CHAPTER 5

AN ESTIMATION OF HELLER AGAINST MARK TWAIN

Knowing pretty well that it is too early to judge Heller, the leading writer of black humour, an estimation of his outstanding novel *Catch-22* is attempted here against *Huckleberry Finn* (as both are humorous novels), to ascertain where Heller deviates and what his shortcomings are (if not failures.). Heller shares the pessimism, disgust and anger of Mark Twain, the prerequisites of any humorous writer. Richard Boyd Hauck says that "many of our best humourists accentuated the negative and all but eliminated the positive when they wrote what they called absurd humour"\(^1\) and Heller's deviation starts at this as he too eliminated the positive, which is the result of his nightmarish realization of the difference between what was and what is and also what is and what has to be. He is black as he realizes that life, with all its multifacetedness resists any artificial order imposed from without and the modern society is doing
just that - ordering the individual and the life. Burlesque and Parody become weapons of his humour (black humor) as he believes that only they help him project these multiple realities. Heller baffles, confuses us and gets us disoriented. He allows reality to override fantasy unlike Twain whose fantasy recreates reality. He hopes not to reform or expose folly as comedy writers do, as he only wants to laugh. He doesn't suggest a way out in his Catch-22 from this bleak world. Yossarian comes back from war only to be an accomplice of superior forces. He only rebels but he accepts ultimately. Huck Finn yields but asserts himself with his own cunningness, returns but with a hope "to light out for territory" and keeps up the hope for human race which his creator has, though he finds the human race damned. If at all Heller is positive he lacks the conviction and his positivity is to be found in acceptance with awareness. He makes us feel that life is ebbing away from our hands. It gives the sinking feeling that society is irreversible.
Heller and Twain are nostalgic. But Heller rejects all experience and finds life meaningless. He does not believe in any concept like religion, love, humanity, and for him the only consolation is in healthy sex which is also merely temporary. For him life is ridiculous. Twain shows faith in some kind of humanism. No doubt he repudiates religion. But it was religion that was in vogue, and it is its pretensions that are ridiculed. He believes in true religion, he believes in real humanity. He finds experience enriching and rewarding. For him life is still worth living. This healthy attitude is the one factor that breaths fresh breath into his novel. And this lack of faith in Heller leaves him totally disgusted making his book a mere masterpiece in black humour and not an epic for all times.

Catch-22 is also picaresque though, more figurative and the hero Yossarian is in search. But the search is not for real self, not for identity, not for truth, but only for a way out to live, to save his
skin. He is a hero, like Huckleberry Finn, in accepting his responsibility for what he does or what happens as a consequence. The difference lies in their outlook. The innocent young outcast risks his life for those whom he finds innocent or at least not deserving such sad predicament. He accepts the responsibility and is ready to face the dire consequences when he tries to rescue Jim, whereas Yossarian is worried just about himself. His sole aim is to get out of the fight (literally or figuratively) not bothering about others. He does not have any concern about others. (Ex: His callous blotting off the names, addresses, articles from the letters to be delivered to fellow soldiers). He is totally self-centered, always preferring himself to any other issue. He reaches heroic heights, rather epic heroic heights when he questions society’s hold on the individual, society’s right to impose itself on him and when he ascertains individual’s right to self, right to live, live as the individual likes. But he stands as mock hero as the answer for his contention—individual against society, will only lead to anarchy.
Any affirmation or any endorsement of his ideology -
self is supreme, any thing can be done to preserve it,
nothing can stand in its way, will result in a society
ridiculous, and precarious.

The readers may laugh, may sense the deep tragedy
but they cannot admire nor they can support him. It is
a mad man's raving which cannot be shared though it can
be sympathised. He does not endear him to them as Huck
does, and that's why Catch-22 fails to rouse interest in
all and fails to appeal to all. Yossarian, typical of
black heroes is still to fight only to meet failure
with and is not easily understood. He cannot reconcile
with society, neither he can get away as Huck hopes to.
He is left with same predicament at the end as he was
in the beginning.

The humour in the novel is darker and it sickens
the readers. It makes us laugh but the laughter traps
us. We feel guilty. The needed alienation or rather
distance for a humorous writer is not possible here as
the humourist believes him to be a part of the society he ridicules and feels that he too is a contributor to it. This proximity, this involvement robs humour of its robust laughter. Yossarian, here is not a commentator like Huck. He is not an outsider or an observer but he is, in the thick of the society he is ridiculing. The incongruity is as much within him as it is in the society.

He is in no way the better than the society he protests against. The only difference is that he is aware of the meaningless predicament and he attempts to run away from it. So the humour is created out of blackness. In rejecting life, in ridiculing it totally without any hope for release, redemption, humour lacks the lustre, the vivacity, and the vigour. It becomes a mad sinister laughter. This laughter does not mitigate the gloom, neither it intensifies it as done in tragedy, but it confuses, horrifies and it nauseates. It smacks of absurdity. The agonizing realities of life are made to look preposterous. Moreover, humour
and terror are alternated and the novel depicts the horrid but funny life, being serious as well as light hearted, baffles, and disorients the readers. This simultaneous perception of horror and humour makes the novel an ideal novel of black humour, thus restricting it to only one school. It does not transcend the limits and hence it can’t be qualified as a universal classic. It is an achievement of Heller but in a narrow sense.

Humour is evoked through characters which are only caricatures, and only two-dimensional. The characters do not develop as the novel proceeds, and they are not human-like, normal, but abnormal, eccentric cartoon like individuals. They are made to look as maroons, of course true to belief of Heller and others that no literature can be realistic or life like. But this robs them of any convincing trait and they become only objects of humour. Readers cannot identify themselves with them and cannot have emotional involvement which is achieved in Huckleberry Finn. Readers feel one with
Huck or Tom or even uncle Phillip or all those other lovable characters in the novel. Spirit of adventure is roused in the readers and they are elated with all that romance in the novel. They simply love those noble characters, they laugh at those knaves and rascals but they do not despise, they do not scorn however villainous those characters may be. Such involvement, such identity is prevented in Catch-22. In spite of understanding the intensity of tragedy, in spite of laughing, no one likes to be identified with Yossarian, though a hero, or with Dock Daneeka, or Millo the Minder Binder, Scheisskoof or any one in the novel. The novel estranges itself.

The story does not evolve, does not proceed or alter as the incidents are described. The incidents in various chapters can stand separately by themselves. They do not add to the growth of the story. Most often the same scenes are repeated like the soldier in white, the impeachment of Clevinger or the Chaplain, Milo’s schemes. This planned careful repetition helps to
change the meaning and deepen the grief of this world, but does not give the pleasure of reading a complete story: "Time, for example complained that Joseph Heller's talent though often impressive lacked discipline, sometimes luring him into bogs of boring repetition"[^11]. Richard Stern also found the novel 'repetitive and monotonous'[^4].

There is no sequential logic and this leaves the novel strange and disappointing too. Moreover the traditional idea of time is shattered and there is a peculiar intermingling of past and present. Brainway feels "it is impossible to establish an orderly time sequence for the novel"[^5]. It is so because Heller felt that orderliness cannot be imposed on this chaotic world.

Often the roles are reversed and one finds no explanation for the statements uttered. Even the dialogues are circular and story comes back to the same point. These are all devices of black humour
excellently exploited but only in one direction, for one goal i.e. to repudiate, to ridicule, to laugh madly. As a result the novel shows a lack of faith, of hope, of redemption. It lacks the nobility of classics. This is where it falls short of *Huckleberry Finn*. After reading this 'far out', seemingly 'formless novel'\(^6\) (p.108), the reader may say like Yossarian who says in desperation "yes, now I see. But I still don't think I understand"\(^7\) (p.537) due to the ironic obsession of the characters in the novel. This disturbing confusion, this bitter funny novel of great baffling, made Richard Stern to refuse to call it a novel\(^8\).

No doubt the novel, differs from other novels of the absurd, as it (Heller thought it) protests against absurdity, which is the result of bureaucracy instead of accepting it. It shows the possibility of escape from this absurdity. But it is negative, Yossarian's escape to Sweden which has a positive inclination does not put a stop to his nightmare. Even in Sweden there
is bureaucracy, the political power that enslaves the individual. Heller does not suggest any other alternative or any other mode of combating it. Moreover one may support the individual, even one like Yossarian in the conflict with the belligerent society, only in principle. The conflict which Heller wanted to deal with is not that simple. The individual's protest can be mistaken for cowardice or selfishness. And Heller fails to convince the readers that it is not so. Individual freedom however great it may be, cannot be and should not be at the cost of others, and cherished values of the society. Yossarian stultifies himself when he deserts the battle saying that an individual's life is more important while letting others die instead. Heller's support of Yossarian shears him off his earlier vitality and the book ceases to be comic. Heller suggests that society may not engulf the individual totally as it is afraid, and the individual can be in harmony with the society through either flight (as Yossarian does) or through preservation (like Colonel Cathcart). But how to achieve this, and
which one is possible is not suggested by him.

The vision of the novel *Catch-22* is narrow. Heller's contention is about a bureaucratic, regimented society. His novel, like his other books can be called a political novel though it's about war. The narrow vision and a strict keeping in with black humour ideology prevent the novel from being universal, an all time novel though a great successful and a legendary novel in its genre.

Whereas Mark Twain made Huck Finn a legendary hero, and the novel a great master piece by his positive romantic out look. The novel is unparallelled as it does not stop at simply being humorous. Of course any humorist does not want to be just a humorist. But Mark Twain transcends these limits in an unprecedented manner and also in an inimitable way. This conscious artist though not "self conscious artist"\(^9\) is a mightily talented artist.
Why is *Huckleberry Finn* a great novel, is a question, very much discussed and answered by critics. This "lowbrow novel of escape" becomes an unrivaled, unforgettable legend of America because of the artistic vision, intense imagination, excellent art of narration, and redeemingly humorous depiction. The novel brings freshness with it into American fiction as Mark Twain cleverly made the boy a hero. He made it a first person narration and exploited the device to its maximum, rectifying the previous mistake of Tom Sawyer which is in 3rd person narration. This ignorant, not much lettered, uncultured young boy of low origin observes the world around, tries to grasp it with all his innocence and often fails to do so. He is a regular truant and takes refuge from the society by retreating into nature, and these frequent withdrawals fill his life with adventures making him rich with experience. The ignorant hero is an added advantage for the writer to write in vernacular, to retain freshness of expression. The book is captivating as boyhood is romanticized and is given an idyllic charm.
Mark Twain is nostalgic, recreating his boyhood, but making it universal as he is realistic too. For this troubled, tormented writer boyhood is the Jackson Island, a paradise on earth. His painting of boyhood is not like other writers, ideal. He found not mere innocence in boys, like Howell and other writers but also cruelty, not mere purity, but an awareness, sometimes involvement in sin, instinctive and rational, childish and partly adult, full of wisdom through experience. The boys are controlled by the adult world which they despise. This remarkable grasping of the childhood enabled him to paint his boy heroes realistic. He romanticized them as it afforded an escape from the world. Mark Twain used them as social commentators of mad-after-money-world, and to recreate the lost idyllic world before world war, and to mitigate the caustic criticism, the seething rage in him. The boys served as a device of humour, a safety valve for his boiling anger, amounting despise. He successfully dramatized the emotions and experiences of a boy. The happy carefree world of the boyhood is
revisited which conceals lampooning of contemporary society and takes away the readers into that far away dream world, into those green pastures of pleasure. The hero is impressive because of his innocence (all his heroes are innocent) which is due to their simplicity and directness. He is an innocent outsider and an observer. His innocence is in nature and not because of inexperience. And his passive role reaffirms the faith that life is predetermined. Twain's tensions are all successfully resolved through his boy hero, the tensions due to the contradictions in him like anti-racist and aristocrat, practical and sentimental, capitalist and sympathizer of the poor, the child and the youth, and many others. There are yet other contradictions in his novel. Huck is sometimes passive and sometimes active. The paradise of the boy is also filled with violence, death and evil. Even there life is full of atrocities, nightmares and, death parades all the time. Meanness in all its multiplicities confronts the hero. This juxtaposition of good and evil, nobility and meanness
violence and peace, kindness and cruelty - all this brings in humour that relieves the tensions. Humour is used as a catalyst, as a redeemer of this cruel world. The experiences are viewed earnestly and humorously. This view is at once fresh and old too. American life as observed by an innocent boy is effectively dramatized.

The uniqueness of the novel is in its appealing to all types of readers - children, youth and as well old. Unlike his mentor Howell and other writers of his age, Twain did not choose to entertain any one of them. Though the novel (other novels too) is of a boy's wonderful world the problems raised are of adult sphere and to the social and moral problems that are eternal human concerns. Neither he heeded to Howell's advice of keeping it just a boy's adventurous story. While recreating the childhood he transcended the limitations; oscillating between present and past, known and unknown frontiers, youth and maturity. His book is that of a child-man exploring, investigating,
reliving of childhood. None of his contemporaries could so thoroughly study and report about this boy’s world. Twain’s America was nostalgic of its childhood as its present world is shattered. The troubled, much disappointed America was hankering for its peaceful past. It wanted to submerge the prevailing violence, death in a carefree, adult free childhood days. Twain could capitalize on this mood as he too had rural, innocent boyhood with rich experiences, as he too wants to take refuge in those bygone days as he could not take the present cruel world in his stride. He succeeded more than other writers due to his intensity of experience and imagination. Moreover Twain’s righteous indignation, contagious humour, and his realistic approach made him reach readers far and wide. He made a boy’s world an enchanting, charming fairy land, adorned with innocence, endowed with scintillating experience, yet a realistic and refreshing world of all ages; of all people. With every reading the novel grows fresh, enriching the reader’s insight.
The childhood in his hands became an instrument of joy as well as a weapon of attack. It suited Twain as his art of attack is concealment and cloaking it in humour. The innocent boy's observations, his comments, his reactions are excellent social satire doled out humorously. The adult world is laughed at, ridiculed with apparent innocence and in humorous vein. It is an ideal medium of his satire, enabling him an artistic escape from daring confrontation with the society. Huck Finn is at odds with the society, as well as a part of society and Twain could identify himself with Huck. His excellent imagination makes the readers enjoy the novel as "they found in its western locale the picaresque adventures of its raffish characters and the strongly subversive stance of its vagabond in a pleasing and familiar package"¹².

The novel's peculiar charm is due to a succession of varied moods and its apparently loose structure. Twain's tone is uncontrolled and his different
techniques like farce, burlesque, sentiment, melodrama, satire, exaggeration, brevity, tragedy and comedy follow one another are seemingly chaotic but bring in great beauty and joy. Hilarious scenes are followed by gruesome violence and rascals and scoundrels are brought in along with the gentle and noble. Death or mistaken identity are against revelation and affirmation. Separation and reunion always go together. Huck runs away from the widow but is brought back by Tom or society. He is captured by his pap but he escapes from him. He then loses Jim in storm but meets him again. He is separated from Jim when he takes shelter in Grangerford’s house but soon joins after the feud. Finally he loses Jim only to be rejoined in Tom’s uncle’s farm. He always poses to be somebody to escape the danger but is rediscovered, re-established, which results in joy. This paradox reaches its climax when Huck goes all the way with Tom to free Jim who is already a freeman. If this paradox, this farce is a delightful comedy, other paradox where the supposed to be a run away father is killed miserably
whom Huck does not notice though sees, results in tragedy. This successive variation makes the novel unforgettable and the writer a legend who is above and beyond all the models. The ultimate paradox is in the fact that the novel intended to be comic is serious in its tone and his fertile imagination, his art of exaggeration are properly checked by this profound seriousness. The end leads us back to beginning. A complete, beautiful blending of vernacular with a literary language gives the novel the crowning effect.

This "god's fool" had a 'call' to literature and that's why his laughter is a sane bitterness. His rich imagination beautifully exaggerates the life, recreating it lyrically and enchantingly. His diction changes easily and smoothly suiting the occasion and so his voice. His characters do speak colloquial language and it is of free nature; though he prefers biblical vocabulary often. And he is not restricted by the local. His style is a summation of American humour. It is sincere and tender. He being a native genius, the
style inevitably turns to be comic but the comedy does not ignore other values of life. It is reflexive, quick witted. It is diabolic. It even foretells the oppressing gloom of later works. But it is still optimistic to a great extent. It recognizes the real worth of what it rejected, and society at large is not lampooned. The attack becomes localized though a universal criticism is embedded, and concealed in comedy.

It is a poised mixture of personal and professional attitudes and it dramatizes the rich experiences of life making it pastoral. It is liberal, and its laughter is positive. It is open-minded and often it becomes prophetic in its artistic, imaginative recreation. It is deep and sublime and multifaceted. It is nihilistic though hilarious, objective but not condemning. The perfect exploitation of the style alone makes Twain 'the true father of our national literature'\textsuperscript{15} and made Faulkner to say "All of us are his heirs"\textsuperscript{16}. 
His style perfectly combines realism and humour. Fantasy is an instrument for realism and humour of Mark Twain. It is not affected and it is precise. It is modern due its colloquial colour and it is subtly psychological too. It is natural, full of spoken rhythms. It is unpretending, and an honest portrayal of American language. It is fertile in its imagination and playful in its recreation. It asserts the faith which is needed for comedy and it does not uphold any philosophy, any reformation. It is matured; and it is widening in perception, intensifying the objective view. It's controlled dialect maintains the comic tempo, making him a master of the comic art. This comedy helps him to say all he wanted blanketing his anger, and enables him wonderfully to give a clue to the characters. Huck, the hero is the chief source of amusement as Mark Twain believed that characterization of the teller or the narrator is the cream of humour and only the teller's merit makes the story memorable. The virtues and vices of the narrator-hero are visible
through his talk. His frivolous tone and his innocent pure heart prevent us from getting angry with the wicked world and tickle us into laughter. His belief that he is a hopeless sinner adds all the charm to the novel.

Moreover Twain believed that art is nothing but construing all absurdities, and incompatibilities in a leisurely, purposeless way. High art lies in the talent of the teller or the spirit of him who deliberately modifies qualities while telling the story and thus makes it fresh, and his own though it is told a hundred times already before him. This is what he did in his masterpiece and wrote a book for all times. His great commonsense, his wide reading, his rich experience and sharp observation, keen hearing, beautiful imagination - all these and still something more made him an unrivaled artist. His classic, *Huckleberry Finn* is "his indisputably great work. Everything is in it, all compact; The best devices and combinations, the healthiest point of view, the
grandest conception. Despite Aristotle’s surmise that tragedy is closer to epic than comedy is, Huck Finn exactly fits the mould of restraint. Comedy saves his cynicism, controls hostility. He has made his style amply symbolic yet comprehensive. It allows him to maintain comic distance. Mark Twain in *Huck Finn* can be found as the comedian who is "free minded enough to enjoy the device as well as the point. His techniques represent his salvational investment in life, the containments and restraints of his view are its necessary form. And he must love the form. His comic devices must in themselves outlast his targets. The distance between comic artist and the unholist intuition or conviction is particularly important to his freedom."17 And he did not lose the joy of this special mission. Joy and vengeance are harmoniously fused with. A summation of all comic devices like dialect, understatement, exaggeration, frontier mode, anecdotal method - is seen here. Humour or comedy helps him to distinguish characters which was not so in his predecessors, and it also allows him integrate
great issues contributing to plot, theme, situations. It is intricate and often subtle. It changes ordinary language into something new, vigorous vivacious.

Twain showed great care throughout the novel in the choice of tone, vocabulary. He knew that careful artistry makes the word in print free, natural, easy. It is already mentioned in the earlier chapter that he wrote in seven different dialects to give the book a life-like, realistic touch.

When it comes to the greatness of The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn one may quote Huck, who comments about an inventor "He hadn’t no harm in him and was just a genius - which was not his fault". Which may adequately explain why Mark Twain is so great. It is as simple as to say he is great simply because he is great. No one could rival Shakespeare and none could Mark Twain. Others may pale into insignificance however great they may be. Heller is one among them, great in his field but falls short of this giant of literature - Mark Twain.
NOTES


2. The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn p.445


4. Ibid.

5. Ibid p.48


8. James M. Mellard: The Exploded Form: p.108

9. Guru Dayal Grover: Mark Twain - The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn: Critical Study (Delhi:

11. Ibid p.278

12. Ibid p.133

13. Willam Dean Howell, Baldwin, Merwin Austin (Ed) *My Mark Twain: Reminiscences and Criticisms* (Baton Rohpe: Louisiana State University Press, 1976) p.120


17. Ibid p.152

18. Walter Blair: *American Humor* p.38