

Balancing the Child-Adult World: a Psychoanalytic Reading of *The Catcher in the Rye*

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Abstract

Drawing on psychoanalytic criticism, this article seeks to shed light on the complexity about the character of Holden in J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, as he wants simultaneously to identify himself with the world of children and the world of adults.

Keywords: Characterization – Development stages – Balancing – Psychology – child – Adult

Résumé

S'inspirant de l'approche psychanalytique, cet article vise à analyser la complexité du portrait du personnage de Holden dans *The Catcher in the Rye* de J.D. Salinger qui veut simultanément s'identifier au monde des enfants et celui des adultes.

Mots clés : Portrait des personnages – Les étapes de développement – Equilibre – Psychologie – Enfant – Adulte

INTRODUCTION

The definition of a child poses some problems because of the complex cultural realities of each community. The World Health Organization offers a rather broad definition of a child. According to this organization, “a child is a person 19 years or younger unless national law defines a person to be an adult at an earlier age” (WHO: 2013). This definition, though broad, uses the age criterion to differentiate a child from an adult, who is, according to the same organization, “a person older than 19 years of age unless national law defines a person as being an adult at an earlier age” (WHO: 2013). Even though the development from childhood to adulthood is linear, there is a wide range of complex stages. Each stage is marked by shifts in

how the growing children understand the world around them. Holden Caulfield, a sixteen-year old boy is the protagonist in *The Catcher in the Rye*. He goes through similar shifting stages as he develops and becomes an adult. His adolescence years are marked by some worries about some adult behaviors that he questions on many occasions.

Drawing on the psychoanalytic criticism, this paper seeks to shed light on the complexity about the character of Holden in J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, as he wants simultaneously to identify himself with the world of children and the world of adults. In the process of the analysis of the child character in the novel, this discussion contributes to showing how the psychological development of children can be operated in a balanced way, so that they may enter adequately the adult world. The hypothesis is that a careful development can help reduce significantly the unpreparedness of some children, who, because of such unbalanced psychological growth, fail to be balanced adults and, thus, fail to contribute to the development of their societies. The examination of the child's development will be concentrated, in the first part, on the ambivalence of the protagonist; the second stage explores the possible ways through which his consistencies and inconsistencies can be reconciled.

I. The Ambivalence of Holden Caulfield

One of the traumas that can be seen in the life of Holden is his ambivalence which, according to Dylan Evans, can be assimilated to "the interdependence of love and hate" (1996, 30). Ambivalence is the right word that qualifies the protagonist in *The Catcher in the Rye*. Throughout the novel, he drops clues and behaviors illustrative of his consistencies and inconsistencies. In other words, he has a contradictory behavior in the novel. Ambivalence is mostly discussed with reference to psychoanalytic criticism. According to developmental psychologists such as Jean Piaget, Sigmund Freud, Lawrence Kohlberg and Mélanie Klein, each stage of the development of children is marked by shifts in how they understand the world. All these developmental psychologists agree that development is a process and therefore has stages. To corroborate that, Murray R. Thomas and Claudine Michel opine: "chacun admet que le développement s'opère graduellement ... le développement s'opère dans la continuité, par acquisitions successives." (Everybody admits that development occurs gradually ... development occurs in continuity, by successive acquisition). (1994, 42). Psychology, the study of

the mind and how it affects behavior, embracing all aspects of conscious and unconscious experience as well as thought (Evans: 1996, 180) is needful in the analysis and understanding of how some characters, especially children behave in works of art.

Freud and Lacan are the proponents of psychoanalysis in the treatment of patients and in the analysis of works of arts. In *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, it is clearly stated that “as far as literature is concerned, it analyses characters ‘invented’ by authors, the language they use and what is known as ‘Freudian imagery’”. Thus, in the Freudian method a literary character is treated as if a living human being; whereas, for example, in the method of Jacques Lacan literature is seen as a ‘symptom’ of the writer” (Cuddon: 1998, 332). This quotation highlights the important place that should be given to the analysis of authors, characters and their language in the interpretation of works of art. Furthermore, Charles E. Bressler, a literary theory critic, opines that “in the 1950s, psychoanalytic critics turned their attention away from psychobiography to character analysis, studying the various aspects of characters’ minds found in an author’s canon” (2011, 139). Psychobiography holds that each author expresses his/her state of mind in his/her writings and creates characters that are dramatized to implicitly or explicitly convey a message to the readers and to the society at large. Fiction writers, as a general rule, paint the realities of their communities when they create characters and have them play specific roles in their works. They use characterization as a means to reveal and denounce the odds of their communities.

Right at the beginning of the story, Holden claims that he will not tell the reader about anything concerning his parents. “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” (*The Catcher in the Rye*: 1951, 3)¹. Though he does not mention the names of his parents or any of their identity features, he surprisingly gives a description of his father and mother which gives the reader the possibility to know about his family. He presents his parents in the following terms:

¹ The title of the novel *The Catcher in the Rye* will be shortened as CR when used in parenthetical references.

My father's quite wealthy, though. I don't know how much he makes – he's never discussed that stuff with me. He's a corporation lawyer... He's always investing money in shows on Broadway. They always flop, though, and it drives my mother crazy when he does it. She hasn't felt too healthy since my brother Allie died. She's very nervous (CR: 140).

From the child's description, it can be inferred that Holden tells about his family while he refuses to provide any information about them. This attitude is characteristic of his ambivalence.

Apart from the protagonist's contradictory character in telling about his parents while he promises not to give information about his family, another incongruity occurs concerning the information he gives about himself. He claims to be illiterate but at the same time he says he reads a lot. "I'm quite illiterate, but I read a lot" (CR: 24). If literacy is defined as the ability to read, write and count, Holden cannot be considered as illiterate because he is able to read. This clearly shows also his ambivalence and the lack of consistency in his behavior. Ambivalence has an impact on a person and the relationships the latter has with others. According to the psychologist Delyse Ledgard, "it is our nature to split our experience into polarities, such as good/bad or right/wrong and emotions such as love/hate, joy/sadness. One could say that we constantly deal with the opposite of our experience even if that is unconscious" (2016). Holden's experience in the adult world denatures his psyche and this creates ambivalence through his actions.

In addition, though a teenager, Holden behaves like an adult. There are some behaviors reserved to adults in any society. For example, in many societies, in contrast to what the protagonist does, children are not allowed to purchase alcohol or go to night clubs. But when Holden buys alcohol and goes to night clubs, he proves his decision not to follow the pattern established by the society reserving some specific privileges only to adults. A child who behaves like adults is considered not abiding by the norms of the given society. Holden tells the reader in earlier chapters that he is a minor.

But he later confesses that he attends some spaces that designed to adults only. His own account of his experience in the night club is eloquent enough:

In fact, nobody was around my age.
They were mostly old ... I ordered a
Scotch and soda, and told him not to
mix it – I said it fast as hell, because if
you hem and how, they know you're
under twenty-one and won't sell you
any intoxicating liquor ... they lose
their jobs if they get caught selling to
a minor (CR: 90-91).

Holden knows pertinently that only adults have the right to be in such a place and purchase liquor, but he violates the norms and pretends to be an adult in order to get satisfaction of his desire. Hence, he violates one of the established norms of the society.

Moreover, Holden confesses that he tells lies but claims at the same time that he tells the truth. "I told her I loved her and all. It was a lie, of course, but the thing is, I meant it when I said it. I'm crazy I swear to God I am" (CR: 163). The character's ambivalent posture, is commonly conceptualized in social psychology as a state of intra-attitudinal conflict in which individuals simultaneously hold positive and negative feelings toward an attitude object (Rudolph: 2005, 905). In similar ways, Holden simultaneously expresses contradictory feelings about lies and truth. He hates the adult world and the behavior of adults. Nevertheless he pretends to be old, that is, adult enough to save kids. "anyway, I keep picturing all these little kids playing some games in this field of rye and all – thousands of little kids, and nobody's around – nobody big, I mean Except me" (CR: 224). He admits he is old enough to take care of these kids when they start to go over the cliff (CR: 225).

Holden's ambivalence is also revealed through the way he speaks. For example, to get the privileges of adults, he changes his voice to sound like an adult. "For a while, I didn't think she was home or something. Nobody kept answering. Then, finally, somebody picked up the phone. 'Hello?' I said. I made my voice quite deep so that she wouldn't suspect my age or anything.... I said, in this very mature voice and all" (CR: 83). This

conversation is an additional evidence of Holden's ambivalence. Similarly, when he expelled from school, Holden exhibits other ambivalent attitudes. He does not know if he should go home and meet his parents or stay on his own away from the family to live an independent life. "But I was too afraid my parents would answer, and then they'd find out I was in New York and kicked out of Pency and all." (CR: 90). This confusion inside the character exemplifies another instance of his ambivalence. This ambivalence becomes complicated as it describes a child who displays two contradictory qualities, that is, his consistencies and inconsistencies.

II. Reconciling the Child's Consistencies and Inconsistencies

As said earlier, defining the "child" as opposed to the "adult" is a difficult task. Some people think we need to consider the age while defining a child. Others think it is rather salutary to consider the physiological and physical development of the person while classifying him. I consider a child in this context as a person who is not yet an adult and who needs guidance in his/her decision making process. For, Bame Nsamenang and Therese M.S. Tchombe, "child development is a function of the interplay of three main factors, none of which operates independently of the other: genetics, environmental influences (including culture), and the child's own activities". (2011:143). These three factors have greatly influenced Holden. He is sixteen years when the story unfolds. "I was sixteen then, and I'm seventeen now, and sometimes I act like I am about thirteen" (CR: 13). According to the WHO's definition of a child and my working definition, as stated earlier, he is still a child. Nevertheless, his behavior in many regards is different from that of children of his age-group: "... and nobody's around – nobody big, I mean except me" (CR: 224).

Holden demonstrates inconsistencies and consistencies in his interactions with the children world and adult world. Something is said to be inconsistent when it lacks in harmonious uniformity as to the units or parts that compose it. Likewise, someone is said to be inconsistent when there is no harmonious uniformity concerning their actions. Among the many things that can explain the inconsistencies of Holden, two are of great interest: his adolescent crisis and the lack of proper parental education coupled with the hypocrisy of the community members. The years 1950s in which *The Catcher in the Rye* is set, were peculiar in the history of the U.S. They were marked by post-WWII consequences. They affected the economic and social

organization of the U.S nation and families as well. Because men went sent to the battle field in the course of the war, women started working to provide for the needs of the family. After the war, women continued to work leaving the children alone. That is the case of Holden's parents who are always busy working in such a way that they do not have time for their children. "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"(CR: 3). Holden's parents spend more time at their work, making money, than they have to take worry about his welfare. He has been sent to a school far away from them, even though he is still a teenager. In his reading of the novel, Gerald Rosen emphasizes the sense of irresponsibility of Holden's parents:

After he fails to get the guidance he needs from his teachers or from the other adults he meets, one would expect Holden to turn to his parents. But in the entire novel, his father never appears and his mother appears once and then only speaks to Phoebe as Holden hides in the closet. The absence of Holden's parents (along with the absence of real religious guidance in the form of a school chaplain or family minister) is so important it amounts to a presence. ... Holden sorely misses being able to turn to his parents in his time of trouble (1975: 553).

Parental irresponsibility results in Holden's adolescence crisis. That phase of the child's psychological growth is defined in many ways depending on the school of thought. According to Roger J. R. Levesque, the adolescent crisis typically "refers to the upheaval that happens during this period, such as the changes that can take place in multiple dimensions, including emotional components, psychological factors, and physical development" (2017, 69). Two main elements can be highlighted from this definition. First, the timeframe in which the crisis comes out and secondly, the various changes that actually occur. These factors, as stated in the above quotation can range from emotional to physical aspects of development. In *The Catcher in the*

Rye, Holden experiences the two dimensions of adolescence crisis. He is sixteen years and is emotionally, psychologically and physically imbalanced. "And yet I still act sometimes like I was only about twelve. Everybody says that. I don't give a damn, except that I get bored sometimes when people tell me to act my age. Sometimes I act a lot older than I am – I really do – but people never notice it. People never notice anything" (CR: 13). As shown by the protagonist's reactions to people's opinions about him it can be noted how far he is ready to challenge all the established norms in the society.

Despite his immaturity relating to his age, he goes to hotels with prostitutes. He goes to places reserved for adults and buys drinks like adults. He gives an account of his own actions when he confesses:

There were very few people around my age in the place. In fact nobody was around my age. They were mostly old, show-offy-looking guys with their dates ... I ordered a Scotch and soda, and told him not to mix it – I said it fast as hell, because if you hem and haw, they think you're under twenty-one and won't sell you any intoxicating liquor (CR: 91).

Holden has this negative experience probably because there is no adult voice, like his parents' to advise him not to venture in these places dangerous for any boy of his age, nor be with people older than him. Definitely, he is exposed to these odds of the society. His inconsistency – contradictions in his behavior – is fueled by the fact that none of his parents help him get prepared to face the crucial period of adolescence. He lives far away from his father and mother who are only preoccupied with their work and making money.

Dr. Thurmer, one of the characters in the novel advises Holden saying: "life is a game, boy. Life is a game that one plays according to the rules" (CR: 12). The rule that needs to be followed while playing the game of life is not obvious. Parents, teachers, and adults, in general, teach children about these rules – the dos and don'ts of the society. Unfortunately, in the case of Holden, his parents are not available to teach him any rules of life, to

the extent that he hardly sees them and talk with them. He follows his own rules – creating his own logic of refusing to follow the dos and don'ts of his society. The teachers who are supposed to protect and provide these guidelines are busy with their professional and personal activities. They do not have time for him.

In other words, they tell Holden to play the game without telling him about the rules. When he does not work hard, instead of finding out the reasons for his failure, they decide to expel him from the school. Holden accuses his parents of having pushed him out of the education system he needs: "I forgot to tell you about that. They kicked me out. I wasn't supposed to come back after Christmas vacation, on account of I was flunking four subjects" (CR: 6). Instead of helping him pass his subjects, because of their hypocrisy, the adults use their authority to expel him without thinking about his future. As a result, Holden comes to hate the adult world and the behavior of adults: "people never notice anything" (CR: 13). Because he has not been provided the assistance a young boy of his age should be given, he decides to play the role the adult fail to display. Paradoxically enough, he claims his adulthood by making the decision to save kids: "anyway, I keep picturing all these little kids playing some games in this field of rye and all – thousands of little kids, and nobody's around – nobody big, I mean Except me" (CR: 224). His thinking and decision purport to challenge the uncaring adult world. Rosen summarizes the situation in these words: "so Holden cannot get advice on how to leave the world of childhood from the adults around him (1975: 554).

Holden admits he is old enough to catch the kids when they start to go over the cliff (CR: 225). His action gives a clear picture of what he thinks about the adult world. He believes that there are thousands of children playing, but there is no adult to watch over them. The adults, because of their selfishness, are busy doing their other activities to earn money. They are busy but they forget that their children need to be taken care of. In reply, Holden challenges the adult world, posing that he is the one who can be ready to protect the children while they play. Salinger's fiction highlights the level of irresponsibility of parents in a capitalistic world. For him, capitalism drives many parents to seek their personal interests.

The novel also suggests that adults in general and parents in particular have to play specific roles in reconciling the consistencies and inconsistencies of their children. Through the eyes of an adolescent who is

critical of his parents' attitudes and, beyond, adults' irresponsibility as regards the child's psychological development, the narrative means that parents should make out time for their children. Certainly, Holden dislikes his parents' obsession in their work and their desire of material wealth. In a parallel way, the child wants parents to be present in the lives of their children and provide the latter with needful any protection. Detailing his role, and because he notices parents' failure, the character of Holden puts:

What I have to do, I have to catch everybody if they start to go over the cliff – I mean if they are running and they don't look where they are 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. I know it's crazy, but that's the only thing I'd really like to be (CR: 224-25).

Though Holden is still an adolescent who needs parental education, he is credible when he says that this education crucial in the holistic development of children. Therefore, he promises to be there for children every day and anytime. The character's premature responsibility reads as a plea for parents to act in the field of the education of their children. Because Holden is abandoned by his parents he stays unprepared to enter the world of adulthood. Nonetheless, he gains awareness of the necessity to take care of other children for whom he becomes the missing parental authority in charge of their development. . When Gerald Rosen describes Holden's own development he insists on two phases, including the stage when the child is left alone, with no protection, and the stage when he is disconnected from the society he lives in. Rosen argues that "when we first meet Holden in the affluent, protective environment of a prep school, we are prepared for his lonely journey by immediately being given a picture of his alienation from the non-seeing groups of people around him" (1975: 548). Like the adolescent character of Holden in the novel, the analyst is critical of parents and adults who are termed as the careless "groups of people."

The Catcher in the Rye might be considered a distorting mirror in which generations of American teenagers see themselves. It instructs them to

give nothing away to the “phonies” who ruin all their lives. Holden declares: “Don’t ever tell anybody anything. If you do, you start missing everybody” (CR: 277). He urges the children and teenagers to keep quiet because he thinks the behavior of adults is phony. He uses sarcasm in his advice because, it is almost impossible to keep silent when children are not cared for by adults but are rather left to the mercy of all hazards in the society. His advice is nonetheless a form of rebellion against the society in general and the adults in particular. Holden constantly encounters people and meets situations that strike him as “phony,” a word he uses to anything hypocritical, shallow, superficial, inauthentic, or fake. He sees such “phoniness” everywhere in the adult world, and believes adults are so phony that they cannot even see their own phoniness. Like many adolescents, he feels that the world is an alien, hostile and comfortless place run by “phonies”. Considering the adolescent character as a victim F. Anthony DeJovine holds:

In a sense he becomes a victim of forces beyond his immediate control: his weakened physical and psychic state; his lack of sophistication and savoir faire; the urgent demands of a foolish moment; the influences of the adult world which glorify sex through advertising, the movies, and mindless behavior; the failure of his parents and the school to provide him with appropriate sex education to prepare him for these predicaments; and peer pressures which assign high status to sexual achievement. All things considered, the total blame here does not lie solely with Holden. Nor is he totally free from blame (1975, 35)

Holden is found excluded from the adult world and he feels victimized by the world he lives in. The adults fail to be supportive when he meets the difficulties relating to the adolescent crisis. He tells Mr. Spencer: “it was just that we were too much on opposite sides of the pole” (CR: 20). In this episode of the novel, Mr. Spencer who represents the adults does not mentally live the in the same world as the one of the child who is sixteen years old. This

section has shown that the contradictory behavior of children in general and Holden in particular is revealed through the way they challenge the established norms of the society. The consistencies and inconsistencies of children can be reconciled with the support of adults in general and parents in particular.

CONCLUSION

This paper has investigated the child's psychological growth in a capitalistic world where parents fail to provide their children with protection and necessary upbringing conditions. In a detailed examination of the case of the main protagonist who is described as an adolescent experimenting crisis in the process of his maturity, it is noted that Holden, the adolescent is torn between two worlds, the one of the children and that of the adults. He simultaneously wants to identify himself with the worlds of children and adults at the same time, but this results in an emotional unbalance. The adolescence crisis and the lack of appropriate parental as well as the hypocrisy of the adult world, account for Holden's ambivalent behavior throughout the novel. The case about Holden suggests that parents' responsibility is crucial in helping children to go through the period from childhood to adulthood smoothly and rewardingly. The novel is suggestive of the importance of communication inside the family circle, involving parents and their children. Like Holden who plays the role of the children's fathers and mothers, parents are recommended to interact with kids. That means, becoming "catchers in the rye" to prevent children from any danger in the society.

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