects, which left a psychological scar that permeated his whole character" (Gelb, 1979, p. 15).

The Great Depression[1] and his father's death had the most permeate effect in shaping Heller's values and concerns. "His father gave him death disguised as a party. Probably because the delayed shock of discovery intensified its impact. Death has become nearly an obsession in Heller's art and life" (Gelb, 1979, P. 4). He worked as an apprentice blacksmith at the Norfolk Navy Yard when the United States entered World War II. The pivotal life event for Heller would be World War II. His time in the military and, later, his formal education were both enhanced by the war's conflict. As the war dragged on in 1942, Heller enlisted in the Army and served as a file clerk. Subsequently, he transferred to the Air Force, which provided him with lucrative salaries, stability, and glitz. In an instant, he saw himself playing daring characters in a film (Seed, 1989, p. 8).

Heller intended to be a gunner on a bomber, so he enrolled in Cadet School to become an officer and bombardier. In May 1944, he found himself stationed on Corsica, an Island off the coast of Italy, ready to begin flying combat missions (Merrill, 1987, p. 64). The travel, education, and money that the Army offered all added to the war's glamour for Heller until his 37th mission over Avignon when the wounding of a crewmember in his plane made him realize, all of a sudden, that he could be killed. At this new point in his life, death swept over him, and it washed all glamour from the war, leaving fear in its place. After leaving the Army, Heller married Shirly of Brooklyn on October 2, 1945, and enrolled in the University of Southern California in Los Angeles for a year. Here, he wrote a humorous short story, "Bookies Beware," which was later published in Esquire in May 1947. Then he writes, "I Don't Love You Anymore." This short story centres on a soldier returning home to discover that his

feelings towards his wife have evolved. He wants to leave her, yet unable to. The protagonist bears a resemblance to Slocum in *Something Happened.* In 1948, Heller graduated with a B.A. degree in English Literature and was considered one of America's most promising young writers. He continued to write short stories, but he grew dissatisfied with them. He wanted to write something very good, but he felt he had nothing worthwhile to write. So he "formally gave up writing those trivial stories" and "began looking for a novel that [he] could consider important" (Claire, 1989, p. 68).

The subsequent novel is *Something Happened* (1974). It is intentionally a relentlessly bleak narrative. It is dense and excessively lengthy, at times sadistically so, providing minimal resolution or plot development. "If the novel's worldview were color, the human eye would likely fail to perceive its darkness" (Claire,1989, P. 77). However, what is unexpected is that through this very bleakness, *Something Happened* emerges as one of the most profoundly moving American novels ever composed (Claire,1989, P.45).

Heller was admitted to the hospital after being diagnosed with Guillain-Barré syndrome[2] on Sunday, December 13, 1981. He remained there until his condition improved enough to be discharged. Despite the debilitating nature of his disease, Heller avoids wallowing in self-pity in his work. In 1983, he filed for divorce from his 35-year-old wife, Shirley, and married Valerie Humphries, the nurse who had helped him recover from his injuries. Heller passed away from a heart attack at his East Hampton home in December 1999, shortly after finishing his last book, *Portrait an Artist, as an Old Man*. Upon hearing the news,

his friend Kurt Vonnegut exclaimed, “Oh God, how terrible. This is a calamity for American Literature” (Vonnegut,1952, p. 3).

1.2 The American Dream: Historical Roots

Sensible people agree that economics is the most important factor in human evolution. However, Americans go further. A very clear correlation has been established throughout history between the country’s institutions and ideals and its economic structure. For many Americans, capitalism and democracy have evolved together as a transcendent concept throughout the country’s history. They believe that the “American Way of Life,” which is based on free capitalism, is embodied in their business practices (Buder,2009, p. 2)

Identifying significant parts of the larger story is essential to understanding the main topics of American business history. Americans have used natural resources, bought and sold goods and services, developed and exploited technologies, and worked through government to shape their economy and society. This has shown both continuity and change. Americans want to believe that hard work and smarts will lead to good things. This national vision motivates people to take action and embrace innovations that promise to improve the economy. However, it is not necessary to endorse or even accept these values as reflecting reality in order to acknowledge their pervasive influence (Buder, 2009, p. 3).

Everyone, regardless of their background, has the potential to achieve greatness through hard work and the development of their inherent talents; this is the fundamental belief upon which the American Dream rests. An earlier version of the American Dream envisioned a nation where all men may enjoy a higher

quality of life. In his book *The Epic of America*, historian James Truslow Adams (1878-1949) first used the phrase "The American Dream" to describe a nation where people should have better, richer, and fuller lives, with opportunities for each person based on their ability or accomplishment. The European upper class has a challenging dream (Adams, 1931, p. 12).

Long before the United States itself existed, in the 1600s, when people first began crossing the Atlantic in search of a better life on a new and largely uncharted continent, the concept of the American Dream began to take shape. Across the ocean, on the other side of the water, lived a vibrant and restless people known as Europeans. In the past, they often engaged in intragroup conflicts in pursuit of economic and political power. A wide range of theological doctrines was represented. There was an apparent and unexplained acceleration in the pace of their lives in the sixteenth century, and their vitality was palpable. The battles were becoming increasingly intense, and commerce, religion, and nationalism were the primary factors (Adams, 1931, p. 25).

There was a significant increase in demand for raw cotton during the 1830s and 1840s as the United States underwent rapid industrialization following the Industrial Revolution, which led to the widespread adoption of textile manufacturing techniques. Additionally, the space available for growing cotton was increased by the opening of new territories in the West after 1812. The cultivation of cotton grew swiftly across the country. The Americans, meantime, were content with their political, cultural, and economic successes. An ideological movement known as Transcendentalism emerged in response to industrialization and urbanization, which at the time prompted many Americans to

abandon their farms, homes, and other cherished possessions in favour of the glamour and opportunities offered by America's expanding urban centres (Fenton, 1969, p. 44).

2. *Something Happened* (1974)

2.1Corporate America in *Something Happened*

The moral emptiness of American culture is laid bare in *Something Happened* (1974). Heller employs the normal middle-class family and the ruthless business world of corporate America as important motifs in this work (Kirk, 1994, P. 5). Heller makes sense of the business world via clichés: top-level executives suffering from burnout, the useless secretary whom no one wants to dismiss, sexual misbehavior and office party flirting during company conventions, and, of course, golf tournaments. The more departments compete with one another, and the more people slack off against one another in pursuit of promotions, the more fear and mistrust there is. Heller portrays the social intrigues and hierarchical relationships among the workers of an unnamed company through the eyes of his narrator, Bob Slocum (Fenton, 1994, p. 3).

In such a high-pressure atmosphere, suicides are an anticipated health hazard, and nervous breakdowns are the norm. Bob Slocum talks about these reports: "We average three suicides a year: two men, usually on the middle-executive level, kill themselves every twelve months, almost always by gunshot, and one girl, usually unmarried, separated, or divorced, who generally does the job with sleeping pills." (*Something Happened,* 78)[3].

Heller presents Slocum, the Willy Loman of the 1970s[4], yet "Slocum is no longer low, as Willy Loman was always to be; he

arrived, made it, and became one of the managers of corporate America" (Canaday,1982, p. 1). For Willy, American society was on the way to becoming the corporate state: "acquisitive, ruthless, and cruel, but impersonal and framed within an order with rules seemingly apparent to all" (Canaday,1982,p.2). But Slocum's world is a freaky and distorted version of what America has become recently. Most damning of all, America is no longer even functional: "The world just doesn't work. It's an idea whose time has gone" (*SH* 506).

Slocum has a lot of anxieties. His fears include the following: death, the government, locked doors, his family, his neighbors, his coworkers, and the three-minute speech he must deliver at his company's retreat in Puerto Rico. Since he is never able to pinpoint the exact source of his fears, the book serves as an internal monologue chronicling his ultimately fruitless pursuit of certainty (Petaccio, 1976, p. 7). To Slocum, the dream of material success, once achieved, is not a nightmare; it is just not satisfying. So, he is desperately determined to hold on to what he has accomplished. The last line of the novel announces confidently: "Everyone seems pleased with the way I've taken command" (*SH* 576). Whatever striving or risk-taking, whatever sense of adventure may have once been part of Slocum's life, something has changed it (Canaday 1982, p. 103).

Slocum confesses that he hates to spend time with his family; this rising executive reinvents his game of golf to participate in an activity traditionally favoured by the American power elite. He does not even like the sport. He does not always like the people with whom he associates during and after his rounds. However, through connections in the locker rooms and lounges of the American Country Club, Slocum can increase his chances of

forming lucrative friendships and securing higher-paying positions (Epstein, 1987, p. 7).

He asks his wife one Sunday morning as she tries to convince him that he should invest more in his relationship with God and not so exclusively in his business contacts on the golf course: "Would you rather be poor and go to heaven, or rich and go to hell?" (*SH* 97). He adds, "Money really talks." (*SH* 77). "Money makes the world go round… and money makes history too" (*SH* 103). He always says that when he lures his wife into dreams of expensive houses in affluent neighborhoods. He persists, openly confessing that he has been sucked into "the quest for gold and riches" (*SH* 201), as his daughter puts it, that has stimulated men more than food, sex, or any other force in history. "Because money… is everything" (*SH* 439). Slocum's success thus turns into failure. His pursuit of it brings not happiness but conformity, loss of identity, insanity, and death. He tries to be a part of his surroundings; he feels it is too late to save his identity.

2.2 Slocom's Family and Inner Life

Home life provides no more satisfaction than the corporate realm. The typical American middle-class family, embodied by the Slocums, is in decline. He ironically observes, "We are a two-car U.S Census Bureau… prepare statistics that include us in the categories of human beings enjoying the richest life" (*SH* 356). He presents such chapters as "My wife is unhappy", "My daughter's unhappy, and "My little boy is having difficulties" However, he negates the static conclusion (*SH* 345). Among the ills of a modern family that Heller diagnoses are marital infidelity, alcoholism, teenage resentment of parents, and

children's lack of self-esteem or inability to compete in a brutal world (Kirk,1994, p. 12). As much as he despises his corporate world, yet he creates a similar atmosphere within his family:

> In the family in which I live, there are four people of whom I'm afraid. Three of these four people are afraid of me, and each of these three is afraid of the other two. Only one member of the family is not afraid of any of the others, and that one is ideal" (*SH* 333).

Slocum marginalizes his family; he considers them a part of the corporate world, and his family members must adhere to all the rules that he blindly follows. That's why if Slocum is experiencing a breakdown, his family cannot offer him any support. Frederick Karl argues: "His family does not support him not because he reifies his children and wife, but because he engrosses them into himself." (Keer,1999,p. 28). They become alternative possible versions of Slocum.

Mistrust and doubt often prevail within each family member, making authentic communication between family members impossible. No one feels loved, even on rare occasions when they seem on the verge of sharing their feelings, someone's defences intervene, and the possibility of communication and trust evaporates. This situation also recreates the same insecurity that rules the hierarchy at work, in that no one knows quite where they stand with him: "No one must feel secure. Everyone must be kept in suspense about new decisions that might emerge from meetings behind closed doors in which I am now a participant" (*SH* 515).

Consequently, Slocum perpetually feels discontent. The more he tries to reconcile with his inner self by stifling the voice of this 'crawling animal', the noisier it becomes, filling Slocum with anger and hostility that he cannot express openly for fear of losing his prestige as an executive. So, he suppresses his anger inside him. This repression results in his enduring unhappiness, despair, and isolation. He begins to have disdain for his inner self. He believes that something 'very bad' is inside him and hopes that he never lives to see the 'real me' come out (*SH* 229). The other member of Slocum's family is Derek, the only one to be named. Derek is born with brain-damaged. He is a significant, yet suppressed, presence throughout the novel. Heller has stated: "The damaged-brain child is a reflection of himself [Slocum], symbolically" (*SH* 44). He virtually confirms this correspondence when he admits that Derek has "an incriminating resemblance to a secret me" (*SH* 391).

Derek is frozen in the mentality of a five-year-old child, suggesting that he is outside of time itself, exempt from the transience that bedevils all other areas of Slocum's experience. When Slocum tries to imagine Derek's future, he sees him as a grotesque form of himself, an image which he consciously composes: "I color his sweaters and jackets dark and his face pale" (*SH* 81). But suppose Derek represents a part of Slocum; in that case, it is a part associated with guilt, an internalized version of guilt, surrounding the issue of whether to eliminate him or not. He used to joke that they could kill him but no longer does so when the joke approaches conscious desire (Seed,1989,p. 117).

Slocum's relationship with his daughter and wife is aggressive. In that case, his relationship with his son follows a completely different pattern. He makes his nine years boy into

the symbol of all he has lost by growing up and entering the world, thus confusing himself as a "little boy" with his son: "hiding inside of me somewhere, I know I feel him inside me. I feel it beyond all doubts; is a timid little boy just like my son" (*SH* 213). His son not only represents innocence but also the uniqueness he feels somehow is lacking in himself, his corporate environment, and his society. His son's behavior exhibits natural goodness and spontaneous generosity that make him stand out from the other children. He gives his money away to any child who asks for it and prefers cooperation to competition; he would rather lose a race so that his opponent won't feel bad, and he cannot understand why everyone cannot win at the same time. As his gym teacher tells Slocum, "he doesn't have a good competitive spirit. He lacks a true will to win" (*SH* 200). As a result, he does not fit in with his peers, who sometimes scorn him when he deliberately loses a relay race, for example. His individuality and his promotion of good relationships among his fellows make him a symbol of the identity Slocum feels he is losing in the competitive work environment.

2.3 Death and Disillusionment

Slocum wants to protect his son from the world because he sees him as a symbol of his lost identity and values, such as kindness, generosity, cooperation, and friendship. Moreover, He sees his son as a representative of perfect spontaneous goodness because he is a child. The only way to preserve such goodness would be to prevent him from growing up because he sees maturing as an inevitable drift into conformity. He wants his son to be isolated from the world. Ironically, his solicitude harms his son more than the world Slocum fears. His recurring fantasy of

his son not living into adulthood suggests that something horrible will happen (Canady, 1977).

In making his son into a symbol, he also imposes on him the static nature of a symbol. Thus, when he does change by becoming more independent, Slocum is shattered, for, in addition to impossible and human goodness, he has projected upon his son the burden of all human relationships he lacks; his relationship with his son seems to him the only one still unspoiled by the pressures of the external world. His boy, thus being the only lifeline to the community, sees in his son's new independence the threat of his utter isolation (Canady, 1977, p. 25).

Last, by making his son into a symbol, he dehumanizes him, placing upon him the impossible burden of compensating for his unhappiness. He forgets he is just a little boy. He makes him into a kind of absolute rather than a human being: Slocum notes, "I pledge my Allegiance to him." (*SH* 284), and "I believe he pulls us together as a family and keeps us together" (*SH* 152), of course, the only way his son could uphold the static perfection, Slocum projects, would be to freeze, motionless, in time like Slocum's around the Thanksgiving table (Delfattore,1984,p. 4).

Death, then, is the logical outcome of Slocum's vision of his son. He represents the goodness and individual uniqueness that he feels can only be preserved by not growing up; i.e., the unhappy conformity that "happened" to Slocum is inevitable. His son exemplifies the human values and identity that Slocum must destroy to succeed as a businessman. Slocum has the unknown feeling that he is going to lose his son:

> Daddy, I love you! The boy exclaims with excitement,
> and throws his face against my hip to kiss me and hug

me. "I hope you never die."
(I hope so too) I crook my arm around his shoulders and
hug him in return. Very swiftly, before he can be embarrassed
by it and stop me. I kiss the top of his head, rush my lips
against his silken, light- brown hair. (I steal a kiss) I love
him, too and hope that he never dies (*SH* 296).

In many ways, Slocum's relationship with his son is the heart of the novel. This relationship ultimately leads to his son's death, the novel's climax, which occurs almost simultaneously with Slocum's promotion to executive. Slocum smothers his son to death after he is hit (but not seriously injured) by a car that jumped, which crab-represents Slocum's final smothering of his individuality as he ascends the corporate hierarchy. On the literal, narrative level of the novel's action, of course, Slocum did not intend to kill his son. When he sees his son lying cut and bleeding from the accident and screaming in pain, he assumes that he is about to die and hugs him tightly to end his suffering sooner, unaware that the injuries are only minor.

In the novel, the reader recognizes that Slocum effectively balances his conflicting needs between material and spiritual desires. He chooses a controlling idea that reduces everything human to a prescribed order or procedure. That explains the list he makes to put his affairs "in order." He reduces human needs to the materialistic formula: it includes buying a new house "to fill his wife's empty hours" and a new car to boost his daughter's self-esteem" (*SH* 527). He becomes "sane" by conforming totally to his executive role. But by allowing himself to be absorbed by a system that subordinates human reality to its rigid patterns, Slocum commits spiritual suicide, giving up that part of himself

that makes the difference between 'man' and 'matter.' Indeed, he is a successful businessman, yet he feels that he is a failure inside. Ultimately, he is completely part of the corporate bureaucracy. By smoothly eliminating someone who 'fits in,' he symbolically eliminates the last reflection of his inner resistance.

In the end, Bob Slocum finally copes with his world efficiently, technically, and managerially. Perhaps his typical dream, which he describes as involving "bitter frustration, humiliation, and insurmountable difficulty" (*SH* 31), does recur. Still, at least consciously, he believes that the world he confronts is all of reality. In this fictional portrait of the Watergate mind, Bob Slocum believes the world is controlled by the smart and the tough. Desperately motivated by a fear of discovery and change, dreading everything unknown but imagined. Some possible assault by a possible antagonist, Slocum, at last, believes himself to be no longer vulnerable. He has taken commands (Canaday, 1982,p. 5).

3. Conclusion

The overarching theme of the last several centuries in America has been commerce. Labour is an essential and natural part of human existence. Their professional pursuits often define an individual's identity. Businesses and businessmen have been portrayed with hostility and contempt in numerous works related to business. Others, on the other hand, have honored them. The idea that a picture reflects reality is not the only way the American businessman is portrayed today. In addition to highlighting the opportunities and vibrancy present in the business environment, this paper explores the conflict between personal values and corporate expectations. The study presents a

biased view, as it focuses on the inadequacies and defects of companies and entrepreneurs. This study examines Joseph Heller's Something Happened (1974) and explores the challenges faced by managers and executives in the business sector. It concludes how the American Dream failed, and the American businessman is lonely, unhappy, and tormented by recurring, hazy fears. As he conforms to the corporate culture, he loses his individuality.

Notes

[1] From 1929 to 1939, the world's economy was hit hard by the Great Depression. Throughout the globe, people were out of work and living in poverty, and banks were going bankrupt. U.S. industrial output, foreign commerce, and financial stability all declined significantly after the 1929 stock market crash, which triggered the crisis.

[2] Extreme paralysis, numbness, and weakness may result from the immune system's erroneous assault on the peripheral nerve system in the uncommon neurological illness known as Guillain-Barré syndrome (GBS). Although this disorder may strike anybody at any time, it disproportionately affects men and adults. Although serious instances are very uncommon and may be fatal, the majority of patients make a complete recovery, albeit it may take a few weeks or even years.

[3] *Something Happened* (1974) will be abbreviated to *SH.*

[4] Willy Loman, the tragic hero of Arthur Miller's "Death of a Salesman," represents the American Dream in all its broken glory. An older salesperson whose ego gets in the way of his business believes that charm and popularity are more important than actual skill in achieving success. The downfall of Willy in

the 1940s is a potent allegory for the disappointment with the American Dream.

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