

Holden, the Boy Who Wanted to be Caught: A Study of *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D.Salinger

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Introduction

I think that there are no other works which were received and read by the young as widely as Jerome David Salinger's. He is one of the American contemporary writers who belong to the post-World War II generation. He neither got a big prize nor became a 'major-writer,' but it seems that his works have something that charms young people.

He was born in 1919, in New York City, as a son of the parents who belonged to the upper-middle class. After he went in and out of school several times, he published his first work, *The Inverted Forest* (1947), *A Perfect Day for Bananafish* (1948), *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), *Nine Stories* (1953), *Frammy and Zooey* (1961), *Raise High Roof Beam, Carpenters, and Seymour: An Introduction* (1963), and *Hapworth 16, 1924*, which was published in 1965 and is practically his last work.

Since then Salinger has been holding his tongue for nearly thirty years. He has been hiding in a small town, Cornish, and leading life which has nothing to do with the publishing world and the literary world. Because of this silence his existence seems to have become even more mysterious.

The Catcher in the Rye which shows his unsociability is his most popular book and the work has received various opinions from critics. There is a description of the work on the cover of this novel printed by Signet: "this book may shock you, will make you laugh, and may break your heart—but you never forget it."

This novel caused a sensation in post-World War II American youth as the above catch phrase. We can say that it literally 'caught' their heart. Why has this novel enchanted the young in the world for a long time as this? Hereafter, I wish to make a psychological approach to this novel and find the reason.

The Lack of Guide

If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you'll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don't feel like going into it.¹

The Catcher in the Rye which opens with the above sentence takes the form of a monologue by a boy who is the hero-narrator of the story. His name is Holden Caulfield. He enrolls in Pency Prep School in Pennsylvania after dropping out of three schools before graduation. But he falls into the situation that he must leave there, too, before Christmas vacation. This story describes three days in December between Holden's leaving Pency Prep and going back to his family in New York.

Holden lives on Central Park West in New York which is one of the highest class residential streets. He lives with his parents and an elder brother, D.B., and a young sister, Phoebe. He says he doesn't "feel like going into" about telling his birth, his childhood and his parents. One of the reasons for not doing so is that his parents would have a haemorrhage if he told anything pretty personal about them.

Actually, his parents are shadowy figures. His father never appears in the entire novel and his mother appears only once. Holden's descriptions of his parents are unfriendly and objective. He says "They're nice and all" but "they're also touchy as hell" (p.5), especially his father.

His father who is quite wealthy is a corporation lawyer. Holden talks about his father's job as follows:

I mean if they're [lawyers are] all right if they go around saving innocent guys' lives all the time, and like that, but you don't do that kind of stuff if you're a lawyer. All you do is make a lot of dough and play golf and play bridge and buy cars and drink martinis and look like a hot-shot. (p.179)

He has the opinion that lawyers are hypocrites. He thinks that they don't understand whether they work for innocent people or they work for fame. About his mother, he says, "She's nervous as hell. Half the time she's up all night smoking cigarettes." (p.165) "Like the other adults, parents can't be relied upon to see, much less give good advice."² And he cannot tell her about leaving school because she still can't get over his younger brother Allie who died when he was ten years old.

Holden also gives severe criticisms to people around him. According to Holden, "old Thurmer" who is the headmaster of Pency Prep is a "phony slob" (p.7), and Mr. Haas who is the headmaster of Elkton Hills School is "the phoniest bastard" he ever met in his life. The biggest reason why Holden left these schools is that he was surrounded by "phonies" just as he was in Pency. In Elkton Hills, the headmaster only shakes hands with the parents who put on a polished air, and if one of the parents who is "corny-looking" offers him his hands, he touches their fingers in a moment and then talks to nice looking parents. Holden says, "It makes me so depressed I go crazy. I hated that goddam Elkton Hills." (p.18)

Holden, though he doesn't like Pency, meets his history teacher, "old Spencer." He is the only person who Holden goes to see and says goodbye to before leaving

Pency. At first, Holden listens to his speech gently, but, little by little, Holden starts to be sorry for having met this old man and gets nervous. Mr. Spencer doesn't agree to Holden's request and reads Holden's failed exam paper aloud. Holden regards him as a coward in this matter, and says, "He...looked at me like he'd just beaten hell out of me in ping-pong or something. I don't think I'll never forgive him for reading me that crap out loud." (p.16)

There are some parts in the conversation with Mr. Spencer that show Holden's view of life. Holden talks about Mr. Spencer saying that "Life is a game that one plays according to the rules." (p.13)

Game, my ass. Some game. If you get on the side where all the hot-shots are, then it's a game, all right — I'll admit that. But if you get on the other side, where there aren't any hot-shots, then what's a game about it? Nothing. No game. (p.13)

Gerald Rosen says:

Holden agrees with him outwardly, but he tells us, ... "Game my ass. Some game." At this point Holden believes his objection to life as "a game" is that it's only fun for the winners.³

Holden feels that he is on "the other side" where there aren't any "hot-shots" because he cannot adjust himself to the society in school. He knows he isn't a winner and will never be a winner.

In connection with this, there is an action that allows Holden's real intention to peep out from the heart. After meeting Mr. Spencer, Holden went back to his room, and when he talked with Robert Ackley who was a senior, Holden started "horsing around a little bit." (p.25) He wore his hunting hat and covered up his eyes. And he started to play the blind man:

"I think I'm going blind, ... Mother darling, everything's getting so dark in here. ... Mother darling, give me your hand. Why won't you give me your hand?" (p.25)

About this Gerald Rosen says that:

Holden sorely misses being able to turn to his parents in his time of trouble. ... This [the action in which he imitates blindness] seems like clowning, but in fact it is a revelation of his terrible anguished isolation from his family. ... Holden cannot get advice on how to leave the world of childhood from the adults around him.⁴

Holden accepts that fact that there isn't anybody who stands by him. That is, nobody comprehends him. School, teachers, and even the parents cannot see through to Holden's heart of hearts, though I will come back to the reason why his parents aren't able to do so later. The action that Holden takes symbolizes his loneliness. It seems that Holden hopes somebody will hold out his hand to him, and lead him.

We can say that Holden "is passing through the most physically difficult period of adolescence."⁵ Rebellion against the Establishment is often one of the elements in that period. It is one of reasons why he swears about the adults, and society. Adolescence is what everyone experiences, but at such an important time, we cannot find Holden's parents' figures anywhere. Holden's parents don't come in sight at all. About this, Warren French says that:

He is thus without the kind of parental guidance an adolescent urgently needs during this crucial period.... Although Holden is trying to cling to an unrealistically rigid Victorian moral code, he also lacks what David Riesman calls the "psychological gyroscope" that keeps the "inner-directed" personality on course. (...he is an "inner-directed" personality in an "other-directed" society.)⁶

Holden really wants to be given his parents' hands to help him get over the crises in his life, but his signal for help never reaches them because they're racking their brains with other concerns. For this reason, he misses the direction that he should go in, and he cannot find another way.

Afterwards, Holden "shacks up" (p.63) in a hotel in New York for a few days and doesn't go home till vacation starts. Holden visits some places and meets a lot of acquaintances there, but he couldn't have any good time. During these three days:

"Holden attempts to make contact with a number of people, but is disillusioned when he finds them flawed by hypocrisy, cruelty, or ugliness."⁷

Why doesn't Holden go back home at once? Why does he stay in such a situation? He must think if he went home before Christmas vacation, that he was kicked out of school again would come out. So he prefers to be with such people who disappoint him rather than to be told off. In other words, he tries to delay telling his parents about his failure. He may have known that his parents couldn't show him what he should do if he asked for help from them.

Holden's Profanity

Holden goes on heaping up "phoney" things and fellows. The persons Holden swears at are the adults who belong to so-called high society. They are, for instance, a pianist who plays "a lot of very tricky stuff," a girl who says "Glad to've met" to him, and "grand," which is one word Holden hates, and some guys that call the famous actor and actress angels. They are all "big snob" and "very phoney" to him. He considers that they don't know whether their own acts are nice or not in reality, and yet they get it into their head that their own acts are "grand" or that that sort of people are "grand." So, he despises the word, "grand," which has only a surface friendliness about it.

The reason he uses profanity isn't only that he is an adolescent. We should pay attention to another reason.

This story is written in the 1950's. Malcom Bradbury in *The Modern American Novel* thinks that "*The Catcher in the Rye* can be said to be the strongest novel of the Fifties; it caught its mood and became a universal student classic."⁸ And Iwao Iwamoto talking about that 50's says *The Catcher in the Rye*:

was probably written in a period when 1950's was on the brink of start, and...we can guess that it was the age that was going to form 'mass-society' in America, which will eventually lead to a society called 'post-modern'...and it was the period when the social 'norm' declined and the public equalization made progress and the sameness among people was becoming prominent.⁹

After World War II, the popularization of society caused the classconsciousness that had clearly existed before to disappear. The individuality that each class had faded away, and the wall that separated each class also had gone. On that account, everyone was able to have things on the same level materially. That is the vanishing of individuality.

In the current of that time, Holden, born and bred in the world called the 'upper-middle class,' may have felt that his existence was threatened and might be swallowed up by the wave of generalization and be forgotten. In the end he cannot give up his class consciousness however much he hates it. The hotel or bars which he chooses in New York show this. He must live with the standard of value which is cultivated in the "upper-middle class," and he knows that unconsciously. Holden used vulgarities in language as a means to express his individuality and he tried to emphasize himself strongly by doing that.

Holden's profanities aim at the real world. When he meets his ex-girlfriend, "old" Sally Hayes, he speaks about this:

"I mean did you ever go scared that everything was going to go lousy unless you did something?" (p.136)

and

Well, I hate it. Boy, do I hate it,.... It's everything. I hate living in New York and all. Taxi-cabs, and Madison Avenue buses, with the drivers and all always yelling at you to go out at the rear door,.... You ought to go to a boys' school.... It's full of phonies, and all you do is study, so that you can learn enough to be smart enough to be able to buy a goddam Cadillac some day. (pp.136-137)

When Sally states her case by saying that lots of boys get more out of school than that, he agrees with her, but he also says that that's all he gets out of it. He doesn't "get hardly anything out of anything." (p.137) Properly speaking, Holden would be able to leave the world of childhood with parental advice, but he didn't get any of it, and so he couldn't get into the world of the adult, a fact which makes him crazy.

Holden's Desire for Purity

In a situation where his parents are absent and where he is afraid of the existence of himself, Holden trusts some matters forgetting away from his fear. These are Allie and the Museum. Saburo Kawamoto says that:

Holden who doesn't get to like the reality of the world remembers dearly his younger brother who died when he was ten years old, and he says that the place he loves best is the Natural History Museum in New York where things that are already dead are on display.¹⁰

Holden sometime felt like he was sort of disappearing. On the way he calls round Mr. Spencer or when he crosses the street after he decides to go to the west. It seems like he remembers his young brother Allie when he feels frightened or depressed. And he keeps on with talking or praying to Allie asking that keeps him from disappearing. Allie who died at ten years old is a saint to Holden because he doesn't know the world of adults and doesn't know the phoniness of that reality. Salinger says:

Holden is aware of the options, because his younger brother Allie,..has escaped (though through disease not choice),.... When Holden fears that he may

'disappear' himself, he prays to his personal saint Allie to preserve him. Holden persists in living..., despite his frustrations in the 'phony' world.¹¹

In the same way, Holden thinks of the Museum in New York as a holy place. It has a lot of things which are preserved in a changeless state. So, for Holden who never wants to change into an adult, that is the best place and the only place that he can feel at ease. The ducks in a lagoon in Central Park are also important for Holden. He thinks of them from the beginning. Holden asks a taxi driver whether he knows "where they go, the ducks, when it gets all frozen over." (p.64) Animals are often taken as the symbol of innocence. In such a sense, his thinking about the ducks represents his love for other things. Malcom Bradbury says:

Holden is in fact adult and sophisticated enough to find his way around the Manhattan world,... But Holden remains on the childhood side of the fall into adulthood: his young sister, Phoebe, the ducks on the lake in Central Park, the Natural History Museum, the things that are "too damn nice" to damage.¹²

Finally, Holden decides to go to the West alone and live in a woods. And he goes back home to say goodbye to his young sister, Phoebe. She questions him about why he comes back early and feels anxious about his future. Now that he loves her like other things: the ducks, Allie, the Museum, he gives ear to her words. She tells him to name one thing that he likes. He tells her that he likes Allie, and doing what he's doing then, sitting there with her, and talking, and so on. She tells him that that isn't anything really. She is determined to make him notice that he is escaping from reality. Holden also knows that she is anxious about him with tender care. This is the scene which shows how she plays an important role for Holden. When he is home talking to her, their parents suddenly come back. He hides away in a closet, and Phoebe tells a lie to their mother. After that, Holden asks Phoebe to lend him money to get away from New York.

Then, all of a sudden, I started to cry. I couldn't help it.... I as 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. (p.186)

Holden feels a strong uneasiness, because he, a boy who is still sixteen, must get away alone from his own parents, the house where he was born and bred and the world where he is in without any supporter. Phoebe is described as a protector who consoles Holden in his sorrow in this scene. In a sense, she may be more adult than Holden. He thinks that she is his one and only person who is on his side. Saburo

Kawamoto says in his book, *Field of Innocence* (1991):

Young girls often appear in the stories of Salinger. They are all impressive. For example, . . . Sibyl in "A Perfect Day for Bananafish", Ramona in "Uncle Wiggly in Connecticut", Esme in "For Esme—Love and Squalor" These girls appear as the existence for relief to the negative feelings of men, their loneliness and estrangement, or their fear for growing up.¹³

Phoebe is the one of girls who symbolizes innocence, too. That sort of girl is described as the symbol of spotlessness and innocence, which boys who begin to know the adult world or men who already are adults wish for.

During the momentary visit, Holden talks about his dream to Phoebe. He says:

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. (pp.179-180)

He gets the idea from a song, "If a body meet a body comin' through the rye". He saw a boy singing this song on his way home and the boy was walking in the street where the cars zipped by, and brakes screeched all over the place. (p.122) He says that it made him feel not so depressed any more. The catcher who Holden wants to be is a person who protects children from danger. He considers the rye the pure world, and the side over the cliff is the adult world. His dream means that he wants to defend children from falling in the world of adults, of reality, of guilt, just as he wishes to be protected from them. About his dream it has been said that:

through this symbolism, Holden's dream of protecting the innocence and integrity of the world of childhood is posed against his inevitable fall into an adult world of self-consciousness and compromise.¹⁴

He doesn't find out how to accept the guilt of the adult world. Because of that he couldn't stand it, and tries to keep the innocence of the world of childhood. Because of his wanting innocence, it seems that he is pureness itself.

Holden doesn't, in the end, save those who are about to fall over the cliff into adulthood, catch them in the rye; he ends under medical treatment in a place like a mental hospital, refusing to grow up. That is the result of his tireless pursuit of

pureness. He wasn't able to be a "catcher in the rye." However, his dream of becoming a "catcher" may have a hidden meaning that is that it is Holden who wanted to be caught. He is caught by adults by having treatment in a hospital. Ironically, we may be able to say that in a sense his wish was realized.

Conclusion

The Catcher in the Rye, shows that all people undergo the process of finding their identities,¹⁵ and is "a case history of all of us."¹⁶ I think that it is the reason that this novel enchanted the young who have various doubts about their life just as Holden did. The matter will look different if we look at it from another angle. Sometimes we'll feel sympathy toward Holden, and sometimes we will be on the side of adult. This time, however, I was charmed by Holden's attitude for a life where he pursues self-existence inspite of all his disappointments and breakdowns, and I wanted to know much more about Holden's heart. It is the reason why I made a psychological approach to this novel. As described above, we can study this novel from all angles, so, next time I want to investigate this novel, or Salinger's other works by another approach.

NOTES:

1. J. D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1958), p.5. This edition is used throughout this study with page notation given in the text.
2. Gerald Rosen, "A Retrospective Look at The Catcher in the Rye" (1977), in *Modern Critical Views: J.D.Salinger*, Harold Bloom, ed., (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987), p.99.
3. Ibid, p.97.
4. Ibid, p.100.
5. Warren French, *J.D.Salinger*, (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1963), p.108.
6. Ibid, pp.108-109.
7. International ed., *Encyclopedia Americana*, Vol.5, (Danbury: Grolier Inc., 1986), p.824.
8. Malcom Bradbury, *The Modern American Novel*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p.180.
9. Iwao Iwamoto, *Henyousuru American Fiction*, (Tokyo: Nanundo, 1989), p.50.
10. Saburo Kawamoto, *Field of Innocence*, (Tokyo: Kawaideshobo-shinsha, 1991), p.15.
11. Matthew J. Bruccoli & Richard Layman, eds., *Concise Dictionary of American Literary Biography: The New Consciousness*, (Detroit: An affiliated company of

- Gale Research, 1987), p.451.
12. Bradbury, p.181.
 13. Kawamoto, pp.122-123.
 14. *Encyclopedia Americana*, p.824.
 15. David J. Nordloh, ed., *American Literary Scholarship: An Annual*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), pp.269-270.
 16. Matthew J. Bruccoli & Richard Layman, eds., p.456.

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