

The Dynamics of Thermodynamics: Joseph Heller's Entropic Life vision

Kishore Ram

Assistant Professor Dept of English MMNSS College, Kottiyam India

Abstract

The paper attempts to read the novels of Joseph Heller by applying theories of thermodynamics. Joseph Heller's major novels are extended metaphoric interpretations of the phenomenon of entropy as stated in the second law of thermodynamics. Entropy is the final disintegration of a system with no energy available. Each system undergoes entropy and entropy cannot be reversed. The various narrative techniques used by Heller to drive home his nihilistic philosophy is examined in this article.

Modern scientific advancements in thermodynamics erased the classical concept of time as an endless process. The modern theories of entropy suggest that time "moves irreversibly 'toward death'" (Harris 77). The novelists of the sixties like Pynchon and Rudolf Clausius coined the term entropy in 1865. Entropy may be termed as the thermal property of a substance, which remains constant when the substance undergoes changes without gain or loss of heat. The entropy of a body increases when heat enters the body and decreases when heat leaves it. Heat flows from the area of higher concentration to the area of lower concentration, therefore heat "equalizes its distribution by flowing unstopably from hot bodies to cold and so becomes unavailable for conversion into work." All forms of energy will be converted to heat energy and will be spread evenly throughout the universe. Thus as Jean-Sylvain Bailly speculated, "all bodies in the universe are cooling off and will eventually reach a final state of equilibrium in which all motion ceases" (Cooper 112). William Thomson stressed the existence of "a universal tendency in nature to the dissipation of mechanical energy" and Hermann Von Helmholtz pointed out that "all energy would eventually be transformed into heat at a uniform temperature, and all natural processes would cease" and the universe from that time onward will be "condemned to a state of eternal rest" (qtd. In Cooper 113).

During all natural processes the entropy increases because the natural processes are irreversible processes. So the entropy of the universe tends to a maximum. When the maximum value of entropy is reached no work will be possible. Thus entropy is a measure of unavailable energy in a system. The greater the increase in entropy of a system the smaller the energy available and with the increase in entropy the disorder of the molecules of a substance increases. Thus entropy is the measure of the degree of molecular disorder existing in the system. Entropy tends to increase in all isolated systems whether it is a machine, a human being, a culture or a political set-up, moving the system to the final destruction. Mathematician Norbert Wiener points out that as the distribution of energy becomes uniform, the universe and all closed systems in the universe, tend naturally to deteriorate and lose their distinctiveness, to move from the

least to the more probable state, from a state of organization and differentiation in which distinctions and formsexist, to a state of chaos and sameness. (Harris 77)

Entropic literature should be distinguished from the mimetic, the fantastic, and the apocalyptic literature. David Ketterer in *New World for Old* concentrates on this. According to him, Mimetic literature focuses on presenting the world as it is in a realistic manner whereas, of fantasy literature, tends to create an escapist world. Both literatures do not concentrate on the destruction of the world in any manner whereas apocalyptic literature is concerned with the creation of an alternative world which exists in literary terms, in a convincing relationship with the real world thereby resulting in a total destruction of the real world in the mind of the reader (14). Entropic fiction does not create an alternative world but tends to present the real world in a distorted manner. The starting point for entropic fiction is the assumption that society, like the world, is undergoing decay in the form of social and economic crises, bureaucratic corruption, institutional decay and deteriorating humanity. Social, economic, religious and political hierarchies are being levelled by chaos and are heading towards the final stage of disintegration like the heat death phenomenon. The worst sufferer in the societal entropy is the individual: he loses his sense of individual uniqueness thus making him suffer from psychic entropy.

Joseph Heller's major novels are extended metaphoric interpretations of the phenomenon of entropy as stated in the second law of thermodynamics. Man, for Heller, is an isolated system. Along with the various other systems surrounding him he is also undergoing decay. His isolated system is led to entropy in the forms of political crisis, war, economic instability and disintegration of culture, tradition and moral values thereby destroying his system and bringing it to chaotic equilibrium at par with his surroundings. O'Neill observes: All traditional, human notions of space, time, and matter had gone overboard, followed by the sacred principles of logic which linked cause and effect; all certainties had vanished from the universe, to be replaced by statistical probabilities; . . . the harmony of spheres had turned into a cacophony. (3) Heller's life vision as tantamount to metaphoric entropy is a feature identifiable with the postmodern canon as a whole. Heller traces the entropic disintegration of the universe by focusing on the absurdity existing in the social, political and bureaucratic institutions. He suggests that man's attempt to give a logical basis to the universe by way of social and political institutions has been entropic. These institutions have in turn entrapped man in their intricacies denying him the possibility of escape through individual effort and heroism. Heller's protagonists never attempt any act of heroism while encountering the various absurd institutions but only makes futile efforts to avoid being overpowered by these forces. An analysis of the major novels of Heller reveals his entropic life vision.

In *Catch-22* Heller pictures the military as a bureaucratic establishment infected with entropic forces. The military with its absurd rules like "*Catch-22*" poses threat for the individual system. Heller's life vision in the novel is apocalyptic and entropic. The military with its illogical rules and complicated administrative strategies is a prototype of the society. The heroism associated with war as presented in conventional novels is lacking in *Catch-22*. War according to Heller is big business and therefore has nothing glorious in it. Heller uses war as a theme to bring out his entropic vision. War for Heller

is not a place for chivalry or sacrifice. It is an arena for big business. The military at Pianosa—a prototype of the world—with its illogical reasoning and incomprehensive dictums like “*Catch-22*” is in the process of entropic disintegration.

The inescapability of the individual from the system is accentuated by the presence of the “*Catch-22*” rule. “*Catch-22*” rule exists in various forms not only at Pianosa but also in the outside world bringing about the slow but sure decay of the world. The military and war are entropic in the sense that they lead to the disintegration of the human self. Yossarian realizes the danger of the situation and attempts to escape from the system. His attempt to save himself is an individual’s futile effort to save his individual system from entropy. The attempt is futile in that he will have to confront the same entropic forces outside Pianosa also. Frederick R. Karl observes that Sweden—to where Yossarian is trying to escape—is “more a state of mind than a real place” and Yossarian is likely to find the place disappointing: Not all the tall, blonde women will capitulate, not all the people will be sane; the government will even expect him to work, and liquor will be expensive. Yet Sweden prove a false Eden, but man in his desperation may still desire Paradise. It is a mark of his humanity that he does. (138) Heller’s message is intensely apocalyptic.

In the chapter “The Eternal City” Heller pictures the final disintegration of the world, where everyone is a victim and the victimizer himself is victimized. Escape is impossible, every atom, every molecule is in the process of entropic disintegration. Helmholtz theory—the final seizure of all natural process—is metaphorically pictured by Heller in this chapter. Heller’s message is entropic in that it denies any chance of reversibility of the entropic process. The chance of ordering the world is impossible. Any attempt of redemption will be disastrous. Yossarian’s attempt at redemption—for he feels morally responsible in not resisting the “*Catch-22*” forces—by trying to protect the kid sister of Natally’s girl friend is disastrous for he is arrested for being AWOL.

The existentialists retain a respect for the individual while thoroughly rejecting the dogmas and institutions of the society. Heller’s characters, unlike the characters in existentialist literature, are resigned to their fate and try to wrest laughter out of the tragic situation. While the existentialists tend to present themes like alienation and despair in a serious tone Heller maintains a wry comic outlook. Finally though Heller uses comedy to present his vision it is much more serious and darker than that of the existentialist for the latter retains the possibility of a final escape: “though man may fall, the absolute, an ordered universe, lies beyond destruction” (Harris 29), whereas Heller rules out even the slightest chance of redemption. For Heller everything is rotten: individual, family, society, country, bureaucracy, food water and even the Divine. There is no hope of escape from entropy since any attempt at escape from entropy is itself entropic. Yossarian’s attempt to save his system by trying to escape to Sweden is itself entropic for his attempt only increases the entropy of his individual system which is being exposed to all kinds of danger while risking an unsafe journey to Sweden. Slocum’s attempt of ordering his system by moving into a senior position in the company and by stabilizing his relation with the members of his family is according to Tucker “an effort at negative entropy” (340).

During negative entropy the system is in a suspended form of entropy with the chance of returning to entropy rather unavoidable. Gold finds the entropic forces too overpowering to resist and succumbs to them. David in *God Knows* loses his link with God. God's metaphysical silence metaphorically indicates Heller's message that there is no hope to be expected from the Divine. Joseph Heller communicates the impossibility of reordering one's system: The chances of reversing entropy and saving the universe is similar, as in Sir Arthur Eddington's analogy, to that of the chance that "an army of monkeys hammering on typewriters could reproduce all the books in the British Museum" (Cooper 115).

Heller presents his degenerative life vision by resorting to unconventional narrative strategies. He uses comedy to picture his bleak vision. Heller communicates his life vision effectively by the use of various subversive tools like burlesque, irony, parody, metalanguage and black humour. Burlesque, irony and parody enable Heller to exaggerate and re-create the dilemmas of the world. The use of metalanguage strategies helps him to picture the absurd disorder existing in the world. The indeterminable nature of the language used metaphorically reflects the indeterminacy of the pluralistic realities of the modern world. Black humour enables him to delineate the gruesome tragedy of modern man using the disguise of the comic. Two-dimensional caricatured characterization, the lack of ordered structure and the use of un-conventional prose further enable Heller to communicate his entropic life vision. The nihilistic life philosophy of Heller is a characteristic feature of postwar literature in general. The high expectations and overdependence of man on science, religion and philosophy to provide comfort and satisfaction proved catastrophic. The disillusioned man realized that material and scientific advancements were in reality misapprehensions. The postmodern writers verbally picture the "central anxieties" of their generation.

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