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SURVIVAL AND MORAL RESPONSIBILITY: THE HUMANISTIC HERO IN PETER HELLER'S THE DOG STARS

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Abstract

This article examines how Peter Heller constructs the humanistic hero in The Dog Stars (2012) through the tension between survival and moral responsibility. Qualitative close reading, informed by Virginia Held's ethics of care, connects Hig's ethical responses with first-person narration, fragmented syntax, and spatial contrasts. The analysis focuses on his dependence on Bangley, his assistance to sick families, his refusal to kill surviving attackers, his grief for Jasper, and his experience of hospitality. These episodes reveal that compassion coexists with coercion and that care involves receiving assistance as well as providing it. Narrative fragmentation registers both vulnerability and the interruption of violent reasoning, while movement beyond the defended airfield opens possibilities for voluntary association. We argue that Hig's humanistic significance lies in his continuing negotiation of responsibility within relationships that sustain and constrain him. The novel thereby complicates the self-sufficient survivor through a protagonist whose moral agency remains dependent, fallible, and open to revision.

Keywords: Peter Heller; The Dog Stars; humanistic hero; moral responsibility; ethics of care; post-apocalyptic fiction.

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1 Introduction

Survival in post-apocalyptic fiction poses an ethical problem alongside the practical demands of food, shelter, and defence. When institutions cease to regulate conduct, survivors must decide whose vulnerability deserves a response and what violence they can justify. Studies of the genre often organise this question around survival: Rajendran and Baghavandoss observe that the post-apocalyptic films they examine "focus on survival of the fittest" [1, p. 2]. That emphasis leaves open what a survivor owes to others, and it is this question that Heller's novel pursues. Peter Heller's The Dog Stars (2012) explores this problem through Hig, a pilot living at a Colorado airfield with his dog Jasper and the armed survivor Bangley. Their security depends on cooperation, yet their responses to strangers differ. Hig benefits from defensive violence while remaining troubled by its consequences.

Previous scholarship connects the novel's emotional concerns with its literary form. Cao [2, pp. 196–201] examines ecological loss, interpersonal alienation, and cultural identity, including the effects of first-person narration. Xin and Cao [3, pp. 981–983] follow Hig's movement from mourning towards companionship and discuss the fragmented language through which his experience becomes accessible. Sharma [4, pp. 126–127], comparing The Dog Stars with Station Eleven, also addresses memory, narrative disruption, and moral ambiguity. Consequently, a new reading cannot claim that connection or narrative form has been overlooked. Our concern is the relationship between these features and the construction of a humanistic hero.

Held's ethics of care provides a useful starting point. Her account places particular needs and human interdependence at the centre of moral inquiry [5, pp. 10–14]. It also distinguishes effective caring practices from benevolent intentions alone [5, p. 51]. We use humanistic hero to describe a protagonist whose responses to vulnerable others preserve possibilities of care despite pressures towards exclusion. This is an interpretive category, not a claim of moral perfection. The article asks how Hig's choices, dependencies, and narrative voice jointly produce this conception of heroism. We argue that Heller makes responsibility an ongoing negotiation within relationships, rather than an accomplishment secured by individual strength.

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2 Methods

The study uses qualitative close reading, supported by a descriptive check of word frequencies. The corpus is the complete narrative of Heller's The Dog Stars in the Knopf electronic edition [6], about 82,700 words in three books (29,300, 31,700, and 21,700 words), excluding paratext. Because electronic pagination varies, passages are located by book and chapter. Every quotation was checked against the text of the edition, and quotations keep the wording and sentence fragments of the source.

Passages were selected in two stages. First, each of the thirteen chapters was screened for scenes in which another being's vulnerability is set beside Hig's security, dependence, or freedom, together with passages in which he interprets these relations; close reading was combined with keyword searches of the full text (for example help, kill, Mennonites, and Cima). Second, the candidate scenes were tested against four criteria derived from Held [5]: (A) attention to the needs of particular others [5, pp. 10–14]; (B) care as a practice and not only an intention [5, p. 51]; (C) interdependence beyond the opposition of egoism and altruism [5, pp. 12–14]; and (D) trust together with mutual autonomy [5, pp. 55–57]. Ten passages from seven of the thirteen chapters met at least one criterion and allowed formal analysis, and they were retained (Table 1). Passages that complicate the argument, such as the coercion at the truck and Hig's reliance on Bangley, were included deliberately.

Table 1. Passages analysed and the criteria applied

No.	Location	Situation	Criteria
1	Book 1, chap. 1	Division of roles with Bangley: plane and guns	C
2	Book 1, chap. 1	Imagined life without Bangley; "like a married couple"	C
3	Book 1, chap. 3	Fear that Bangley may kill Hig and Jasper if the visits become too risky	A, C
4	Book 1, chap. 4	Truck encounter: survivors spared, supplies loaded under threat	A, B
5	Book 1, chap. 6	"Help asked and given": an alternative to universal suspicion	C, D
6	Book 1, chap. 6	Jasper's death: kinship named in fragments	A, C
7	Book 2, chap. 1	Aftermath of the loss: fire and food neglected	B
8	Book 2, chap. 4	Meal with Cima and her father	C, D
9	Book 1, chap. 1	Opening self-description: vanished trout, Cain	A
10	Book 3, chap. 3	Cima nurses the wounded Bangley and treats the families Hig once visited alone	A, B, C

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Note. A = attention to particular needs [5, pp. 10–14]; B = care as practice [5, p. 51]; C = interdependence beyond egoism and altruism [5, pp. 12–14]; D = trust and mutual autonomy [5, pp. 55–57].

Each passage was described under three headings: the situation, Hig's action or response, and the formal means of its presentation (first-person qualification, interrupted syntax, metaphor, dialogue, and the contrast between defended and hospitable spaces). The descriptions were then compared across passages to see whether the same device performs different ethical functions. To avoid relying on isolated scenes alone, we also counted forms of kill, the names Jasper, Bangley, and Cima in each book and normalised the counts per 1,000 words (Table 2). Because the kill count also covers figurative and retrospective uses, the frequencies serve as contextual indicators of emphasis, and interpretation rests on the close readings.

The resulting claims concern how selected passages construct moral agency. They do not establish the frequency of compassionate behaviour or prove that Hig's perspective expresses Heller's position without qualification. Counter-evidence was sought for each claim: Hig's coercion, his reliance on Bangley, and his reception of care. The earlier studies [2–4, 7] are used in Section 4 to test whether the results confirm, qualify, or extend existing readings.

3 Results

3.1 Dependence complicates moral distinction

Hig initially explains the partnership through complementary capacities: "I have the plane, I am the eyes, he has the guns, he is the muscle" [6, book 1, chap. 1]. The parallel clauses distribute agency between the men. His subsequent admission, "I don't have the stomach for killing," locates an ethical difference inside this arrangement. Nevertheless, his discomfort does not make him independent of its violence. The surrounding reflection acknowledges that neither man might survive alone. We read this juxtaposition as a restriction on Hig's moral self-presentation: his conscience operates within a system from which he benefits.

The domestic comparison sharpens this ambivalence. Imagining life without Bangley, Hig interrupts his own hostile speculation with "Would I? Maybe"

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before describing them as "like a married couple" [6, book 1, chap. 1]. Questions and qualifications prevent the passage from settling into a simple judgement. Dependence includes irritation and companionship as well as protection. Similarly, Hig fears that visits to the sick families might lead Bangley to kill him and Jasper [6, book 1, chap. 3]. The threat is his apprehension, not a confirmed plan. His continued visits reveal a commitment extending beyond the airfield's immediate partnership, but the text does not require us to assume that such contact brings him no emotional benefit.

3.2 Mercy interrupts violence without cancelling coercion

The encounter at the abandoned truck gives the conflict a specific object: access to soft drinks. Having killed one attacker, Hig refuses to kill the survivors. His internal judgement contracts into "Not a staple, a luxury," followed by the broken refusal "Not. Not today" [6, book 1, chap. 4]. The contrast distinguishes necessity from desire, while the repeated negative interrupts the calculation that would justify further killing. Syntax participates in the decision. Here, fragmentation does more than reproduce a damaged mental state; it marks a limit Hig places on his own conduct.

The scene, however, resists an uncomplicated celebration of mercy. Hig frightens the men and orders them to load supplies into his plane. His refusal to execute them changes the encounter without establishing equality or trust. "Done too much of that" places the decision against an acknowledged history of killing [6, book 1, chap. 4]. In our reading, its ethical force comes from this imperfect interruption of violence. The qualification matters: sparing a life can coexist with domination, and Hig's self-restraint does not erase the survivors' fear.

3.3 Hospitality gives freedom a relational form

Hig explicitly contrasts Bangley's prohibition on negotiation with the possibility of allowing a visitor to live longer. He imagines the endpoint of universal suspicion as "a ringing solitude," whereas connection becomes visible through ordinary gestures: "Help asked and given. A smile across a dirt yard, a wave" [6, book 1, chap. 6]. The compressed images move from an abstract disagreement to

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recognisable exchanges. Significantly, help is both requested and offered. Hig's alternative already includes the possibility that he will need others.

This reciprocity acquires spatial form at the meal with Cima and her father. Hig compares eating with Bangley to "feeding time in a zoo of our own making"; the new encounter feels different because "I was free to leave. They were free to disinvite me" [6, book 2, chap. 4]. The zoo metaphor makes their defended existence resemble confinement. The paired declarations of freedom then distribute choice among guest and hosts. Hig receives food and welcome rather than acting as a rescuer. Moreover, Cima's questions and her father's participation prevent the scene from becoming his solitary achievement. Hospitality emerges as an interaction whose value depends on several people's willingness to sustain it.

Book 3 extends this reciprocity to a wounded man. After Bangley is shot, Cima "set and splinted his leg" and "cleaned and sewed shut the hole in his left side," and when he cannot drink, "She got water and Sprite into him with a turkey baster" [6, book 3, chap. 3]. The man whose rule was "Never ever negotiate" [6, book 1, chap. 6] now depends on a stranger's practice of care, and the Sprite that Hig once carried to the families without telling him [6, book 1, chap. 1] reappears as a means of keeping him alive. Care also ceases to be Hig's private errand, since Cima examines the families herself and "sewed up bad cuts, dressed wounds, called for buckets of warm water" [6, book 3, chap. 3]. We read these details as the point at which Held's criterion of practice [5, p. 51] is met by several people and not by Hig alone, so that the ending places responsibility in a small community whose members both give and receive care.

3.4 Grief preserves attachment but can disable action

After Jasper's death, the sequence "Jasper. Little brother. My heart" expresses kinship through verbless fragments [6, book 1, chap. 6]. The dog is named through a relationship whose significance exceeds his usefulness as an alarm. Yet the narrative does not turn mourning directly into effective care. At the beginning of book 2, Hig neglects the fire and food and remains beside Jasper's body [6, book 2, chap. 1]. Grief exposes the dependency underlying his former routine and temporarily disrupts his ability to sustain himself.

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The opening lament for vanished trout similarly establishes attention to losses beyond human society [6, book 1, chap. 1]. Nevertheless, ecological grief and practical assistance are different responses. The former enlarges the field of what Hig values; it does not by itself demonstrate that he meets another being's needs. Taken together, these passages distinguish emotional attachment, moral reflection, and action. Their connections support a humanistic reading, but their differences prevent every expression of sadness from being classified as heroism. There is also a tension within the opening act of self-description. Hig acknowledges his work of maintaining the aircraft before turning to vanished fish, lost species, and his dead wife. Practical competence and remembered attachment occupy the same narrative opening. His comparison of himself with Cain rather than Adam further unsettles any expectation of an innocent founder beginning humanity again [6, book 1, chap. 1]. We take this self-implication seriously: the humanistic protagonist enters the narrative already conscious of damage and complicity. The question becomes what he can sustain from that position, rather than whether catastrophe has left him morally untouched.

3.5 Distribution of key terms across the three books

The frequency check shows how attention shifts across the novel (Table 2). Forms of kill occur 48 times in Book 1 (1.64 per 1,000 words), 27 times in Book 2 (0.85), and 4 times in Book 3 (0.18). Cima, who does not appear in Book 1, is named 3 times in Book 2 and 29 times in Book 3 (1.33 per 1,000 words). Mentions of Bangley fall from 3.76 to 2.02 per 1,000 words and those of Jasper from 2.90 to 0.55. These figures describe emphasis only; they do not show that any particular scene is ethical, which is why they are read alongside the passages in 3.1–3.4.

Table 2. Frequency of selected terms by book (raw count and count per 1,000 words)

Term	Book 1	Book 2	Book 3	Whole text
kill (all forms)	48 (1.64)	27 (0.85)	4 (0.18)	79 (0.96)
Jasper	85 (2.90)	27 (0.85)	12 (0.55)	124 (1.50)
Bangley	110 (3.76)	75 (2.37)	44 (2.02)	229 (2.77)
Cima	0 (0.00)	3 (0.09)	29 (1.33)	32 (0.39)
Words in book	29,276	31,683	21,747	82,706

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4 Discussion

The four main findings answer the research question. First, Hig's ethical stance develops inside dependence: the partnership in which "I have the plane, I am the eyes, he has the guns, he is the muscle" [6, book 1, chap. 1] shelters his reluctance to kill, and he fears that Bangley could kill him and Jasper if the visits to the families become too risky [6, book 1, chap. 3]. Second, mercy at the truck interrupts violence without cancelling coercion: "Not. Not today" [6, book 1, chap. 4] stops the killing while the survivors remain frightened and ordered to load the plane. Third, hospitality gives freedom a reciprocal form, "I was free to leave. They were free to disinvite me" [6, book 2, chap. 4], and in Book 3 the same reciprocity reaches Bangley, who is nursed by Cima [6, book 3, chap. 3]. Fourth, grief preserves attachment but can disable action, as the fragments after Jasper's death and the neglected fire show [6, book 1, chap. 6; book 2, chap. 1]. Taken together, these findings locate Hig's humanistic significance in the continuing negotiation of responsibility within relations that sustain and constrain him.

The frequency check supports this movement without proving it. Forms of kill fall from 1.64 per 1,000 words in Book 1 to 0.18 in Book 3, while Cima, absent from Book 1, reaches 1.33 per 1,000 words in Book 3 (Table 2). The pattern coincides with the shift from the defended airfield to the wider and more hospitable spaces analysed in 3.3. Frequency, however, records only emphasis; the ethical meaning of the shift is established by the passages themselves, in which the vocabulary of killing yields to scenes of exchange, and not by the counts.

The results both confirm and extend earlier readings. Xin and Cao note that Melissa is named 25 times, mostly in the first half of the narrative, and read this as mourning for the world before the pandemic [3, p. 981]. Our count of the electronic text gives 24 occurrences, 18 of them in the first half, which supports their observation. We add that the novel does not leave grief at the level of memory: at the opening of Book 2 it becomes a practical failure to keep the fire and food going [6, book 2, chap. 1]. Xin and Cao also argue that the fragmented sentences reflect "the chaotic state of his mind" [3, p. 983]. The truck passage shows that the same device can do different work, since the repeated "Not"

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interrupts a justification for killing and marks a choice, not only a disorder. Cao links the novel's loneliness to ecological and interpersonal alienation [2, p. 201]. Our reading suggests that the novel also proposes a remedy located in reciprocal exchange, "Help asked and given" [6, book 1, chap. 6], and not simply in the presence of a companion. Sharma observes that trauma is "formally enacted through fragmented, recursive structures" [4, p. 126] and treats the moral ambiguity of survival in general terms [4, p. 127]. We locate that ambiguity in particular scenes, above all in the coexistence of mercy and domination at the truck.

A comparison with Guo's reading of The Road clarifies what is distinctive here. The father there, although not free of self-preservation, "never surrenders himself to barbarity" [7, p. 4] because he must protect his son, so the ethical choice is organised around kinship. Hig's responsibilities extend to sick neighbours, hosts, and defeated attackers, which supports our claim that his significance is relational rather than filial. Rajendran and Baghavandoss observe that post-apocalyptic films "focus on survival of the fittest" [1, p. 2]; Heller's novel qualifies that emphasis by making the survivor's fitness depend on a partner he distrusts and on strangers whose welcome he cannot command.

The findings also bear on the theoretical framework. Held argues that persons in caring relations act for "self-and-other together" and that their stance is "neither egoistic nor altruistic" [5, p. 12]. This revises the assumption that Hig's choices become humanistic only when he gains nothing: his longing for company does not invalidate hospitality, just as receiving food does not reduce him to a self-interested guest. Held's account of trust adds a limit. She holds that persons ought to take a chance on trust if they lack reasons to mistrust, yet she also warns that misplaced trust can encourage exploitation [5, p. 57]. The meal with Cima and her father meets both conditions, because the parties acknowledge each other's freedom to continue or end the encounter, which corresponds to Held's mutual autonomy, with its "mutual understandings and acceptances" of shared time and space [5, p. 55]. Cima's choices must therefore remain part of the interpretation instead of becoming evidence of Hig's recovery alone. Held's emphasis on practice [5, p. 51] also explains why grief cannot be classified as heroism by itself: attachment becomes care only when it issues in the work of caring.

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The study has limits. Chapters without an analysed passage, notably the journey and the violent episode at the tower in Book 3, chapter 2, remain outside the present selection, and applying the criteria to them is a task for further work. It rests on one novel and one narrator, on ten purposively selected passages, from seven of the thirteen chapters, and on locators by book and chapter, because the electronic edition lacks stable print pagination. The frequency counts are approximate, since kill includes figurative uses and the names were counted in the electronic text. Held's framework concerns human relationships, so its extension to Jasper and to ecological loss is our literary application and not her definition of a humanistic hero. Further research could test the same criteria on other narrators in the genre, in particular on McCarthy's The Road and Whitehead's Zone One, and could ask whether greater confidence or readiness to take risks is a weaker sign of a hero's development than the acknowledgement of another person's agency, the interruption of unnecessary violence, and participation in relations that allow care to circulate.

5 Conclusion

The Dog Stars constructs its humanistic hero through the interaction of ethical conflict and narrative form. Hig's dependence on Bangley complicates his rejection of habitual violence; the truck encounter reveals mercy without eliminating coercion. Hospitality gives freedom a reciprocal structure, while grief discloses attachments that both sustain and unsettle him. We conclude that Hig's heroism lies in repeatedly negotiating responsibility rather than possessing an unchanging moral superiority. First-person qualifications, interrupted sentences, and contrasting spaces make that negotiation perceptible. Heller's protagonist consequently offers a model of survival in which preserving humanity requires attention to the relationships through which life becomes possible.

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