

Good as Gold Short Guide

Good as Gold by Joseph Heller

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Characters

The protagonist of *Good as Gold*, Dr.

Bruce Gold, is a forty-eight-year-old English professor with political aspirations.

Not public-minded in the least, Gold cultivates a self-serving shiftiness in his stance on issues. He is opposed both to segregation and integration, to sexual and racial discrimination, and to equal rights amendments. As Heller observes, Gold could "deliver essentially the same speech to an elderly reactionary religious group that he had given the day before with equal success to a congress of teen-aged Maoists." Power and fame are Dr. Gold's goals, with the possible added benefit of gaining the beautiful, blonde Andrea Conover as his new wife.

However, Gold has a problem that thwarts his fulfilling his dreams: He is a Jew. Ambivalent about his heritage, Gold seeks acceptance among the privileged WASPS of Washington, yet he cannot escape reminders of his Jewishness—from his stifling family connections, to the tokenism with which Jews are courted as political appointees, to the Jewish F.B.I. agent's persistent beratings that he is a shonda to his race. As the novel ends, Gold seems ready to confront his ethnic identity. He sees the inscription in Hebrew on his mother's headstone, leaves a pebble on her grave—a Yiddish custom, and returns to his wife Belle.

As is typical of so many of Heller's novels, other characters are usually caricatures, primarily illuminating some aspect of the protagonist's personality. Such is the case with Heller's sisters, who define themselves by the food they prepare; Slocum's two friends from college, Lieberman and Pomoroy—one fat, the other lean; and Ralph Newsome, the presidential press officer skilled in verbal evasion. Two characters are noteworthy, however, for more complexity. One is Andrea Conover, whom Gold idealistically sees as "a floating seraph of ageless and ethereal beauty," although she is a sexually rapacious woman who associates sex with access to power. The other is Henry Kissinger, with whom Gold, and Heller, have an antagonistic relationship and yet whose rise to political power from academics, winning the hand of a beautiful blonde as his wife, and deemphasis upon his Jewishness mirrors Gold's aspirations.

Social Concerns

Good as Gold begins with two epigraphs that define its concerns. The first is a statement Lyndon B. Johnson made when he was Senate Majority Leader: "I've got his pecker in my pocket." This crude but forceful assertion highlights Joseph Heller's belief that the number one commodity in America's capital is power, with social status and wealth the second most important values for many Americans. According to the author, there are no statesmen at the nation's helm. Instead Heller presents the reader with a book-writing, self-promoting chief executive, a position-promising member of the President's inner circle, and an ambitious academician who would like to escape the burden of paper grading and become Secretary of State. In addition to these unsavory characters, Heller also spews invective at real Washington politicians, including Richard Nixon, David Eisenhower, and Henry Kissinger. In Heller's Washington, success is measured according to what does not get done.

Therefore Dr. Bruce Gold receives praise for a report he never writes; and a Presidential Commission, comprised of such representative figures as the Governor, the Ambassador, the Widow, the Spade, and the Jew, congratulates itself on accomplishing "in just two meetings what had taken others as long as three years: nothing." Action occurs not in meetings but in the illicit sexual couplings that seem de rigueur along the banks of the Potomac.

The novel's second epigraph comes from a story by Bernard Malamud: "If you ever forget you're a Jew, a gentile will remind you." In Good as Gold, Heller directly confronts for the first time in a novel his own Jewish heritage. Like his creator, his protagonist grows up on Coney Island, does graduate work at Columbia University, and becomes a writer. Indeed, author's and character's actions so closely parallel in this highly autobiographical work that as Gold throughout the novel ponders how to write a book on the Jewish experience in America, Heller does just that. Heller is particularly interested in Gold's love/ hate relationship with his extended Jewish family and in the anti-Semitism rampant in the government. Heller has revealed that he sought to contrast the two worlds in which Bruce Gold exists: "the intimate world of a large almost suffocating immigrant family whose successive members have experienced different stages of American life and assimilation" and "the very garish political public life of the celebrities in Washington politics."



Techniques

Good as Gold contains a rather disconcerting blend of absurdist and realist techniques. As in *Catch-22*, many of the characterizations are cartoon figures, for example, the testy, devoted WASP Pugh Biddle Conover, a gross parody of the Virginian gentleman-statesman, and Miss Plum, a big-breasted Girl Friday. However, others, such as Gold's long-suffering wife Belle, seem lifelike. And still others are indeed lifelike, as Heller refers to former White House officials and even includes actual newspaper clippings about them.

The language also reveals a confusing mixture of techniques, represented by the striking disparities between the two settings: New York City and Washington, D.C. The Yiddish-flavored dialogue of the Gold family dinner scenes—with the stepmother discoursing on burial plots, the brothers jealously baiting each other, and the sisters boasting of their culinary contributions—is humorous and convincing. Less effective are Heller's attempts to satirize bureaucratism in such exchanges as "What would I have to do?"

"Anything you want, as long as it's everything we tell you to say and do in support of our policies, whether you agree with them or not. You'll have complete freedom." The most irritatingly unbelievable passages are Pugh Biddle Conover's anti-Semitic tirades.

Themes

The multiple meanings of Heller's title reveal his thematic concerns. How good is Bruce Gold, the academician who holds contempt for his colleagues and students alike, the purveyor of catchy verbiage without any substance, the husband of the long-suffering Belle who has not one—but two mistresses, the Jew embarrassed by his family and willing to be "unnamed" to achieve power? In many respects the novel is like a morality play in which Washington's call to a possible cabinet position takes on overtones of a Satanic temptation for Gold to deny his ethnic and familial heritage. In fact, Heller has suggested such a connection in clarifying the moral themes of his third novel: "What is being ridiculed, deplored by me if not by my characters, is a moral corruption, a disavowal of responsibilities, a substitution of vanity, folly where other people's lives are concerned."

The title also relates to the dependence of Washington politics upon wordsmiths, crafters of catchy phrases to manipulate the electorate and obscure ugly realities.

Exactly how good is Gold in producing a currency of slogans? Disillusioned with governmental rhetoric, Heller once complained, ". . . now there's too much distance between the citizen-voter and his elected representative . . . the Presidency has become a kind of public-relations enterprise for the party in power."

In addition, the title raises a question Bruce Gold must ask himself: Will a position in Washington bring a power and status that is as valuable as gold? Or, as Heller phrases the question, "How much lower would he have to crawl to rise to the top?" Gold is clearly in danger of seeing himself as a commodity, a danger Heller makes explicit in Gold's dream that he has been transformed into a glistening Van Cleef and Arpels jewelry store where the wealthiest people in the nation shop. Ultimately, Bruce Gold must decide what values he considers golden.



Key Questions

Certainly Heller's satire of Washington politics during the Nixon administration should stimulate discussion from reaction to a President who prefers to write a book about serving the American public to actually doing so; to a press secretary who excels in equivocation, circular reasoning, evasion, qualifications, and contradiction; to an anti-Semitic Virginian statesman. Particularly provocative should be readers' reactions to Heller's portraits of actual politicians and use of newspaper clippings.

The role Jews have played in American political life is a fascinating topic for consideration. Does a rise to political prominence in Washington require a loss of ethnic identity? And is achieving distinction in academics the primary avenue into the political realm for Jews?

Students and teachers should enjoy discussing Heller's biting depiction of the self-promoting gamesmanship in academe and the world of publishing.

1. Why does Bruce Gold have trouble writing about the Jewish experience in America?
2. How is Gold alienated from his family? How do his father, his stepmother, his brother Sid, his sisters, and his mother-in-law react to him?
3. Is Julius Gold merely a Dickensian eccentric or does he play a more important role in the novel?
4. Why is Andrea Conover attractive to Gold? Why does he also have an affair with Linda Book? How do these women's last names relate to Gold's aspirations?
5. Does Gold's wife Belle transcend the stereotype of the long-suffering wife?

Do you think Heller suggests in this and other novels that a wife should realistically expect her husband to have affairs?

6. Do you perceive the Jewish characters in this novel primarily as vitally realistic human beings or as petty caricatures?
7. How successful is Heller's satire of academe? Note especially Heller's depiction of Gold's English Department vying to attract students through enticing course titles and descriptions.
8. Is Heller right in noting a problem with verbal prostitution in our country, that is, the meaningless act of selling one's words without concern for the expression of honest thoughts and emotions?
9. Is Heller's use of news clippings an effective technique?



10. Do you find Heller's portrayals of Henry Kissinger, Richard Nixon, and other politicians offensive and disrespectful or hilariously perceptive?

11. Do you believe at the end of the novel that Gold is at peace with his Jewish heritage?

Literary Precedents

Heller has explained his literary preparation for his third novel: "For Good as Gold I intentionally read English comic writers—Austen, Dickens, Wodehouse and Waugh. I was looking for certain kinds of 'literary clichés.'" Dickens's influence seems especially predominant in the flat, sometimes ludicrous characterizations and the Great Expectations (1861) narrative pattern of depicting the rise of the protagonist's hopes for success despite other characters' warnings and then the abrupt puncturing of his dreams.

Heller even directly refers to Dickens in the novel as "a long winded novelist . . .

whose ponderous works," in Gold's opinion, "were always too long and always flawed by a procession of eccentric, one-sided characters too large in number to keep track of, and an excessive abundance of extravagant coincidences and other unlikely events"—an ironic reminder of critics' complaints about Heller's own novels. Gold's pursuit of Andrea Conover's hand in marriage recalls the relationship between Adam Symes and Colonel Blount's daughter in Evelyn Waugh's *Vile Bodies* (1930), whereas Gold's desire for social prominence despite his recognition of the hypocrisy around him links him to William Thackeray's Becky Sharp in *Vanity Fair* (1847/1848). The self-referentiality of Heller's discourse on creating texts recalls Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1760), to which Heller alludes in mentioning that Gold wrote a paper on Sterne's novel.

Also essential to Heller as he worked on his manuscript were accounts of political events and key figures. For example, many details of his portrayal of Henry Kissinger come from the Marvin and Bernard Kalb biography, while Heller's Ralph Newsome, a verbally evasive press officer, owes much to newspaper accounts of Ron Ziegler's press conferences.

Related Titles

Within the corpus of Heller's work, *Good as Gold* shares the closest affinities with *God Knows* (1984; see separate entry) in the use of Yiddish dialect and in the author's examination of his Jewish heritage. Linking this novel to *Catch-22* (1961; see separate entry), critics have suggested *Good as Gold* does to Washington politics what the earlier book did to the military.

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