

**AN ALTERNATIVE STUDY OF THE MATURATION OF HOLDEN  
CAULFIELD AS A LONE ANARCHIST OR CROOKED IDEALIST IN  
J.D. SALINGER'S *THE CATCHER IN THE RYE***

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“What really makes me out is a book that, when you're all done reading it, you wish the author that wrote it was a terrific friend of yours and you felt like it. That doesn't happen much.”

This excerpt by the young protagonist in J.D. Salinger's monumental *The Catcher in the Rye* suggests, in the least, two things – that Caulfield is a lone being who is desperately in need of a friend and having realized that finding a friend is not, at all, easy, he searches for one or at least craves one in the author he reads. Now, it is this search that reinforces the fact that Caulfield is solitary. However, my dissertation aims at discussing something more than merely confining itself to the discussion of Caulfield's peculiar position in this world who has problem with almost anything he comes across. *The Catcher in the Rye* also exhibits a wonderful journey of maturation chiefly of HOLDEN Caulfield who transforms into a sort of altogether complacent man for cantankerous, bickering self who is never at peace with anyone.

When Holden starts his narrative, standing by the “crazy cannon” on Thomson Hill one sunless afternoon, listening to the cheers to a football game below, “the two teams bashing each other all over the place.” Holden feels not only sort of disconnected from everything around but also feels as if he is bidding a farewell – “some kind of a good- by” to the school he has just flunked out of.

“I was lucky” , says Holden in the initial scene that occurs in the novel. This “I was lucky” and what follows this line provide one with crucial clues that are illustrative of a pattern of scene construction that ultimately does yield a meaning. Drawing on Matthew Arnold’s poem “Dover Beach”, Salinger’s narrator remarks: in the “darkling plain”, “ignorant football teams clash by afternoon.” focus has to be put on the word “ignorant” as this word suggests Caulfield’s contempt apparently for ignorance so much characteristic of adolescence. Not only that, the fact that Salinger chooses football of all the games to show “ignorance” of the “nice boys” in Holden’s prep school makes wonder whatever Salinger wanted us to think of it as an ironic commentary on football’s being a ritualization (in form of a sport) of human aggression. Perhaps, it’s because of this aggression in the two teams of boys engaged in, that they are called ignorant.

This sixteen-year-old hero of Salinger is so obsessed with gaining that he relentlessly tries to define and re-define what maturity is and how it is different from immaturity. In one such attempt, he embarks with this remark - “The mark of immature man is that he wants to die nobly for a cause, while the mark of the mature man is that he wants to live humbly for one.”

What is forcing Holden’s crisis? Why is he always at odds with almost everyone around? Why is a boy of his age so much obsessed with the question of maturity. Much of the criticism has testified to Holden’s acute moral and aesthetic perceptions- his stance against “Phoniness” in particular.

Since Caulfield is always concerned about maturity and immaturity and since he keeps associating these two mental dimensions with age, “One implication of the novel’s main motif that which polarizes childlike and adult responses, concerns the dilemma of impossible alternatives.” What strikes us is the fact that though Caulfield always wants me to be matured, he

does not want to be mature at the cost of one's subscribing to phoniness. This is the reason, in the novel's first paragraph, Holden tells us that his brother D.B has "Prostituted" his gift of writing by going to Hollywood- a fact subtly contrasted throughout with the pure self of Allie, the brother who died before the temptations of adulthood.

As James Bryan says, *The Catcher in the Rye* is built around the impossible alternatives that Holden tries to imagine in his own probable idyll- the ideal world. Just as we found out in the beginning of our discussion, Holden having found no role model to emulate, no ideal guide to follow, becomes a lone directionless juvenile wanderer who's choice of routs is dictated by unsaddled impulses. This unguided flow of impulse pervades much of Salinger's oeuvre: we can recall Seymour Glass from his sort story 'A Perfect Day for Banana fish'- the World War II veteran recently discharged from an army hospital, at odds with his life who will take his own life in the end.

Here again in this short story, Salinger deals with the impossible alternatives we have already talked about- something that permeates his novel *The Catcher in the Rye*. Just as in the novel the phoniness of the apparently mature adults stands in straight contrast to the purity of the immature children similarly Seymour's sympathetic and affectionate interaction with the detached and phony behaviour of adults. Both Seymour and Holden - though of different age group- are extended projections of Salinger himself, a fact Salinger confessed in his *Seymour- An Introduction (1959)*.

Kenneth Slawenski reports that traumatized by the Battle of the Bulge and the Nazi Concentration Camps, Salinger found it impossible to fit into a society that ignored the truth that now knew. In a way Holden Caulfield's disenchantment can be paralleled with than of Franny

Glass, the titular narrator in the eponymous short story by Salinger. Disillusioned with life because of the selfishness and inauthenticity she perceives all around her, Franny attempts to escape it through spiritual means. Both Holden and Franny are tormented souls, finding it hard enough to exist happily, to live a life of complacency. What Holden says is just a reinforcement of this: "I am always saying, "Glad to 've met you" to somebody I'm not at all glad I met. If you want to stay alive, you have to say that stuff, though."

However, despite the similarities that Holden shares with Franny, there's one thing that Franny get but Holden doesn't- love. In *Zooey*, a sequel to *Franny*, we find Franny getting love and care and words of sage advice from her brother. But Holden gets nothing of this sort except for the pseudo-crudite set of advices from the old crone Spencer, who instead depresses him by wishing him an insipid "good luck". Old Spencer's ways of educating Holden is somewhat in accord with the old woman's chatter in the penultimate chapter. The Spencer-chapter lets us know of the Holden has flunked the administrative necessities of education. But what attracts our notice by contrast is that we get to learn immediately after that Holden draws a handful of sustenance from art, something evident in his attempt to re-read that chronicle-part in Isak Dinesen's *Out of Africa*. There again Holden seems struck with the character of eighteen-year-old Robert Ackley, " a grotesque possibility of what Holden may become if his manhood is similarly thwarted." Bryan correctly comprehends that Ackley's impotence is reflected in "acned, unsightly looks, general enervation, and repulsive habits." Yet HOLDEN could not become another Robert Ackley but

"He hated it when you called him a moron. All morons hate it when you call them a moron." So, the thing, as it turns out to be, Holden, no matter he tries to find happiness everywhere, he is going to get it nowhere. This was not at all a new phenomenon in Salinger's

age to have a protagonist who is disillusioned with anything under the Sun. One may also find partial likeness between Jimmy Porter's frustration from Osborne's play and this young Holden from Salinger's novel. The reason of such a likening is none but HOLDEN himself who utters-

*"That's the whole trouble. You can't even find a place that nice and peaceful , because there isn't any. You may think there is , but once you get there , when you're not looking, somebody'll sneak up and write " Fuck you" right under your nose. Try it sometime."*

and,

*"The thing with kids is, if they want to grab for the gold ring, you have to let them do it, and not say anything. If they fall off, they fall off, but it's bad if you say anything to them."*

and again,

*"Don't ever tell anybody anything. If you do, you start missing everybody."*

Whether or not does Holden share any of his peevish features with any other characters to be found in literature, it is quite easy for any reader to blame both Salinger and his alter-ego Holden Caulfield for this irritable disposition that mostly characterises the latter.

After he retreats in a panic to Grand Central station and visits Phoebe's school short after, he finds "somebody'd written "Fuck you" than the actual act of fucking someone. Probably, it is because he is constantly anxious about his being identified with the "pervert" who has inscribed the words on the wall. Once again, as an almost self-proclaimed idealist for not being considered by the posterity as one of the many (whom he detests) around him. That he is an idealist or, at least, he wants to think of himself as one is further reinforced through his commingling appears

to be out of context, this bears performed significance if we realise Holden's strange position of a disillusioned idealist.

Salinger always believed of himself as not only an idealist but also an artist or maybe, in his case, both selves merge into one Salinger's idea of artist- one who believes in the ideal and also knows that the ideal is not something one can get in this world – remains in how endeavours to locate the position and performance / function of an artist-

*“An artist's only concern is to shoot for some kind of perfection, and on his own terms, not anyone else's”*

and,

*“The worst thing that being an artist could do to you would be that it would make you slightly unhappy constantly.”*

Holden's meeting with Phoebe is the turning point of the book. For the first time he admits, "I just felt good for a change." And the reason he feels good is clear. He is with a person who sees. He tries to lie to her about his getting kicked out of school and she sees through his lie immediately. He tells her, "I'll probably be in Colorado on this ranch," and she responds, "Don't make me laugh. You can't ride a horse." She isn't easy, but she sees. And Holden quickly begins to pour out what is bothering him, as if she were a little doctor. When her mother returns with a headache, she prescribes a few aspirin. And she lies to protect Holden, taking the blame for his smoking. These upside-down situations, in which the younger person protects the older ones and gives them advice, are in line with the whole pattern of the book. And the failure of the older people to protect and guide the young not only results in botched initiations like Holden's, it also

leads the younger people to try to be their own parents, forcing them to act older than they are by cursing, affecting a false cynicism, lying about their age, drinking, and wearing falsies.

Maybe it's because of this self-assigned peculiar role of the artist/idealist that makes him go bickering with almost anyone and anything. Notwithstanding, the novel is not only about HOLDEN's exuberant disillusionment with life and the world, neither does merely deal with the polarized positions of the two words- one of the adults and the other of the "kids". Salinger's novel tries to somewhat irregularly chronicle the journey of gaining maturity which the protagonist undergoes.

To many, *The Catcher in the Rye*, at the out, seems to be a very rigid novel with a much linear narrative and an unchanging stubborn protagonist in Holden Caulfield. However , a profound reading will suggest a gradual transformation in Holden's character who-- though still vacillating between the poles of detachment of adulthood replete with snobbery and phoniness and the immature innocence of the adolescent—evolves as a character as in the climax his dwindling shows enough clues to be resolved very soon. This resolution begins in the scene of Phoebe's bedroom (or rather the bedroom of D.B., where she sleeps) and ends at the carrousel after Holden refuses to run away with him.

Bryan notes a significant point in Holden's transformation, as he writes:

*“The narrator’s overall perspective is thus mapped out: his present age representing some measure of maturity, the thirteen and twelve the vacillation comes at puberty and that is so much more painful when it occurs as late as sixteen.”*

Hence the simple fact remains, as I would argue, Holden's sulkiness, his being fared by anything happening around is more because of his age than his seemingly strange psychic disposition.

The "hunting hat" in the climactic carousel scene also is significant in Holden's transformation as it "symbolizes something like Holden's basic resources—his birth right, his lucky caul of protective courage, humour, compassion, honesty and love—all which are real subject matter of the novel." Starting with an uncanny beginning and evolving writes a bleak uneven movement along with its protagonist rough strife's with life the novel resolves in a calm and healthy way where Holden finally becomes able of shaping and controlling his trouble in the order to truly transform his tale into one of enduring struggle for (attaining) maturity – a struggle shared by, as Antolini tells him in the epilogue,-- " many men [who] have been just as troubled morally and spiritually you are right now." Indeed, we may learn something from Holden's tale, since it is "a beautiful reciprocal arrangement. And it isn't education. It's history. It's poetry."

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