

Something Happened Short Guide

Something Happened by Joseph Heller

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Contents

Something Happened Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Characters.....	3
Social Concerns.....	4
Techniques.....	6
Themes.....	7
Key Questions.....	9
Literary Precedents.....	11
Related Titles.....	12
Copyright Information.....	13

Characters

Bob Slocum's psyche directs the novel. As Heller explained in an interview with George Plimpton, *Something Happened* is about Slocum's "interior, psychological survival," in counterpart to Yossarian's exterior, physical survival in *Catch-22*. There is a war in Slocum's soul. One side of him is the cynical seeker of self-gratification — the sex-obsessed consort of whores, the chooser of promotion over friendship.

However, the other side is the mourner of lost innocence — haunted by memories of the little boy inside himself, frustrated by his unfulfilled desire for the allegorical Virginia, and deeply attracted to his oldest son's generosity and ability to love. In one sense Slocum is the consummate corporate man eager to climb the ladder to success; yet conversely in his *Happiness Charts* he notes that those individuals who most closely identify with the corporation are the least happy, he attacks his company's practices, although participating in them, and he occasionally expresses longings to be powerless.

Contradictions in Slocum's character abound. He is both insensitive and tender, concealing and revealing of his narcissism, sexism, and racism. Slocum laments, "The problem is that I don't know who or what I really am"; however, he is often remarkably self-perceptive, particularly in his parenthetical asides. The only consistency in Slocum's character is his paranoia.

Heller has admitted that he originally intended Bob Slocum to be despicable but that he became a more sympathetic character as the narrative unfolded.

Perhaps Slocum's most significant characteristic is, as Heller says, that "[h]e is very human." Indeed, it is that human fallibility that makes his dehumanization in the last chapter of the novel so chilling.

Other characters in the narrative are not deeply developed. For instance, there are the stereotyped employees Slocum works with, including Green, White, Black, and Brown. Neither his wife, eldest son, nor daughter are named; only his brain-damaged youngest son Derek, whose birth his father would like to deny. The family members are meant to serve typical roles rather than to be highly individualized characters. Thus Heller presents readers with the aging wife who attempts to use flirting and alcohol as defense mechanisms against boredom and loneliness, the disputatious fifteen-year-old daughter who resents any signs of affection from her father, and the nine-year-old son whose innate goodness renders him helpless in a success-oriented, backstabbing world. These characters function primarily as reflectors of Slocum himself, with his wife representing the desire for family unity and loyalty, his daughter representing the skeptical recognition of his self-deceptions, and his older son representing his idealism.



Social Concerns

Like *Catch-22* (1961), *Something Happened* exposes the moral vacuity of American society. In this later novel, the targets of Heller's satire are two: the cutthroat corporate realm and the suburbanite middle-class family.

Through the eyes of his narrator/ protagonist Bob Slocum, Heller presents the hierarchical relationships and the social and sexual intrigues of the employees of an unidentified company — a company that Heller has suggested in conversation has affinities with Time, Incorporated, where he worked as an advertising copywriter from 1952 to 1956. In portraying the corporate world, the author uses stereotyped situations: the executive burnout in the upper ranks, the incompetent secretary whom everyone is afraid to fire, the office party flirtations and sexual misconduct at company conventions, and the requisite golf games. Fear and distrust flourish as department competes with department and individual vies against individual for promotion.

In such a high-pressured atmosphere, nervous breakdowns are the norm, and suicides are an anticipated health hazard, as proven when Slocum nonchalantly reports: "We average three suicides a year: two men, usually on the middle-executive level, kill themselves every twelve months, almost always by gunshot, and one girl, usually unmarried, separated, or divorced, who generally does the job with sleeping pills."

Home life provides no more satisfaction than the corporate realm. The typical American middle-class family, embodied by the Slocums, is in decline.

Bob Slocum ironically observes, "We are a two-car family in a Class A suburb in Connecticut. Advertising people of the U.S. Census Bureau . . . prepare statistics that include us in the categories of human beings enjoying the richest life." Such chapter titles as "My wife is unhappy," "My daughter's unhappy," and "My little boy is having difficulties," however, negate the statistical conclusion. Among the ills of modern family life that Heller diagnoses are marital infidelity, alcoholism, teen-age resentment of parents, children's lack of self-esteem or inability to compete in a brutal world, boredom, and coping with having a brain-damaged child.

Both Heller's depictions of the corporate world and domestic life reflect a larger disillusionment with America — an America of lost innocence. An America that, according to Heller, has only improved in two areas — "smut and weaponry." Slocum complains: From sea to shining sea the country is filling with slag, shale, and used-up automobile tires. The fruited plain is coated with insecticide and chemical fertilizers.

Even pure horseshit is hard to come by these days. They add preservatives. You don't find fish in lakes and rivers anymore. You have to catch them in cans. Towns die. Oil spills. Money talks. God listens. God is good, a real team player. 'American the Beautiful' isn't: it was over the day the first white man set foot on the continent to live.

The passage, however, is less a statement of Heller's concerns about the American environment than it is a reflection of the moral debris within Slocum's interior landscape.



Techniques

Abandoning the multiple points of view of *Catch-22*, Heller in *Something Happened* experiments with a first person interior monologue. Related in the present tense, Bob Slocum's monologue, however, is less important for advancing the action than for conveying his memories of key events in the past, his dire presentiments of the future, and his confessions of anxieties and moral failings. The time shifts in the narration, which occur with greater frequency as the monologue unfolds, reflect Slocum's psychological breakdown. Heller has explained, "*Something Happened* is written from the point of view of someone so close to madness that he no longer has the ability to control what to think about." Perhaps the most interesting dimension of the narrator's monologue is that it shows his avoidance of painful realities. For example, whenever, he starts discussing Derek, he digresses, most often to sex reveries. As in *Catch-22*, repetition is significant, with Slocum's recollections of his adolescent gropings with Virginia being the major unifying device revealing the futility of his efforts to romanticize his past.

The narrative structure relates closely to Heller's treatment of point of view. The monologue is divided into nine sections, which follow an orderly sequence of psychologically introducing Slocum, then portraying his company and each member of his family, then depicting two climactic events in Slocum's life — his acceptance of his colleague Kagle's job and his unwittingly causing the death of his son, the fulfillment of Slocum's fears throughout the novel — and finally presenting Slocum assuming command of his company in a brief epilogue. The structure moves us from the protagonist's tenuous control in his work and domestic environments to accelerating angst and narrative chaos to a return to an insidious control achieved only by Slocum's concealing the facts of his son's death.

That structure, in turn, directly relates to Slocum's style. In an interview Heller noted that Slocum's style reflects his mental condition: "At the beginning, the prose is very orderly, very precise, very controlled. But as you move into the middle, as Slocum becomes more emotional, the prose gets less orderly and the sentences get longer." Oxymorons increase, as do parenthetical expressions that qualify or contradict what Slocum has just said and that turn readers' grammatical expectations upside down since the seemingly nonessential parenthetical asides seem more meaningful than the nonparenthetical expressions. Furthermore, the dialogue Slocum presents bristles with disagreement and tension.

The ending of the novel then returns to short declarative sentences, fewer parenthetical statements, and dialogue that depicts a surface politeness.

Throughout the novel the tone is flat and ordinary. Whether articulating deep-seated insecurities or describing his bedroom exploits, Slocum's voice remains devoid of passion. Many readers and critics have found the tone boring, yet one should note that the effect is intentional. Wedding content and form, Heller crafted Slocum's speeches to reflect the monotony of his life.



Themes

The title of Heller's second novel reveals its major theme — that there is an unidentifiable something that happened to create anxiety and disillusionment in its Everyman protagonist.

Through Bob Slocum's middle-age crisis, Heller confronts us with the truth that as humans age, they lose innocence and confidence in their ability to shape their destinies. Success in the corporate world does not guarantee happiness. Dreams of family affection and harmony are quickly dispelled by the realities of combativeness, insecurity, and guilt that characterize the Slocum family's interactions. Bob Slocum's idealism becomes transformed into acceptance of life's banalities. As Heller explains, *Something Happened* "is a very bleak book, a melancholy illumination on the part of a man in his forties who looks at his past and looks at his present and tries to see some kind of future and sees not much of any."

Moreover, not only does the novel suggest there is a haunting, amorphous "something" that must have directed our fate, but there is an equally amorphous "something" that forebodes disaster, a paranoia-inspired presentiment that Slocum terms "the willies."

It is the willies that make Slocum fearful about his job security despite salary raises and promotions, that make him fantasize that his children will drown, choke, or be murdered, that evoke disturbing sexual memories, and that compel him in an unforgettably horrible scene to hug his injured son so tightly in an attempt to protect and comfort him that he causes the boy's death by asphyxiation.

Ultimately as do *Catch-22* and *Closing Time* (1994), *Something Happened* confronts human fallibility and mortality.

The narrative is permeated with references to disease, disasters, the aging process, and death. One of the most poignant passages is when Bob Slocum realizes that his elder son is growing distant from him as the boy matures.

As his son leaves the room and closes the door behind him, reminding us of the novel's opening sentence in which Slocum revealed his fear of closed doors, Slocum confides: "I don't want him to go. My memory's failing, my bladder is weak, my arches are falling, my tonsils and adenoids are gone, and my jawbone is rotting, and now my little boy wants to cast me away and leave me behind for reasons he won't give me. What else will I have?" He then predicts a future with nothing to look forward to except incontinence and then death. When Slocum laments that he wants his son back, he is also lamenting the loss of his own youth.

The inexorable march of time is a realization that many of Heller's characters and indeed Heller himself have difficulty accepting.



Another of Heller's concerns, which links his second novel with *Catch-22*, is an emphasis upon the failure of meaningful communication. According to Sanford Pinsker in *Understanding Joseph Heller*, "Communication in *Something Happened* is always on the edge of breaking down, of dissolving, of deconstructing itself into meaninglessness." Slocum confesses, "All my life, it seems, I've been sandwiched between people who will not speak." These include his mother, condemned to silence before she died, his brain-damaged son who is unable to articulate ideas, and various relatives with whom he does not converse. Slocum himself is tormented by dreams that he cannot speak, and he does indeed stammer.

When he speaks within the workplace, he mimics the person he is speaking with in terms of pace, volume, vocabulary, and dialect. When he speaks to his family, he is often taunting or evasive. Even his narration often seems empty verbosity, for it is filled with repetition and contradiction, particularly in its long parenthetical passages.



Key Questions

Readers who delighted in Heller's verbal wit and exposure of bureaucratic absurdities in *Catch-22* may be disappointed in *Something Happened*.

Often animated debate results between those who find reading the over five hundred-page pessimistic novel an exercise in tedium and those who view the book as a penetratingly accurate capturing of the stultifying routines of middle-class life and a brilliant rendering of psychic disintegration. Discussion groups may also consider whether they find successful Heller's use of a first person monologue.

Discussion of this novel may take a personal turn as participants compare Heller's depiction to their own experiences and perceptions of the corporate world and family life, especially the changing dynamics between husband and wife, parents and children as time passes.

1. Some reviewers complained that in *Something Happened*, nothing happens. Is that complaint fair?
2. Does Bob Slocum seem a reliable or unreliable narrator? Does his paranoia affect our evaluation of the trustworthiness of his perceptions?
3. Do you think Heller suggests that the events in Slocum's life are, as Slocum himself contends, beyond his control or that Heller condemns Slocum for avoiding responsibility for his decisions and actions?
4. How has Virginia Markowitz affected Slocum's life? Of what significance is her name?
5. Why does Heller not give the name of the company that Slocum works for nor specify its product? If Slocum believes the company is "benevolent," then why is fear in the workplace so pervasive?
6. Slocum confesses that he worries about the decline of American civilization. What evidences of that decline does Heller present?
7. Is Slocum's fixation on sexual misconduct a sign of a midlife crisis, perhaps revealing anxiety over his virility?
8. What impact does the namelessness of Slocum's wife, daughter, and elder son have upon the reader?
9. Do you think Slocum loves Derek? 10. Does Slocum's relationship with his older son change your conception of the protagonist?
11. What is your reaction to the final chapter entitled "Nobody knows what I've done"? Does Slocum finally achieve success and take command of his life?



12. Is this a novel without hope? 13. Do you agree with Heller's assertion that Bob Slocum is "the most contemptible person I've ever found in literature"?

Literary Precedents

The major influence upon *Something Happened* is William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929). Stylistically, Heller has adopted from Faulkner the use of a first person monologue, which in its fragmented chronology reveals the constant impinging of the past upon the present. Thematically, the similarities between the two works are quite apparent. Both chart the disintegration of a family, satirize the commercial orientation of the modern world, and lament lost innocence. Most obvious is the parallel between Heller's Derek Slocum and Faulkner's Benjy Compson, and in fact, Heller actually refers to Benjy in the section entitled "It is not true." Also Bob Slocum — in his bitter diatribes about modern life and his mistreatment of his wife and daughter — resembles Jason Compson.

In his penetrating self-diagnosis, Slocum is reminiscent of Dostoevsky's *Underground Man* and T. S. Eliot's *Prufrock*. Heller has said in concentrating upon the processes of Bob Slocum's mind he was trying to achieve a similar technique to Samuel Beckett in his trilogy *Molloy* (1951), *Malone Died* (1951), and *The Unnamable* (1953). He also has asserted that he was trying to create a sense of the horrifying in the familiar, "the same sense of imprisonment, of intimidation, of psychological paralysis and enslavement" as in Kafka's works, but without Kafkaesque symbolism.

When questioned about the influences from his reading upon *Something Happened*, Heller mentioned the minor influence of Henry James. In a scene in which Slocum visits a psychiatrist, the psychiatrist repeatedly says, "Ah?"

That response, Heller claims, was inspired by James's *The Ambassadors* (1903). Critics have linked Heller's portrayal of the corporate world to such books as Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1955) and William Whyte's *The Organization Man* (1956).



Related Titles

Something Happened is most closely related to Heller's fourth novel, *God Knows* (1984), in the use of a first-person monologue that through memory links the past to the present and its moving depiction of the love and pain involved in the father/son relationship.



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