

DOI <https://doi.org/10.30525/978-9934-588-90-7-20>

**TOM SAWYER IN LATE JOSEPH HELLER'S PROSE
"PORTRAIT OF AN ARTIST, AS AN OLD MAN"**

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The American writer Joseph Heller is best known for his first novel "Catch-22" (1961), which embodies the concept of the same title – the absurdism and contradiction that has become leading and recognizable through all his work. And the study of his latest novel "Portrait of an Artist, as an Old Man" (2000) in terms of the late style concept has the potential to redefine the final image of the author and his career.

As most of the literary research gravitates toward the 'main' work or 'masterpiece', which in Heller's career is his first novel "Catch-22" (1961). Therefore, Joseph Ozias in his project at Ohio Dominican University ignored the obvious powerful self-ironic narrative and proclaims that Heller, as his character, wanted to become 'relevant' again for his audience by writing a "terrific swan song" [5].

Michiko Kakutani, famous literary critic, and former chief book critic for The New York Times, in her article claimed the novel lacks literary skills and technique, which present in his other work. By definition "an old man's narcissistic rant" Kakutani notes his excessive "mortality obsession" and existential dilemma in dealing with frightening reality. According to the article, Heller represents a concentrate of his old fear of failure and the inevitable comparison with his first and overwhelming successful novel [4].

The most recent and only fundamental work in Ukrainian literary criticism was presented by Y. S. Goncharova in her thesis dedicated to autobiography poetics. The researcher considers the book as an innovative step in the genre of autobiography, a simultaneous combination of the technique of "erasing the face" and "creating a portrait" [2, p. 78]. Summing up that only a gullible reader could perceive it "straightforwardly", which testifies in favor of our previous critical reviews, but the main thing is the "catch" of Heller himself – the main key to analysis – not all as obvious as it seems at first glance, it is not a "novel of decay", but a masterful work of destroying the general notion of the genre "portrait" [2, p. 88].

In transtextual terms, Heller primarily refers to and recreates the character of Tom Sawyer, who represents the “Great American Novel” – a magnitude, the unattainable height of the past. Ten years later John Barth in “Every Third Thought” (2011) will also look for such a lighthouse in the literary world by creating his own self-projection of an old writer. These two characters have the common goal – to write the last novel, which must be a special, new type of masterpiece in their own eyes, even if it might be labeled as “failure” by a common point of view, not praised as best while he is still alive: “<...> the grandiose determination that his next novel, possibly his last, should be hailed as among his best” [3, p. 44]. The “Portrait” sections, labeled “Tom” or “Tom Sawyer, Novelist,” focus on the character’s futile attempts to meet the great writers of the past to get advice: how to write a novel, gain immortal fame, and get rich. In his imagination or, better say, by a created mythical images of each persona in terms of the history of art, all of them live a fabulously happy and sublime life, resting on the laurels of his fame in America or Europe.

As the narrative unfolds further, the author also changes the accentuation on the novel idea: “This is a book about a well-known, aging author trying to close out his career with a crowning achievement, with a laudable bang that would embellish his reputation rather than a fainthearted whimper that would bring him only condescension and insult” (*Heller, 2000: 40*). Adorno specifically emphasized that late style is the rebellion against the artist’s style and audience expectations, the sole act of intention. All of those indicate the transition to one’s lateness, the power to stand against problems that being silenced [1], mostly because the old artist might get away with the consequences of such a provocative move.

It is no coincidence that the beginning and the end of the novel has a stylistic frame of Mark Twain’s “The Adventures of Tom Sawyer”. The power of the myth of its author and the character used both as allusion and metafiction. Emotional and stylistic regression is the way of the Heller to reflect on himself – a Tom Sawyer that reaches to the illusional immortality and greatness. He is a spoiled young man of the late twentieth century who is looking for an easy way to get rich and famous. His life is a fantasy, and he does not care about reality. Tom is also Pota, going from one writer to another, trying to grasp a formula of their success. he inherited from the original Mark Twain’s character a unique trait of confidence, independence, and ease of perception of the circumstances in which he finds himself and tries to get the most out of them. A century passed and Tom’s character has also gone through some changes, as America did. Pota/Heller/Tom – they all are the united image of modern and past, carrying the spark of the American spirit.

First, Tom goes in search of Samuel Clements – Mark Twain, his creator, and finds out the shocking details of his life in recent years: depression due to financial setbacks, the death of his daughter, and overlooked works “The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg” and “Pudd’nhead Wilson”. Frustrated Tom decides to find another prominent figure and continues his journey, get money by selling signed copies of “The Adventures of Tom Sawyer”. The narrator of this part, Pota/Heller, remarks bitterly that “The thought did not once cross his innocent mind that Samuel Clements, who’d authored *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, *Tom Sawyer, Detective*, and *Tom Sawyer Abroad*, had come to *loathe* that very name Tom Sawyer, as he now bitterly did very much else in the world around him.” [3, p. 157]. Heller himself experienced how the early success can eventually become a burden that later pulls down and overshadows all future work, defeats in advance every attempt to overturn the result. Dying in despair and oblivion, that even the giants of fiction of the past couldn’t escape, – is his very own and personal fear in which he, as Yossarian, engaged in “borderline situation”: ready for a fall, but hopes to rise.

Jack London, Bret Harte, Ambrose Bierce, Frank Norris, Stephen Crane – wherever Tom arrives he is already too late, writer is gone: “Alas, again his timing was bad; he was again too late” [3, p. 148]. The narrator delves into the description of the last years of each of them, revealing tragic biographical details that haven’t caught the general attention and not affected the final image, contrasting with the image of literary success at the beginning of their careers. This resonates with the concept of late style: last work usually perceived by author contemporaries as a catastrophe, the inability not only of general audience but also literary critique to see the final creation as the result of artistic style history, look deeper into it as the experiment. Under “history” is meant to be the stylistic essence concentrated and reinterpreted through the original path, which not stands on simple “autobiography” label. Despite the discourse of “The Death of the Author”, Heller emphasize repeatedly that postmodernism still stands and empowers not only past images of Authors, but continually mythologize new one, which might lead inevitably to high criticism in case of attempt to get out of the imposed pattern. Therefore, authors also become fictional figures: “His travels through the literary hall of fame of America had steered him into a mortuary of a museum with the failed lives and careers of suffering heroes who were only human” [3, p. 160], means this is the result of the narrator’s search for a mentor.

By changing one recognizable narrative scene to another Heller not only skillfully represents the proto image of the artist/himself, but also touches the problems related to last works and their authors within the history of literature. At the same time, he builds another, more private dimension of the novel,

concentrated on the themes of love and marriage, youth and maturity, career, and recognition.

Heller's return to the literary "origins" became possible through the deepening of his perception of poetics of the absurdism and existentialism through interpretations and rewriting modernist, classical, and own plots. The journey of his own "self" that is incarnated into the postmodern Tom Sawyer and Eugene Pota, who both see in every late classic literature figure a mentor, is the brightest illustration of life circle. His desire to reach the perfection of the Great American Novel is also the piece of philosophy of absurdism. Heller joins the new tendency of high postmodernists who in their late novels reversing to and reflecting on the twentieth-century literature processes.

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