

# ***The Catcher in the Rye:*** **The War Against Lost Innocence**

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## **Introduction**

In this paper I wish to take a psychological approach to *The Catcher in the Rye*, the major novel of J.D. Salinger. First, I will investigate the character of Holden as a lonely libertine. Second, I will analyze Holden's ideas of innocence and insincerity. Finally, I will think about Holden's wish to be the catcher in the rye. I have focused on these specific aspects of the hero of this story because I have observed that it is from these angles that critics have examined the novel.

## **Holden as a Lonely Libertine**

About the hero of this novel Warren French states, "Although Holden, as critics have thronged to point out, shares much of phoniness he complains of in others, he differs from those he meets in that he still has genuinely passionate feelings that have atrophied in what we would now call conformist clones."<sup>1</sup> To be frank, he is a problem-child because his language is bad and he is not cooperative. In spite of his sixteen years, he cannot understand the reasoning of society. He is against the phoniness in American culture that he thinks is so prevalent. He always carries this condemnation in his mind. His character is this way. At Pencey Prep, which is the fourth school he has transferred to, he was expelled. He was allowed to stay in his school's dormitory until Wednesday, but he ran away before that day arrived.

Obviously he could not stand the phoniness around him, and he did not want to be around that school any longer. It made him sad and lonesome. As a result, he became a lonely libertine. At the same time during his disturbing trip, his conversion "from innocence to experience"<sup>2</sup> started. Before this troublesome trip, he visited Mr. Spencer, a teacher of history. When Holden was running down from the top of a hill to greet Spencer, the boy got out of breath:

Anyway, as soon as I got my breath back I ran across Route 204. It was icy as hell and I damn near fell down. I don't even know what I was running for —I guess I just felt like it. After I got across the road, I felt like I was sort of disappearing. It was that kind of a crazy afternoon, terrifically cold, and no sun out or anything, and you felt like you were disappearing every time you crossed a road.<sup>3</sup>

Not only is he quite disturbed, but he has also become physically unstable. Keisuke Tanaka notes, "Holden's isolation grew worse and worse. His existence is a total surprise."<sup>4</sup> Holden chooses isolation for himself. Yet it is impossible for him to act by himself.

He ran away from Pencey, and then he exhausted himself by his dissipations. Of course he is not happy. He always feels gloomy. What is the essential thing, then, for Holden? Gerald Rosen says, "Holden possesses the necessary but painful gift of the novelist – the intuitive ability to perceive that words are instruments used to nonverbal reality. So he needs more than even good advice, he needs a living adult, a mature person within the culture who, by his or her living presence, will demonstrate a possibility that Holden might achieve if he gives up the nondefined personality of his childhood and accepts a role as a mature member of the society."<sup>5</sup> That will perhaps help to form his character.

But Holden cannot meet such a mature person. His parents do not appear. Only his mother's voice is heard for a short time. At that time he was hiding in a closet because he did not want to let his mother know about his withdrawal from school. Of course he feels sorry for his parents, especially for his mother. Ever since his brother Allie died, his mother has been nervous, so he feels sympathy for his mother. According to Rosen, "Holden's mother, though well-meaning, won't be of much help either. 'She still isn't over my brother Allie yet,' and, 'She's nervous as hell. Half the time she's up all night smoking cigarettes.' Like the other adults, parents cannot be relied upon to see, much less give good advice."<sup>6</sup> Holden cannot unburden his heart to his parents. For that reason he cannot confide in other adults either. Instead, he starts to express his sharp criticism of the adult world. On the other hand, "he does not wish to grow up because sees no role for himself in the adult world."<sup>7</sup> So "Seeking protection himself, Holden is forced to protect the adults he encounters."<sup>8</sup> In the adult world his isolation is even worse.

As a result, he feels the ennui of loneliness. Sometimes, he tries to get Sally, Luce, and Mr. Antolini to agree with his opinion. He speaks of his indignation to Sally:

"Did you ever get fed up?" I said. "I mean did you ever get scared that everything was going to go lousy unless you did something? I mean do you like school, and all that stuff?"<sup>9</sup>

His words make a disagreeable impression on Sally. But he talks about his frustrations one after another:

"I hate living in New York and all. Taxi-cabs, and Madison Avenue buses, with the drivers and all always yelling at you to get out at the rear door, and being

introduced to phoney guys that call the Lunts angels, and going up and down in elevators when you just want to go outside, and guys fitting your pants all the time at Brooks',"<sup>10</sup>

It was all very serious to Holden. But the problem was too difficult for Sally. They gradually talked about different feelings. He became desperate; he proposed they should get out of New York. She was against his wild idea. Consequently, he was disappointed in her reaction. He thought she would appreciate his intentions. Contrary to his expectations, her comments increased his loneliness.

But his idea of escape from New York—namely, escape from the phoney world—gradually came to be more concrete. Of course he knew it was an insane idea. He knew the plan was far from being realized. Nevertheless, he sought even more loneliness. Even though he was tired of isolation, he wished for even more loneliness. This shows how unstable Holden is.

Why does he choose loneliness? Apparently he can find peace of mind in a visionary scheme when he feels lonely. And he is relieved to contact his sister Phoebe. Phoebe's hearty love heals his unrest. Finally, his lonely journey finishes on the third day.

As a libertine, everything he tried went wrong. But his loneliness, he realized, is part of his self-discipline. At the end of the novel, Holden talked about his impressions of this experience:

I don't know what the hell to say. If you want to know the truth, I don't *know* what I think about it. I'm sorry I told so many people about it. About all I know is, I sort of *miss* everybody I told about.<sup>11</sup>

He yearns for the past, and he is in deep meditation now. His loneliness has taught him that sometimes he must resign himself to fate.

### **Innocence and Insincerity**

Concerning the style of *Catcher*, Michael Cowan writes: "Although *Catcher* is of course a written document, Holden's narrative is represented as a spoken narrative...it offers us the 'sound' and flavor of Holden talking. Holden is nothing if not a talker, perhaps even a compulsive talker."<sup>12</sup> Of course this story is a mirror of Holden's subjective life. He always expresses sharp criticism over the insincerity of things or people. He calls them 'phoney' or 'phoniness.' Since these criticisms are all his own judgment, they seem to be only his own complaint. But that is wrong because he knows what dishonesty is. Those who are dishonest are egoists, narcissists, persons who blindly follow others. And these bad elements are especially found in the

adult world. Therefore, he has a longing for childhood. He thinks children are a symbol of innocence. He quietly assents to the innocence of children. When he meets such innocence, he always says, "It killed me," and he surrenders to it easily.

For Holden, the typical phoney guy is Ward Stradlater, his roommate. Frank N. Magill states: "Handsome, popular, aggressive, and self-confident, Ward represents the phoniness that Holden sees in almost everyone around him."<sup>13</sup> Holden delves into Ward's character, and Holden criticizes him as "a Year Book kind of handsome guy." Tanaka writes: "Stradlater is, so to speak, a handsome and indecent guy....The narcissist loves only oneself. Actually such a person cannot love another. This is connected to Stradlater's selfishness."<sup>14</sup> Stradlater keeps only his appearance decent. Since on the inside he is very selfish, Holden hates Stradlater's insincerity.

However, Holden is wounded by Stradlater's selfishness. Stradlater asks for Holden to do his homework. Worse still, he is dating Holden's innocent friend Jane Gallagher. She is the one good friend Holden has. Reluctantly Holden sets about doing Stradlater's homework even though he is worried about Jane. Stradlater's homework is to write a composition on something descriptive, so Holden writes about his brother Allie's baseball mitt:

The thing was, I couldn't think of a room or a house or anything to describe the way Stradlater said he had to have. I'm not too crazy about describing rooms and houses anyway. So what I did, I wrote about my brother Allie's baseball mitt. It was a very descriptive subject. It really was. My brother Allie had this left-handed fielder's mitt. He was left-handed. The thing that was descriptive about it, though, was that he had poems written all over the fingers and the pocket and everywhere. In green ink. He wrote them on it so that he'd have something to read when he was in the field and nobody was up at bat. He's dead now.<sup>15</sup>

Holden loved his brother Allie, who died of leukemia. Tanaka suggests, "Allie was loved by everyone, and he did not follow the ways of the world. So Allie was made holy and idolized in Holden's mind."<sup>16</sup> Of course Allie is a symbol of innocence for Holden. But he is dead. Sometimes Holden speaks to an imaginary Allie when he feels gloomy or ill or exhausted. He seeks Allie's help even though he is in fact talking to himself. He depends on the holy Allie. Most probably Holden's red hunting hat is related to Allie's red hair. Perhaps Holden tries to integrate with Allie through this red hunting hat. Holden keeps his red hunting hat on while doing the composition. It must be a good theme for him. However, contrary to his expectation, Stradlater gets angry about it. Perhaps this is natural, but Stradlater's manner is too icy. Because of the composition theme, Tanaka observes, "To Holden,

Allie's baseball mitt was a really important and extremely descriptive theme. Because he takes out Allie's mitt from a suitcase and just copies the poems that were written everywhere on it."<sup>17</sup> Stradlater cares only about appearances. He always says implausible things. Holden feels injured by Stradlater's phoniness. To make matters worse, he worries about Jane, who has lost her innocence through Stradlater.

Holden runs away from school; then he experiences some hardships. His mind and body become exhausted. After a while, he is afraid of dying. He wants to see his sister Phoebe. She is another symbol of innocence, probably the best symbol of innocence. Holden explains her attractive character:

You should see her. You never saw a little kid so pretty and smart in your whole life. She's really smart....But you ought to see old Phoebe. She has this sort of red hair, a little bit like Allie's was,...You'd like her. I mean if you tell old Phoebe something, she knows exactly what the hell you're talking about. I mean you can even take her anywhere with you. If you take her to a lousy movie, for instance, she knows it's a lousy movie....She killed Allie, too. I mean he liked her, too. She's ten now, and not such a tiny little kid any more, but she still kills everybody—everybody with any sense, anyway.<sup>18</sup>

Phoebe also loves Holden. To Holden, she is the only person who can understand him. As for the relationship of Phoebe to Holden, Magill explains, "Phoebe is the only person to whom Holden believes he can relate; since the death of their brother Allie, she is the only one with whom he feels truly comfortable. Phoebe convinces Holden to return home with her instead of running away."<sup>19</sup> There is some innocence, as it were, in her kindness. First, he tells her that he dropped and broke her record, and he takes the pieces of the broken record out of his coat pocket and shows them to her. She takes them right out of his hand without hesitation. On this broken record, Tanaka makes the following observation: "The broken record—not a 'piece of love,' not a 'broken love'—is 'the picture of love' for her."<sup>20</sup> Then Holden asks her to lend him some money. She lends him all her Christmas savings. She gives him 8 dollars and 65 cents. What she does has nothing to do with amounts of money. Her kindness moves Holden to tears:

Then, all of a sudden, I started to cry. I couldn't help it. I did it so nobody could hear me, but I did it. It scared hell out of old Phoebe when I started doing it, and she come over and tried to make me stop, but once you get started, you can't just stop on a goddam dime. I was still sitting on the edge of the bed when I did it, and she put her old arm around my neck, and I put my arm around her, too, but I still couldn't stop for a long time. I thought I was going to choke to death or something.<sup>21</sup>

Tanaka says, "The tears for all her love and kindness. Holden had been looking for such a pure love. He could achieve it, so he cried. His tears were a delight."<sup>22</sup>

What does Holden search for? French writes, "If the novel were only the story of the overstrained Holden's search for something 'nice' in a phony world, it would end with his admiring Phoebe riding the carousel."<sup>23</sup> But Holden is not overstrained. Although Holden is an unstable boy, he knows what pure love is. To Holden, innocence is love; unfruitful and pretended love is insincerity or phoniness.

### **The Catcher in the Rye**

When Phoebe asks, "What would you like to be?" Holden answers:

You know that song 'If a body catch a body comin' through the rye'? ...Anyway, I keep picturing all these little kids playing some game in this big field of rye and all. Thousands of little kids, and nobody's around - nobody big, I mean - except me. And I'm standing on the edge of some crazy cliff. What I have to do, I have to catch everybody if they start to go over the cliff - I mean if they're running and they don't look where they're going I have to come out from somewhere and catch them. That's all I'd do all day. I'd just be the catcher in the rye and all.<sup>24</sup>

Holden's idea of *the catcher* is, so to speak, to make himself the guardian of innocence. *The rye* is a symbol of the innocent world. It does not have any phoniness. He wants to be a guardian though he yearns for innocence very much. In his daily life he is fighting to secure his identity. Then his mental state is wounded after all. But why does he wish to help other people? The reason is that he can see virtue in weak and transient things. He is deeply moved by admirable and praiseworthy deeds.

Obviously he notices the loss of his innocence. He wants to protect an eternal innocence. It seems to pine for the past. As for Holden's love of innocence, Malcom Bradbury observes: "Holden remains on the childhood side of the fall into adulthood, and his love is for the innocent remnants of his boyhood: his young sister Phoebe, the ducks of the lake in Central Park, the Natural History Museum, the things that are 'too damn nice' to damage."<sup>25</sup> His love for innocence is a real philanthropy.

## Conclusion

I have discovered that Salinger's Holden is American literature's Huckleberry of the modern world. Like Huck, he knows sincerity, honesty and faithfulness, while he is a sharp critic of American society. Due to the wide critical study of *Catcher*, it seems likely that this novel will endure because it contains several important ideas. Perhaps the novel will continue to shine as a major work in American literature.

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4. Tanaka, p.19.
5. Gerald Rosen, "A Retrospective Look at *The Catcher in the Rye*," *Modern Critical Views J.D.Salinger*, ed. Harold Bloom. (New York: Chelsea House, 1987), p.100.
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16. Tanaka, pp.60-1..
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