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1) Introduction

In 1984, Joseph Heller published his fourth novel, *God Knows* (hereafter *GK*), in which King David narrates his brilliant career from the point of view of a senile man. Because of the biblical material, it is natural that many critics emphasize its relation to the Bible. Yet, if “the ‘best lines’ in *God Knows* are still to be found in Chronicles, in Judges, and most of all, in I and II Samuel” (Pinsker 127), Heller’s David is quite different from the biblical David. What is more, in an interview with Ramona Koval in 1998, Heller clearly objects to having his relation to Judaism readily probed and suggests that the book should be read in view of contemporary life and ways of living: “King David is Jewish and the Old Testament is a [Jewish text], but I was not that interested in the Jewish religion, and there’s not much religion in ‘God Knows’ [sic], it’s a very modern, contemporary morality” (no page).

In this essay, therefore, I would like to analyze how Heller uses the biblical King David to depict contemporary life, first by tracing his view of the world in the surface structure of the novel, and then by searching for new developments in the deeper structure of *GK*. I would then like to assess *GK* from a postmodern perspective and compare its ideas with those of some postmodern philosophers.

2) Binary Opposition between Humanity and Inhumanity in the Surface Structure

In his first novel, *Catch-22*, Heller coined a new phrase, “catch-22”, to indicate an impossible predicament. Today, his neologism has become a common and widely used noun not only because *Catch-22* has become a well-known classic novel but also because people in contemporary society have faced unreasonable predicaments so often that Heller’s social criticism has hit home for us.

King David in *GK* is also afflicted by a catch-22 – a typical contemporary problem for Heller. What he suffers from are all kinds of miseries in his old age. Robert Merrill explains that Heller’s David is a familiar figure, being “less perfect ... far less pious” (115) and “far more human” (115) than the biblical David and that because of his humanity, “David lost everything to the decay of time” (120) and suffers from the dilemma of the human limitations imposed by time and the human wish to resist time. David M. Craig also recognizes the book’s tragic vision of “the revolution of the times” (148), quoting Heller’s explanation that “[w]hat there is in all my books, part of the central consciousness, is a philosophical despair on the inevitability of age, of aging, and dying” (148).

In fact, Heller’s David has already passed the peak of his life long enough to face the human limitations regulated by time. He had been a brilliant warrior and enjoyed a spectacular career. Once he sat on the

throne, however, “[t]here was nowhere to go but down” (256). Though he “fucked and fought plenty and had a rousing good time doing both” (5), he is now too old even to be warned by the beautiful Abishag the Shunammite. He laments, “Nothing fails like success” (80), and his efforts for good purposes designated by God were crowned with success only to betray him and drive him into despair later.

When young, David never accepted any impossibility. He could not help wondering why Saul had headed into a fight in spite of a prediction his forces would be routed. When Samuel replied that “It was his destiny” (56), David vehemently disagreed, “That’s bullshit, Samuel ... We’re Jews, not Greeks. Tell us another flood is coming and we’ll learn how to live under water. Character is destiny” (56). At that time, David was leading a happy life. He obeyed God but God told him only what he wished and thought. David as an aged narrator, on the other hand, has regrets: “If character is destiny, the good are damned. In such wisdom is much grief. If I’d known in my youth how I’d feel in old age, I think I might have given the Philistine champion Goliath a very wide berth that day” (56). He has learned that people cannot fully control their lives, for there is a great power beyond manipulating their lives.

In spite of this old man’s wisdom and the catch-22 derived from “the revolution of the times,” David strongly insists on his human rights and wishes. In anger and frustration, he blames God for His inhuman ruling over his life as the cause of his present miseries. This is why *GK*’s surface structure is constructed in a clear dichotomy between man and God, or between humanity and inhumanity.

3) Postmodern Ambiguity and Multiplication in the Deeper Structure

Because there is no solution to a catch-22, David’s lamentation derived from the dichotomy in *GK*’s surface structure may betray Heller’s pessimism. As John Aldridge recognizes, Heller’s pessimism seems deeply ingrained in his works. In *The American Novel and the Way We Live Now*, Aldridge analyzes Heller’s second novel, *Something Happened*, and comments that “there is no one at all in charge ... and that there is absolutely nothing to be done about it because the causes responsible cannot be located and the very idea of responsibility may have lost all meaning” (42). Aldridge made this statement before *GK*’s publication but his analysis can be safely applied to *GK* because *GK*’s deeper structure identifies David with God so often that the dichotomy in the surface structure is undermined enough to indicate that David’s dilemmas and tragedy actually originate from his own character. In *GK*’s deeper structure, David has nobody but himself either to fight against or to run away from.

Unlike in the Bible, David’s characteristics and roles in *GK* are quite ambiguous in many situations. For example, he tries to prove his love toward Saul by composing a beautiful elegy to express his sorrow at Saul’s death but he “soon grew more absorbed in the writing of it than in the fact of the deaths of Saul and his sons”(217). However important a role his writing may play in *GK*, this abrupt change in attitude is not proper for a mourner and impairs his open love toward Saul. Similar discrepancies are observed when the Amelekite brings King Saul’s crown and bracelet and claims that he slayed the king. The biblical David demands of the Amelekite, “Why were you not afraid to lift your hand to destroy the Lord’s anointed?” (2 Sam. 1:14) and has him killed for ignoring God’s will. The Bible thus emphasizes David’s piety, while

Heller's David hints at a secret and sly self-protective reason why he had the Amelekite killed: "I did not want anyone around me to get the idea that one could lift his hand against a king for any reason whatsoever, especially if I was the king" (216). His shrewd precaution invites a suspicion that Heller's David may have appreciated the death of Saul for the sake of ensuring his own safety and succession to the kingdom and that he might emphasize his love toward Saul simply to hide his actual wishes.

Similarly, David often begrudges Joab but he significantly benefits from his deeds. David publicly blames Joab for ignoring his wishes in order to disguise the fact that Joab does dirty jobs to support his rule and to feign innocence in the matters. And because of these contradictions between his deeds and intentions, David as a first-person narrator can never be trusted, as Judith Ruderman acknowledges: "David [in *GK*] is, in fact, a consummate liar. ... David is fully aware that he bends the truth as it suits him" (108–09). His story is told to his advantage. His viewpoints and attitudes also change according to his wishes. As a result, if the surface story emphasizes David's human emotions as a lover and a father and accuses God of the inhuman exertion of His almighty power, careful observation of David's unreliable narration will disclose that he actually behaves like God from time to time and exercises power over life and death as a mighty king, just as God does. It is no wonder why he confesses, "I have a monkey on my back that I cannot shake off, and now I know who that monkey is: His name is God. ...The fault, I know, was not in my stars but in myself" (337–38). In *GK*'s deeper structure, David is both the accuser and accused. And this is the very situation that Aldridge calls "the nihilistic perception" (42).

4) The Real Location of Heller's Humanism

In *GK*, David's life seems to be at a distressing dead end, and Merrill comments, "the book is sad ... for it too offers a sustained confession of failure on the part of one who is perceived by the world as a success" (118). Yet Merrill does not fully agree with Aldridge's negative analysis but claims, "*God Knows* acknowledges the loss of what we value, ... but life's values, especially love, are affirmed throughout the book" (121).

In fact, Heller demonstrates his trust in men strongly enough to prevent his pessimistic view of life from becoming as negative as nihilism or cynicism. Heller's David manifests tremendous anger at God with a strong sense of frustration but this also emphasizes his humanity. He treats God as if he were His equal and claims, "He owes me an apology" (8). He adamantly insists on God's error, too: "I have my faults ... but to this very day I know in my bones that I'm a much better person than He is" (8). God is not "a person" but David dares to evaluate Him according to human standards so as to honor human values and dignity.

The pride of a man can be also detected when he boastfully announces what a man, especially a good moral Jew, would do in God's place.

I know if I were God and possessed His powers, I would sooner obliterate the world I had created than allow any child of mine to be killed in it, for any reason whatever. ... But that may be because I am Jewish, and God is not. (96)

Religious people must be awed by such an audacious comparison of God and man, but Heller's David does

not hesitate. It is apparent that he believes in his right to get angry with Him whenever His judgment looks one-sided and unfair. Apparently he assumes that his contract with God is settled on the basis of their equal relations.

Even with his limitations and inabilities, therefore, Heller's David reflects positively on his identity as a man and pays homage to it by demonstrating his anger and frustration at God's inhumanity. Ironically speaking, however, because humanity is highly praised, Heller cannot treat his David with so much respect and love as the biblical David receives, for as a king his David too often exerts absolute power just as God the Almighty does. Indeed, Heller demeans his David by introducing comical elements in his narration as Sanford Pinsker notes: "Every Borscht Belt gag, every stage Yiddish cliché, every 'bit' from television's Golden Age has been stuffed into King David's 350+ page monologue" (107). While the laughable elements in *GK* may function as a literary device — as Craig claims, "humor distances and controls the emotional desolation" (153) — they definitely diminish David's royal dignity and sometimes even present him as a fool.

Heller's David looks absurd, too, when he swaggers about his authorship not only of Ecclesiastes and the Book of Psalms in the Bible, but also of every well known writing including all of Shakespeare's works, Romantic poems, contemporary jazz songs, etc. His claim suggests a God-like omnipresence and omnipotence but such an insinuation reveals faults with his absolute power, just as with God's. What is worse, his declaration of authorship of the great literary works of Western civilization is too ridiculous to be taken seriously and reduces him to a Quixote or a schlemiel. Similarly, David's ungracious and tenacious coveting of Bathsheba is farcical. While it may reveal a strong love toward Bathsheba, it definitely diminishes his royal dignity whenever his affections are neglected or turned down coldly.

Because of his silly behavior and dishonest narration, Heller's David is impossible to sympathize with, however forcefully he laments over his miseries and however humane and righteous he asserts he is. Besides, if his situation is objectively re-examined, readers will realize that one does not have to be so unhappy as Heller's David is after losing the charms and freedom of youth. And it is on this objective level of reading his story that the true nature of Heller's humanism will be disclosed.

5) Traps for the Warrior King and Heller's Warning

Heller's David is not a trusted narrator and quickly changes his attitudes for his own advantage. In this way he assumes various roles such as son, father, lover, shepherd, poet, warrior, and king. These diverse roles fall into two basic personas of war and peace, as he calls himself, "David, the warrior king, the sweet psalmist of Israel" (221). And these antithetical aspects of his character often involve contradictory actions that cause him acute suffering. After Absalom's revolt, for example, David tries to save his favorite son's life as a peaceful loving father. On the other hand, as the warrior king who governs the country by force of arms, he cannot allow anybody to rise against him. If David had not aspired to become king and remained a shepherd who could sing such sweet psalms as to comfort even the frantic mind of King Saul, he would have saved himself from any power games and their associated suffering. His troubles started only after he

stepped into the course of becoming king, which he appears to regret, "the longer I reflect on this tale of mine, the stronger grows my conviction that killing Goliath was just about the biggest goddamn mistake I ever made" (15).

In fact, Heller does not appreciate David's brilliant military victories so much as the Bible does. In the Bible, God chooses David as King Saul's successor and his military victories including killing Goliath are prescribed deeds to realize His intention. David's victories are, therefore, God's victories and righteous events. Contrarily, in *GK*, David acts too aggressive and flippant in his fights to be respected. In his face-off with Goliath, for example, David announces, "I was afire with conceit and bursting with a zeal to show off when I found myself with the chance to fight Goliath one on one. There was no way I was going to let that opportunity pass" (15). David deserves censure, too, for neglecting to appreciate the significant loss of human life when he felt exhilarated at hearing people sing, "Saul hath slain his thousands and David his ten thousands" (126).

Neither can Heller's David be absolved from responsibility for the deaths of King Saul and his heir, Jonathan, although he insists, as in the Bible, that he would not kill King Saul with his hands. Yet Heller's text subtly hints that David's overtaking King Saul's royal position is an act of usurpation that set an example of insurrection for his sons. Heller also ridicules David's attitudes toward Bathsheba so much that his committing adultery as a powerful king could have set another bad example for his sons. Accordingly, when he laments his sons' fighting with each other for the throne, Amnon's rape of his half-sister, Tamar, and Absalom's rape of David's concubines, readers cannot wholly sympathize with him.

King David apparently realizes that governing a kingdom peacefully resembles his former role as a shepherd when he comments: "I was easily bored by the repetitious minutiae of administering power. War, not reigning, was my real work. Like a fish out of water is a man of war in time of peace" (311). Yet he remains the same type of warrior king as King Saul. He is tied down by the law of the jungle — one of the miserable traps for a warrior king — and he cannot help suffering the loss of power in his old age as King Saul did.

David is caught in another trap of a warrior king, too. Because he depends on absolute power, he cannot take advantage of chances to correct his mistakes and evade his miseries. This kind of failure is more clearly committed by God himself, who exerts almighty power over men. For example, Saul starts to lose God's support after he conducted a religious ritual for himself on account of Samuel's delayed arrival to camp before the battle of Michmash. He asks, "Was it my fault or his?" (149). It looks reasonable to blame Samuel rather than Saul, but God will not reconsider his verdict and Saul laments, "Can one reason with God?" (150). Saul blames God for His tyrannical inhumanity because His judgment is unilateral and imposed without considering any excuse. In *GK*, God can make a mistake but His inhumane absolute power dismisses any human criticism and prevents Him from correcting Himself. In the same way, both David and Saul as warrior kings assert despotic power to control their people without thinking of them from their own points of view. Though they criticize God's inhumanity, as warrior kings they assume the same adamant inhuman attitudes that God does. Depicting their predicaments with ironical laughter Heller clearly criticizes the autocracy of warrior kings and their defects from his authorial point of view.

6) *GK*'s Postmodern Characteristics and Limitations

If ironically amusing, *GK* is never a pleasant, heart-warming work to read. Heller's David is too complicated to be loved or admired. His postmodern ambiguity and multiple roles in war and peace generate ironical tension and induce the reader to assess the despotism of God and warrior kings. Yet, even when David contradicts himself in exerting power over his subjects while denouncing God's one-sided dictatorial power as inhuman, he acts as a man as fully as possible and, with his tenacious criticism of God's tyranny, emphasizes his persistent and uncompromising belief in being a man to present the best humanism in *GK*. Through David's inconsistent ambiguity, Heller demonstrates his strong opposition to absolute power as well as his unequivocal belief in men, in spite of his deep pessimism about humanity.

While appreciating Heller's humanism and his postmodern presentation of it, however, one must admit that he fails to offer any solution for fighting autocracy or relieving David's miseries. In fact, David's antithetical roles as the warrior king and the sweet psalmist are too tangled to be clearly analyzed in terms of how they might better complement each other. Heller is also too earnest in satirizing the victimizers and victims of despotism to examine how one should properly wield or avoid such power. As a result, though his writing reflects some postmodern characteristics, Heller does not seem to have fully understood the important role of "otherness" and the indispensability of differences, which have been examined by postmodern philosophers influenced by the Second World War and the Holocaust, such as Theodor Adorno, Emanuel Lévinas, and Jacques Derrida.

For example, on Adorno Martin Jay observes: "The major lesson Adorno drew from the Holocaust was, in fact, the link between anti-Semitism and totalistic thinking" (20). He alerted his readers to the danger of generalization or classification because it dismisses differences. He ascribed such a deed to "the ticket mentality" (Jay 38). If Heller had considered such a danger, he may not have been satisfied with undermining David's criticism of God as inhumane by presenting David's own inhumanity but would have clarified "the ticket mentality" in the accusation. Similarly to Adorno, Emmanuel Lévinas, another philosopher strongly influenced by the Holocaust, underscores diversity by emphasizing man's ethical obligation towards other people, trying to become "a real thinker for peace" (Minatomichi 130). Jacques Derrida, who inherited Lévinas's thinking, also developed his philosophy under the influence of the Holocaust, and his concept of Deconstruction, Tetsuya Takahashi explains, "is in itself an affirmative response to a certain otherness" (139). Both Lévinas and Derrida believe that cultural pluralism should never be abandoned. According to Robert Eaglestone, they advocate "a sense of openness towards the future" (299), as well as towards other people, and view people's variety and differences which "go out of the wheel track" (281) as indispensable to establishing a peaceful future.

Eaglestone stresses the influence of the Holocaust on Lévinas and Derrida and claims that "postmodernism in the West begins with thinking about Holocaust, that postmodernism ... is a response to the Holocaust" (2). The positive affirmation of differences and otherness so important for Lévinas and Derrida is easily recognized in postmodern Jewish American writers influenced by the Holocaust, such as Raymond Federman and Walter Abish¹. Unlike these European-born writers, Heller was born in the United States and was

shielded from the immediate horror of the Holocaust. Although his war experience was bitter and painful enough to breed his distrust in any governing power, he does not seem to have shared Federman and Abish's compulsion to establish a peaceful future.

Comparing *GK* with the works of writers influenced by the Holocaust thus confirms Heller's lack of a concrete vision for a better future. Still *GK* is undoubtedly a masterpiece and no writer has ever presented the malfunctioning world so humorously and cleverly — and without losing his faith in humanity — as Heller did.

Notes

- 1 I have already discussed their postmodern characteristics in several papers such as “Stratégies de l'absence chez Raymond Federman” (2012) and “Walter Abish and His Literary Arts” (2014).

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