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The Portrayal and Self-image of Holden Caulfield of
The Catcher in the Rye

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Annotation

The aim of the thesis is to analyze the two possible views on Holden Caulfield, the protagonist of J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* – his self-image and his portrayal. The self-image discussion will be based on Holden's own perception of himself (with his statements and fantasies being the source of information), while the portrayal will be analyzed from more objective point of view. The focus of the portrayal will be the discussion of Holden's motivation and the influence of his attitude and his family on the situation he finds himself in.

Anotace

Cílem práce je analýza dvou možných pohledů na Holdena Caulfielda, protagonisty románu J. D. Salinger *Kdo chytá v žitě* – jeho náhledu na sebe sama a jeho vnějšího vyobrazení. Jeho sebeobraz bude analyzován na základě Holdenova vnímání sebe sama (zdrojem informací budou Holdenovy výroky a představy o jeho vlastní osobě), zatímco rozbor vnějšího vyobrazení se bude zabývat objektivními faktory – motivací hlavního hrdiny a vliv jeho postoje a rodiny na situaci, ve které se nachází.

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Introduction

The aim of the thesis is the analysis of two possible views on *The Catcher in the Rye*'s main character and narrator, Holden Caulfield – his portrayal and his self-image. The difference between the two concepts of analysis of Holden Caulfield's character lies in the nature of the source of information on which each of these views will be discussed. While the self-image will draw on Holden's own perception of himself, the portrayal will be built up on the analysis of his overall situation, as seen by the outside observer.

The portrayal is more complex – it needs most aspects of the narrative to be analyzed. On the contrary, Holden's self-image is based on his own words about himself and inexplicit hints. However, these “two faces” are not too distant from each other. In a way, they merge. His self-image is actually one of the constituents of his portrayal.

In the self-image section, what the character being analyzed, Holden Caulfield, thinks about himself will be discussed. The discussion will be based on the statements and implications he makes about himself, which will be used as a source of evidence to provide the character's self-image. At first, we will focus on his direct claims about his personality and appearance. Afterwards, we will look into his visions and plans in order to gain an insight into his own outlook on the situation. And finally, via Holden's conversation with Mr. Antolini, a broader insight into Holden's life as he sees it will be provided.

The portrayal deals with Holden's situation from an objective point of view and also reveals the effect of his attitude on his situation. On the other hand, it will consist of both subjective and objective information (since Holden is the narrator – unreliable and very selective in his observations, which indicates a good deal of subjectivity), while his self-image is based only on subjective information and it is up to the reader to confront it with his own understanding of Holden's character. Thus, the portrayal will focus on his situation in general. Additionally, it is very important for his motivation to be analyzed. To put it simply, the main focus of the analysis of the portrayal is the message of the whole narrative.

Therefore, the portrayal and Holden's self image are not really counterparts, but two possible views of Holden Caulfield. But, in some way, we can think about the self-image as being inferior to the portrayal. However, the two views are basically

counterparts in one respect – the portrayal deals with the outer, while Holden’s self-image deals with the inner. The portrayal sees Holden from the outside, whereas his self-image represents Holden’s own view of himself.

1. The Self-image

Holden Caulfield's self-image is inferior to his portrayal. While in the portrayal the outer features of Holden Caulfield (such as his situation, family, and personality) are analyzed, in the self-image section we will focus on what Holden thinks about himself. His claims about himself, together with his visions of himself, will be used as a source for the analysis of his self-image. Of course, unlike in the portrayal section, it is much more important to be selective here – as an unreliable pseudo-oral narrator Holden is harder to define in his genuineness. He even declares himself to be a liar.

As stated at the beginning, his self-image and portrayal are not strictly divided or opposite values. His self-image comes under his portrayal, too – it reveals the message about Holden.

The merger of the two concepts, Holden's self-image and his portrayal (the inner and the outer), also takes place metaphorically – through the symbolism of names. In its form a name is an outer feature, but in its symbolic meaning it represents the inner. In his article *Holden Caulfield: Salinger's "ironic amalgam"*, Richard Lettis discusses ways of decoding the meaning of the character's name by giving an example of decoded names from other prose works by Salinger:

Sometimes the name simply carries its traditional significance (Phoebe means "shining"); sometimes it's itself a common word (Buddy); sometimes it approximates a common word or phrase (Ackley – acne, Stradlater – straddle later). Some names are complete phonetic units, defining a major quality of the identified character – for example, Seymour (see more) (43).

Lettis then introduces his interpretation of Holden Caulfield's name:

Holden says that he would like to be a catcher of the endangered children, and his name tells us that he is. He *holds in the caul field* – tries to prevent children, including himself, from growing up (44).

Although, this message hidden in Holden's name supports the idea of him as a protector, it does not have to mean protecting children from ever growing up, but from growing up too early – because children born with a caul are mostly born prematurely ("Caul").

This symbolism of his name describes what he considers himself to be or aspires to be. In this section, what the person behind the name Holden Caulfield thinks about

Holden Caulfield will be discussed. As the name was given to Holden, it thus has an objective quality which he cannot modify, unlike his self-image.

1.1 Holden on Holden (statements)

We can hear several statements from Holden's mouth in which he classifies himself. According to his own words, Holden is the most terrific liar "you ever saw in your life" (Salinger 16), an exhibitionist needing an audience (29), and all the more, we have probably never seen such a sexual maniac as he is, in his mind (62), etc. He also claims to act like a thirteen-year-old but to look and sometimes act older than he is (9), and to have a pretty deep voice (64). Of course, we should bear in mind his unreliability – which actually reveals even more about Holden.

Indirectly, we can recognize his self-consciousness through his description of his position in the family. He praises his sister Phoebe and then he gets into a statement about himself:

You should see her. You never saw a little kid so smart and pretty in your whole life. (...) As a matter of fact, I'm the only dumb one in the family. My brother D.B.'s a writer and all, and my brother Allie, the one that died, that I told you about, was a wizard. I'm the only really dumb one (67).

1.11 Physical appearance

He describes himself as being tall and having gray hair, and thus looking older. But it is not only in his looks. He also seems to consider himself older mentally. But both presuppositions fail right before the reader's eyes.

I was sixteen then, and I'm seventeen now, and sometimes I act like I'm about thirteen. It's all really irrational, because I'm six foot two and a half and I have gray hair. I really do. The one side of my head – the right side – is full of millions gray hairs. I've had them since I was a little kid. And yet I still act sometimes like I was only about twelve. Everybody says that, especially my father. It's partly true, too, but it isn't *all* true. People always think something's *all* true. 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 (Salinger 9).

This citation is basically a simplified description of the story's conflict (in terms of his self-image, but his portrayal too); it is not only Holden describing his appearance.

First, it expresses Holden's awareness of the contradiction of his personality – he acts younger, though he sees himself as looking physically older. In this aspect, it describes a conflict between the inner and the outer.

Second, it shows a very interesting fact: despite his narrow view of reality (which is relevant throughout the narrative), he speaks of relativity and the variedness of things when he laments about people always thinking that "something's *all* true". Though not said in a very mature form, the point of this statement is very sound and grown-up. This is further proof of his contradictory character.

And finally, he reveals his feeling of being neglected by people – which is probably one of the causes of his struggle.

When he speaks about himself, he often mentions his certainty that he looks older than he really is. But the reader is given some hints that this is not likely to be true. For example, when he phones Miss Faith Cavendish to arrange a date with her, he emphasizes that he has a deep and mature voice and speaks in a suave way. Despite this, Cavendish says:

"You sound a little on the young side."

I laughed. "Thank you for the compliment," I said – suave as hell (64).

This certainty about his older-looking appearance might be given by his experience of death, which initiated him into the adult world. He speaks of being older, thus becoming part of the adult world (but not an adult himself) much earlier than he should have. Most probably, this self-image is too distorted. He rather does not look so much older than he wants us (and himself) to believe. His gray hair is a permanent mark of his traumatic experience – the death of his brother.

1.2 Holden's Fantasies

Holden often shares his visions, or dreams, of what would he like to do, or even images of the things he dreads, which are close enough to obsession. His fantasies are definitely an important constituent in analyzing his self-image. One of his visions that he presents to us gave the book its name. This fact might be proof of the importance of self-imageries (and his self-image) for the message of the book.

1.21 Holden Disappearing

As the story progresses and Holden's mental state gets worse, so does his self-imagery. For example, while he is reading the magazine in the waiting room of Grand Central his overly selective mind, which focuses on the negative aspects of everything, produces an obsessive fear of having a disease:

(...) this damn article I started reading made me feel almost worse. It was all about hormones. It described how you should look, your face and eyes and all, if your hormones were in good shape, and I didn't look that way at all. I looked exactly like the guy in the article with lousy hormones. So I started getting worried about my hormones. Then I read this other article about how you can tell if you have cancer or not. It said if you had any sores in your mouth that didn't heal pretty quickly, it was a sign that you probably had cancer. I'd had this sore on the inside of my lip for about *two weeks*. So figured I was getting cancer (Salinger 195-196).

His narrow vision is applied to his self-image – he does not see anything positive about his situation and his fate overall.

Another example of self-imagery brings us back to symbolic ground. Just a few moments after Holden's self-diagnosis, he imagines himself disappearing.

Anyway, I kept walking and walking up Fifth Avenue, without any tie on or anything. Then all of a sudden, something very spooky started happening. Every time I came to the end of a block and stepped off the goddamn curb, I had this feeling that I'd never get to the other side of the street. I thought I'd just go down, down, down, and nobody'd ever see

me again. Boy, did it scare me. You can't imagine. I started sweating like a bastard – my whole shirt and underwear and everything. Then I started doing something else. Every time I'd get to the end of the block I'd make believe I was talking to my brother Allie. I'd say to him, "Allie, don't let me disappear. Allie, don't let me disappear. Allie. Don't let me disappear. Please, Allie." And then I'd reach the other side of the street without disappearing, I'd *thank* him. Then it would start all over again as soon as I got to the next corner. But I kept going and all. I was sort of afraid to stop, I think – I don't remember, to tell you the truth (197-198).

This is the motif of the fall reflected in his mind, with Allie as his guardian. He realizes himself falling while he was aspiring to protect others (children) from doing so. He feels his separation from his family, just as Allie is separated now. From this point of view, he might identify himself with Allie.

1.22 The Catcher in the Rye and Other Stories (by Holden Caulfield)

Besides the obsessive fantasies of a desperate mind, Holden invites us to share more pleasant aspects of his rich imagination. He daydreams a lot. Although it seems positive, the motivation still comes from negative experience. Being the catcher in the rye is his dream job, which he himself admits to be "crazy", but in terms of "craziness" it is not very far from his "serious" plan for the future: to live in a cabin in the woods. Practically, both of these are tools to deny reality. Holden dreams of protecting children from the fall which must be taken (as Holden realizes while watching the children on the carousel). And his dream of living in a lonely place in the woods means rejecting society. Simply put, he wants to build an anti-phoney place where he could reject reality, though he needs to cope with it instead (or before he can make such a decision about his future life).

His attempt to deny reality is strengthened by his vision of being deaf-mute, which comes together with living in a lonely place far away from civilization.

1.22.1 I'd decided I'd go away

Holden decides to solve his desperate situation with an escape “somewhere out West”. He actually decides to solve his mental isolation in society by means of a physical isolation. Holden’s words “I’d never go home again and I’d never go away to another school again” (Salinger 198) might reveal that there is something more than disgust at going to another school or fear of his parents’ reaction to his having been expelled again.

But he wishes for a new beginning, which is the one he always starts at a new school: “Just so people didn’t know me and I didn’t know anybody” (198). This might not be Holden behaving abnormally – his outlook on things does not change, he just decides not to go to another school again – but the conflict stays the same.

Then, by saying “I thought what I’d do was, I’d pretend I was one of those deaf-mutes. That way I wouldn’t have to have any goddamn stupid useless conversations with anybody” (198) he reveals his acceptance that he cannot communicate with people – he sees himself as a desperate case who is unable to communicate what he needs to. He desperately calls for help but nobody, not even his family, seems to answer. (In the catcher in the rye fantasy, this wish to be helped is reflected, too – just as he himself wishes to be saved, so he would save others.)

He also declares his attitude towards society: “Everybody’d think I was just a poor deaf-mute bastard and they’d leave me alone” (199). This is a criticism of modern society’s unwillingness to help people in need.

Another important thing lies in his next words about marrying “this beautiful girl that was also a deaf-mute” (199). Such a statement seems to be part of Holden’s tragicomic narrative strategy, but on the other hand, it might show his deep mistrust of everybody. He simply does not believe there is a person who is worth communicating with – which basically proves that his mental instability comes to its peak at this moment in the story. His statement “If we had any children, we’d hide them somewhere” (199) only adds insult to injury.

This fantasy proves his rather negative and self-conscious or even self-denying attitude. The negative side of Holden’s imaginative scenarios (like going blind, having a bullet in the guts, etc.) was commented on by J. Opland:

Always in these fantasies is maimed or suffering in some way; this is indicative of the situation in which Holden finds himself, and is another facet of his obsessions with death (17).

So, Holden's fantasies, along with his statements, are proof of his negative appraisal of both his situation and personality.

1.22.2 Something Crazy

His fantasy of being a catcher in the rye is important for the completeness of his self-image, even though it might not seem so at first sight. In the presentation of this vision of what he would like to be if he had his "goddamn choice" there is an explicit message. In his description of the requirements of his dream job, he says: "I'm standing on the edge of this crazy cliff" (Salinger 173). It might be the answer to the question of which world (the adult one or the innocent one) he considers that he belongs in. He is standing on a cliff – but he is too preoccupied with his concern about protecting little children from falling (so they can play on) to realize that he should not really be standing there. He is standing between the two worlds and he is "too big" to fit into the innocent world, but he is also too afraid to let himself "take the fall" which everybody is obliged to take.

1.3 Digressing from the Road

At the beginning of his conversation with Mr. Antolini, Holden gets to explain his flunking Oral Expression when Antolini asks about his achievements in English at Pencey. Holden gives an interesting metaphor that provides a deep insight into his situation. He starts by explaining:

It's this course where each boy in class has to get up in class and make a speech. You know. Spontaneous and all. And if the boy digresses at all, you're supposed to yell 'Digression!' at him as fast as you can. It just drove me crazy. I got an *F* in it (Salinger 183).

Digression is definitely one of the most significant features of Holden's narrative. It is basically built on his digressing. We would not know much about his character if all his

digressions were omitted. Holden seems to apply the necessity of the act of digression to his own life.

That digression business got on my nerves. I don't know. The trouble with me is, I *like* it when somebody digresses. It's more *interesting* and all (183).

Thus, the “digression business” description seems to be a metaphor for Holden's outlook on his own life. He seems to defend his current situation (which he got himself into by his actions), which he is criticized for. At the very end of the book, when he explains that he is not sure about his application in the new school and thus his problem does not seem to have been solved (“I mean how do you know what you're going to do till you *do* it? The answer is, you don't”), he goes back to this attitude which he presented in the conversation with Mr. Antolini:

But what I mean is, lots of time you don't *know* what interests you most till you start talking about something that *doesn't* interest you most (184).

On the other hand, as his explanation of the “digression business” progresses, it also looks like a metaphor of the force of the unpredictable situations in life:

You just didn't know this teacher, Mr. Vinson. He could drive you crazy sometimes, him and the goddamn class. I mean he'd keep telling you to *unify* and *simplify* all the time. Some things you just can't *do* that to. I mean you can't hardly ever simplify and unify something just because somebody *wants* you to (185).

Thus, Holden might not be digressing from his journey, not only because it seems more interesting to him but also because he has to. Again, we get back to the beginning of all his trouble – the death of Allie. Such an unpredictable situation causes an inevitable digression in one's life. Holden might be disappointed by the lack of compassion from the others and maybe from his family – to judge from all his actions, he does not seem to have been given an opportunity to adapt to this inconvenience and deal with it in an appropriate way.

Throughout the narrative, indications are given of how much Allie's death influenced Holden's life. In the portrayal section, the importance of this topic will be discussed in detail.

2. The Portrayal

Holden Caulfield might be the most famous unreliable narrator in American literature, although he was listed in Henry Sutton's top 10 list of unreliable narrators as No. 7, being described as "anything but clear about what his short, privileged life has already led him to believe – he's a teenager," which perfectly expresses the importance of his unreliability to the analysis of the portrayal. (His unreliability is definitely an important part of his portrayal.) Concerning Holden's personality, the discussion of his portrayal is based on more objective information. However, the objectivity could not be carried out a hundred percent as a result of the limitation of our view, because Holden is the creator of his portrayal – the complexity of the given amount of information (on which the analyses of the portrayal will be based) is in his hands. Thus, Holden's portrayal will be analyzed within the given limit of information. More concretely, the analysis will be based more within the framework of Holden's scope of activity into which we, the readers, were invited. It is important to point out that the limitation itself influences the portrayal.

The aim of the analysis of the portrayal is to discuss the overall portrayal of the character in terms of the motivation for his actions and possible message of the story in relation to its narrator. To put it simply, the portrayal section is concerned with what the story says about Holden Caulfield.

The situation in which the character is involved when we enter the story, together with the subsequent development of this situation, is crucial in the case of the portrayal. It forms a part of the portrayal itself, as we become familiar with the background, and learning that this is not the first time Holden has been expelled from school. This, together with other factual information, will be the source for the analysis of the portrayal.

For the portrayal, it is not important to search for the authenticity of the facts, which we cannot verify because we have to rely on Holden, who is the only source of information. We are dependent on what he says. There is no evidence that all the actions he talks about are true. The task is to analyze what is displayed – the portrayal.

The theme of the quest is an important part of the narrative, as well as of defining the character of Holden Caulfield. Thus, Holden's quest will be analyzed and the nature of the quest will be discussed.

2.1 Formal Characteristics of the Portrayal

It is important to define the features of Holden Caulfield's narrative before analyzing the portrayal itself.

In Holden Caulfield's narrative, it is hard to judge and divide the objective component from the subjective one. To define norms that depict the implied author is also an act of interpretation and it is not important for the portrayal. In this case it is important to define Holden's characteristics as a narrator. In Monika Fludernik's essay *Conversational Narration/Oral Narration* the narrative strategy in *The Catcher in the Rye* is classified as pseudo-oral; she states that such narrators are "often garrulous, repetitive, contradictory and illogical; they keep interrupting themselves and tend to address a fictive listener or audience familiarly; they seem to have an intimate rapport with the fictional world, to which they apparently belong, and also do not shy away from expressing their feelings and views emphatically, thus setting themselves off from the typical narrators of literary texts – aloof, bland, reliable, neutral" (65). Thus, reliability is not compatible with Holden's characteristics as a narrator. Holden is the producer of the narrative, but we are not informed whether it is Holden's piece of writing or if the narrative is supposed to be a document of his actual speech.

Holden's authenticity is intensified by addressing the reader directly. Concerning Holden addressing the reader, the crucial parts are the very beginning and very end of the story, where Holden explicitly addresses the reader. He sets the limits of his narrative saying what he will not tell us. This proves the impossibility of full objectivity being available for the analysis. Thus, there is too great a lack of information for it to be possible to carry out an objective "case study" of the character.

In *Notes on J. D. Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye*, there is an important discussion about Holden's unreliability:

Whether or not one likes Holden, it is difficult not to feel empathy for him, since we do get to know him quite well. But we must be careful to differentiate between Holden's attitude to the events he describes, and Salinger's. It is vitally important to ask ourselves whether Salinger establishes Holden as a trustworthy narrator. Can we believe everything Holden tells us? If we decide that Holden is not a reliable narrator then we as readers have been given a two-fold view of reality: Holden's

biased version of the events he narrates, and the true situation which we have to winnow out for ourselves (Opland 11-12).

Afterwards, Opland gives us objective characteristics, describing Holden as “an extremely highly strung person who overacts under pressure” (12). Then, adding another important note, he says “Holden presents us with a partial view of reality, and that view is a diseased one. He often selects facts to present to us, omitting or glossing over particularly emotional moments” (12). And finally, he makes a most important point about Holden as the creator of the portrayal, saying that he sees only what he chooses (12). His skeptical outlook on life and other people has a strong effect on his portrayal – these facts have always to be kept in mind when discussing the portrayal. What is crucial to his situation is the death of his brother Allie. As will be discussed later, this fact is present throughout the whole narrative. Dealing with the experience of death at a young age could be the major reason for Holden’s trouble, if not the only one.

2.11 Language

Holden’s language is crucial when his reliability is being considered and in revealing his personality. Among the important aspects of his oral-like narrative are unfinished sentences, italics indicating stressed words, and phrases he uses repeatedly. His vocabulary also reveals the character’s attributes that could serve as a verification of the reliability of the information the character gave us himself.

The style attempts to create an accurate impression of the speech of a teenager in the 1950s. Some critics have felt that the vocabulary at times is too sophisticated for a teenager. (Holden uses words like ‘ostracized’, ‘bourgeois’, ‘exhibitionist’), but if this is a problem then it could be countered by arguing that Holden’s best subject is English, the only subject he does not fail at Pencey. His sense of grammar is usually sound, so the book’s many sentence fragments, repetitions and contractions suggest that Salinger expects us to be hearing Holden speaking to us and not reading something that he has written (Opland 14).

In the citation, Opland defined the nature of the *Catcher*’s narrator, which is, as discussed above, the key to identifying unreliability. It also influences the reader’s impression of the narrative. The story itself is neutral, having the potential to be

interpreted in a wider variety of ways, but Holden's language limits the reader's field of interpretation. He addresses the reader, he speaks about what he sees, and we are basically given his interpretation of these events, which is reflected in the way he speaks. Language is a manipulative tool of Holden's. We could have two possible outlooks on this: we could see the character in terms of his own interpretation, altogether with hints which indicate the truth that is either explicitly refused or unspoken. The other possibility is to see him as someone who is not very honest with us and who we should be careful about believing. In fact, we can even think that the whole story is made up and its purpose is something different to what we think – it could be Holden wanting something particular to say by means of a story he made up. And all this affects the portrayal of Holden Caulfield.

Much of the humour in the novel resides in Holden's language, as in 'my parents would have about two haemorrhages apiece if I told you anything pretty personal about them' (p. 5), of, 'Sensitive. That killed me. That guy Morrow was about as sensitive as a goddamn toilet seat.' (p. 59) The language of the novel has been analyzed by Donald P. Costello, which is printed as an appendix in Grunwald's book on Salinger. Costello characterizes Holden's slang as typically teenage: 'versatile yet narrow, expressive yet unimaginative, imprecise, often crude and always trite'. In conclusion, he writes, 'The language of *The Catcher in the Rye* is, as we have seen, an authentic artistic rendering of a type of informal colloquial, teenage American spoken speech. It is strongly typical and trite, yet often somewhat individual; it is crude and slangy and imprecise, imitative yet occasionally imaginative... (Opland 14)'

And, last but not least, the language defines the character:

A number of features of this style provide insights into Holden's personality; the style does more than merely establish that the narrator is an American Teenager of the fifties (14).

As for the other aspects of his narrative given above, let us discuss the italics that indicate stress in his narrative. As Sarah Graham says, it evokes the spoken word:

In *Catcher*, Holden's narrative is given nuance by italics on whole and parts of words, as in 'I can even get to hate somebody, just *looking* at them' (24).

As already stated, Holden's form of speech contributes to the final form of his portrayal. It is basically manipulation of the reader. But there are moments when the reader can have a say in the portrayal. In the text, we are not always given a clear view (beside Holden's view and opinions) of the whole situation. There are moments which invite the reader to become a co-creator of the meaning of these moments. These are the unfinished sentences in Holden's narrative. Sarah Graham continues:

a typical feature of Salinger's technique is his refusal to offer definitive answers to questions raised by the text, which encourages the reader to participate in the construction of the meaning (21).

Then she specifies the topic of the unfinished sentences:

One of the defining characteristics of Salinger's dialogue is unfinished sentences. Like his use of narrative gaps, this encourages the reader to participate in the construction of meaning. In *Catcher*, the most striking example of what is left unsaid is Antolini's statement 'I'm simply here, admiring—' (Salinger 1994a: 172) when Holden wakes to find his teacher touching him. The unfinished sentence prompts the reader to imagine how it might end and consider the implications of the unspoken 'you' (22).

Holden's negative interpretation is not coincidental. However, he was shocked and acted according to his logic. His spontaneous reaction might have its function in revealing Holden's character.

This might be a sign that we should consider Holden's selective point of view. This scene shows us (probably intentionally) that we should be aware of Holden's pessimistic attitude towards everything. This assumption does not give us a conclusion as to whether Holden's outlook on this situation is wrong or right – we do not know objectively where the truth is. But this moment in the story can serve as the climax of all of Holden's pessimistic perceptions of reality and his comments on it. He might not do it intentionally, but his view is affected by his pessimistic attitude.

He is selective in his description of reality, and what he selects to describe is generally what depresses him (Opland 19).

In general, this is a feature of the form of narration in *Catcher* – the first person narrator.

As Graham claims, first-person narration is a key factor in indicating Holden's state of mind (20). Then she gives us a specification:

A novel with a first-person narrator is inevitably narrow in its perspective: the reader can only know what the narrator chooses to reveal, and has no access to the thoughts of the other characters. Conventionally, the use of first-person narration creates a close bond between reader and narrator and a great potential for intimate engagement with the main protagonist (20).

The important features of the language of the narrative, which define the portrayal of Holden Caulfield, are phrases he uses frequently. Such as “and all”:

This last phrase suggests that Holden has not thought the scene through completely; Holden often ends his thoughts loosely. Now this is precisely the situation Holden is in: he acts impulsively, but fails to analyze the implications of his actions (Opland 14-15).

This statement supports the idea of language as a key to the character’s personality. The same is true for his favorite phrase, “I really did”:

Similarly, Holden’s habit of adding, ‘I really did’, or, ‘It really was’, is typical teenage talk, but in this particular case it serves to emphasize Holden’s basic insecurity, as if Holden feels he has to repeat everything he says twice before anyone will believe him, or insist on the truth of his statements (15).

So, the language is a crucial tool of the narrative that provides the overall shape of the story, not only in terms of approaching the character as such, but also his situation.

2.11.1 Interaction

As implied by the discussion of the event at Mr. Antolini’s, the dialogues and interaction between Holden and the other characters are very important for the analysis of the language as a co-creator of the portrayal. In this section, we will focus on the portrayal primarily, but there will be some aspects of the self-image, too.

In the examples which are going to be discussed, there are implications of Holden’s subjectivity as a creator of the portrayal. We are alerted by his partners in dialogues that Holden’s self-reflection fails in the given moment.

One of the examples is during the dialogue with Sally Hayes, when the discussion gets more serious (on Holden’s side). Holden makes a confession about his hatred of

things that make him feel “lousy”. He is interrupted by Sally, and his comment on it is the point:

Don’t shout, please,” old Sally said. Which was funny, because I wasn’t even shouting (Salinger 130).

We could believe that Holden wasn’t shouting, but this is actually repeated a little further on in the text – when he meets up with his older friend, Carl Luce, in the Wicker Bar. Again, when Holden gets into passionate discussion about something which is very important to him, he speaks too loudly without even realizing it. This time it is the topic of the outlook on sex in the East; Luce explains to Holden:

“They simply happen to regard sex as both a physical and a spiritual experience. If you think I’m –”

“So do I! So do I regard it as a wuddayacallit – a physical and spiritual experience and all. I really do. But it depends on who the hell I’m doing it with. If I’m doing it with somebody I don’t even–”

“Not so *loud*, for God’s sake, Caulfield (...)” (146).

But then, unlike in the previous conversation with Sally, he admits he was speaking “a little loud”:

I was getting excited and I *was* talking a little too loud. Sometimes I talk a little too loud when I get excited (147).

This might mean that he is not willing to admit to excitement or indignation in the first case, in the conversation with Sally.

Sarah Graham sees this as evidence of his forthcoming nervous breakdown.

In *Catcher*, Holden is often inaccurate in his judgments about himself and others, a trait he inadvertently reveals throughout the text. For example, he cannot understand why the women he meets at the Lavender Room treat him like a foolish teenager, even though he is not old enough to order alcohol at the bar, and he denies that he is shouting at Sally despite her requests that he lower his voice. In both cases, the disparity between his perceptions and the evidence provided by other characters suggest a lack of self-awareness that is a product of poor mental health (20).

The other crucial conversation is the one with the taxi driver about the ducks in Central Park. In every way, the event in the cab seems so trivial in terms of language and rhetoric that it apparently indicates its importance by its triviality. In fact, the major

idea of this conversation is an important hint, not only for the reader, but for Holden himself. It is basically an answer for him. But as an adolescent, his mind might not be able to calm down and soak it up, as this moment in the story could possibly be the conclusion of some of his troubles. It carries the idea of a solution to Holden's situation.

Holden's concern about the ducks' fate apparently deals with the insecurity of young people searching for their own direction in life. This moment could be interpreted differently, but the idea of insecurity might be the most apparent.

The cab driver, Horwitz, is given an irritating question by Holden that is metaphorical in itself and he, despite his former unwillingness, gives him a clear answer to his underlying question, which deals with the essential conflict of the narrative.

If you was a fish, Mother Nature'd take care of *you*, wouldn't she?
Right? You don't think them fish just *die* when it gets to be winter, do ya? (Salinger 83)

Though the driver's explanation is rather clumsy and factually incorrect (besides substituting fish for ducks), the conclusion is clear. Holden is given a simple and clear answer that everything will survive the unsteady and inhospitable time of winter, no matter whether it is a duck or a fish. However, this answer does not give Holden a guarantee of protection from what he fears most – becoming a phoney, or, more concretely, from having no other choice to survive but to act phoney in order to survive.

Graham interprets the conversation differently:

In *Catcher*, Holden's repetitive questions about the ducks communicate his fear of loss: 'By any chance, do you happen to know where they go, the ducks, when it gets frozen all over? Do you happen to know, by any chance?' (...) (23).

Thus, from these examples of Holden communicating with other characters, we can derive, by taking into account his reactions, his attitude regarding the message of the story – wrong self-perception and insecurity about growing up.

2.2 Holden's situation

2.21 Holden as a rebel without a cause

The figure of a young rebel was “invented” in the 1950s. The ‘50s culture in America is teemed with rebellious teenage outsiders. It was the decade when the integrity of American youth was shaping. As Adam Golub mentions in his article *American Adolescent*:

In the years after World War II, an autonomous youth culture emerged with tastes in music, fashion, film and language that differed starkly from those of the older generation. The mass culture industry rushed to both shape and respond to these tastes while pollsters and journalists set out to decipher the alien mores of teen society. Meanwhile many *Catcher* readers lauded Salinger for capturing the modern adolescent vernacular. (Forbes.com)

If Holden could be the iconic teenage rebel of the literary world, Jim Stark would be the silver screen's. The two have been compared countless times by both professionals and amateurs (mainly by their fans). Nevertheless, there are actually more differences than similarities.

They share a disappointment in adults. Just as Jim wishes he could look up to his father, Holden, lamenting his disappointment in adults, desires to have someone to look up to, though he does not say so explicitly. He shows some faith in Mr. Antolini, but he ends up with a terrible disappointment. (Still, we are under the reign of Holden's unreliable narrative, and so we cannot really see into the real motivation of other people, because Holden creates a filter that selects or even manipulates information.) They idolize earlier times – which, considering their age, can be nothing but childhood. They are both melodramatic. They also have in common one important aspect which will be later discussed in detail – the motif of the road. They are escapists. They are on the road. They both change schools. They wish for new beginnings which they always give up too fast.

Contradicting the 1950s emphasis on family and conservative values, Jim and Holden's family backgrounds are problematic because of the requirement of American society of that time – securing a high living standard. The Caulfields and the Starks are well-off families, but at the cost of lack of time spent together. Their children lead a

privileged lifestyle. They are not really struggling materially.

Besides being seventeen-years-old rebels with a cause which is incomprehensible to adults, they also share another interesting thing – the gesture of giving an article of their clothing to a younger fellow. The symbolism of wearing a red article of clothing that is passed to their friends when their stories culminate was also noticed and analyzed by Roberto Pachecano in his essay *Parents: A Cause for Rebellion*. He discusses the symbolism of the color red:

Red is the most vibrant of colors, and its wearer is often considered daring and begging for attention. The reader may have decided that both Jim and Holden were not only seeking attention, but also seeking acceptance.

Then he explains another possible interpretation of the color:

The color red also symbolizes anger. After all, Jim is angry at the world in general and at his family in particular. By giving his beloved red jacket to Plato, Jim is letting go of this. Holden, too, is angry at the world. Perhaps he gives his red hat to Phoebe because he knows she will be a teenager in three short years and like him, will soon be angry at the world.

The second interpretation contradicts my point of view. It is not likely that Jim or Holden “pass” their anger to their younger colleagues (especially Holden, who is explicit about his dream of “protecting” children from growing up). The items of clothing may rather symbolize their care and protection – something they desire to be given to them. In her book dealing with color symbolism called, *Svět barev*, Petra Pleskotová explains one of the many (and often contradictory) meanings of the color red in early times as being the color of protection from diseases and evil magic and that our ancient ancestors wore red protective amulets. This interpretation supports the theory of red items being a caring gesture. On the other hand, the color red, being a symbol of opposing values, perfectly depicts the ambivalence of the young teenage characters.

As for the differences, at the end of *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), Jim learns that making the right decision might cut two ways – picking the right decision can cause pain just like the wrong one, according to his experience when his mission to save Plato’s life fails, but not because of him. After that, the silver-screen rebel experiences a happy ending. Such a happy end as Holden would surely hate and consider “phoney”.

The movie (especially in that era) would not work without it. And Holden hates movies anyway.

The two '50s rebel figures also became idols of their kind, keeping their positions in subsequent generations. The influence is not evident only in literature but also in popular culture. Holden Caulfield's name later appears in rock bands' lyrics, for example, in Green Day's *Who Wrote Holden Caulfield*, from their second album named *Kerplunk* (1992), which is an evident identification with the character:

There's a boy who fogs his world and now he's getting lazy
There's no motivation and frustration makes him crazy
He makes a plan to take a stand but always ends up sitting
Someone help him up or he's gonna end up quitting

Despite such popularity among the young generation, with its rebellious attitude towards society, the essential meaning of Holden Caulfield's situation is understood rather superficially, if not actually misunderstood. His frank commentaries and use of indecent language are definitely not the most defining feature of his story.

2.22 The motive of the road – finding a resolution

All of sudden, I decided what I'd really do, I'd get the hell out of Pencey – right that same night and all. I mean not wait till Wednesday or anything. I just didn't want to hang around anymore. It made me too sad and lonesome. So what I decided to do, I decided I'd take a room in a hotel in New York – some very inexpensive hotel and all – and just take it easy till Wednesday. Then, on Wednesday, I'd go home all rested up and feeling swell (Salinger 51).

Holden's words make his motivation clear, at least, for that moment. Leaving Pencey is a crucial point. Holden hits the road. The previous quotation is a concentrated set of motives, showing that he makes decisions all of a sudden, and changes his mind at the same rate. Patience is not one of his virtues.

In *Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye*, Sarah Graham approximates the *Catcher* as being compared to significant works of literary history, such as Hamlet, Ulysses, and others, by critics:

In these essays, critics typically focus upon the significance of a troubled hero who undertakes a journey towards revelation, offering a commentary on his society as he goes. In comparing *Catcher* to such famous texts, critics are asserting that Salinger's novel is – despite its expletives and its rebellious hero – an important work of literature that should be taken seriously by academics (83).

This idea speaks for the importance of the motif of the road – the road and Holden's motivation to take it as an important part of the substance of the portrayal and makes Holden's story part of the literary tradition. Later in the text Graham mentions Miller and Heiserman, who compared *Catcher* to the Quest – one of the archetypal models of European literature:

In Quest texts, heroes are usually either looking for something or trying to find their way home: Heiserman and Miller argue that Holden is 'engaged in both sorts of quest at once; he needs to go home and he needs to leave it' (Heiserman 1956: 131). Holden longs to leave home, to escape the 'phony' society he lives in, but at the same time he seeks home, craving the security that has been lost through Allie's death (83).

As has already been implied, Allie's death might be the starting point of Holden's mental problems. The experience of death was a crucial intervention in his childhood. Children are not fully aware of mortality – they are innocent in terms of awareness of the cruelties of life. Holden's innocence was violently corrupted by this experience. It seems that he did not recover from this experience – he was not with his family at Allie's funeral. This indicates his isolation from the family. Then he was sent to boarding school. His feeling of isolation from his family is crucial.

Thus, he does not have just one road to take but going home is one of them – leaving Pencey for home has its symbolic aspects. Nevertheless, we do not really know if he reached the aim of his road (to get back home). He did – but only ostensibly, when his parents were not aware of him. We, as readers, miss his homecoming. We know he did it, but we did not see him reaching this aim – he refuses to tell us.

The road is present in multiple ways. The moment we enter the story is the moment of a new beginning for Holden but it is a repetitive experience; he is excluded *again*. It is the moment when he takes a new road within the road – the road of an unsuccessful student from one school to another one. His narrative is practically just one battle in the war. Howard M. Harper specifies his journey as an initiation:

The Catcher in the Rye is a story of initiation. Its hero, Holden Caulfield, is innocent but not altogether naive; he has some knowledge of evil though he is not himself corrupted by it. His story is an odyssey – a search and a series of escapes, both a flight and a quest. The odyssey itself, which begins on a Saturday afternoon “last Christmastime” at Pencey Prep and ends at the New York zoo on Monday afternoon, is placed in a retrospective frame; Holden tells the story some months later in California, where he has been seeing a psychiatrist (66).

Harper’s idea of the story being both a case study and a therapeutic confession (67) would reveal Holden’s hospitalization as the denouement of the whole of Holden’s road. Holden himself speaks about undergoing treatment, with Luc Carl:

“You mean to go to a psychoanalyst and all?” I said. That’s what he’d told me I ought to do. His father was a psychoanalyst and all.

“It’s up to you, for God’s sake. It’s none of my goddamn business what you want to do with your life.”

I didn’t say anything for a while. I was thinking.

“Supposing I went to your father and had him psychoanalyze me and all,” I said. “What would he do to me? I mean what would he do to me?” (148).

Considering this conversation, Holden seems to be interested in the treatment. Throughout his narrative, he seems to be seeking advice. He sees the adult world as a corrupted one but, at the same time, he wishes to have somebody older than him to help him, to advise him about his life. But he seems to look for it in the wrong places, and some of the possible mentors he comes across remain unappreciated by Holden. At the beginning of the book, Spencer tries to advise him, with a focus on Holden’s future (14). But this doesn’t seem to appeal to Holden because he is too concerned about his past. He needs to deal with his past before he can set some concerns for his future. In conversation with Luce, Holden seems to be placing more hope on getting some kind of guidance. Paradoxically, Luce is totally unwilling to discuss Holden’s problems. Holden, as if he would not even notice his disdain, seems to interpret the conversation positively.

Another mentor, Mr. Antolini, might be the most important one for Holden. Holden feels that there is something that they share – he was the only one who dared to get near the dead body of James Castle and did not care if he got bloody while picking him up.

Everybody else was loath to get near the dead body. Holden seems to be disappointed by people's reservations and disrespect towards people who are dead – and he, in a way, seems to identify himself with the death in terms of his isolation. He explains his attitude when he speaks about Allie:

When the weather's nice, my parents go out quite frequently and stick a bunch of flowers on old Allie's grave. I went with them a couple of times, but I cut it out. In the first place, I certainly don't enjoy seeing him in that crazy cemetery. Surrounded by dead guys and tombstones and all. It wasn't too bad when the sun was out, but twice – *twice* – we were there when it started to rain. It was awful. It rained on his lousy tombstone, and it rained on the grass on his stomach. It rained all over the place. All the visitors that were visiting the cemetery started running like hell over to their cars. That's what nearly drove me crazy. All the visitors could get in their cars and turn on their radios and all and then go someplace nice for dinner – everybody except Allie. I couldn't stand it. I know it's only his body and all that's in the cemetery, and his soul's in Heaven and all that crap, but I couldn't stand it anyway. I just wish he wasn't there (Salinger 155-156).

Death means isolation and he strongly feels the absurdity of the ritual of putting flowers on graves. The isolation is intensified by the rain. Holden admires Mr. Antolini for not being afraid to pick up the dead body. The figure of Mr. Antolini will be discussed more closely later.

It is hard to say whether Phoebe could be a mentor too, but she knows Holden better than the other possible mentors. And she gave Holden a simple but true reflection of his situation by saying to him “You don't like *anything* that's happening “ (169).

Thus, Holden's initiation consists of a mental treatment. He needs to solve his trauma over Allie's death, which was probably the crucial and most formative experience that influenced his situation – his journey (the war) beyond all his other journeys (battles).

In his case, the whole process of initiation is to realize that he needs help, and he is simply not able to put up with it on his own. He does not need answers but treatment.

The conclusion in his situation is realizing that he needs treatment to help him deal with his traumatic experience and realize that he will never win his fight against corruption.

The conclusion of the initiation of Holden Caulfield is not represented clearly in the story. It is caused by the fact we see through Holden's eyes, and he does not make a statement except the one in the carousel scene:

All the kids kept trying to grab for the gold ring, and so was old Phoebe, and I was sort of afraid she'd fall off the goddam horse, but I didn't say anything or do anything, 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 (Salinger 211).

As Harper claims, Holden learns that conflict is inevitable, inescapable, eternal (68).

Though his portrayal seems to be based on his label of a teenage rebel, the reason being that he is a teenager, the truth may also be, despite all Holden's labels, that his fight against the corruption of innocence is not only a consequence of his traumatic experience of death. The motive of Holden's rebellion (and his road) may lie in such a life experience of vital importance as the death of a sibling.

The resolution of the story and the moment of realization are not at all to Holden's taste – it is almost Hollywood-like: children on a carousel, a “jazzy and funny” song is playing. Then it starts raining. Everybody else is protected by the roof of the carousel. Holden remains standing alone in the rain but he feels happy, despite realizing that his hunting hat really gave him quite a lot of protection, in a way, he got drenched anyway – as all hunting caps always get soaked in the rain, it is not natural that innocence would last for ever. In this moment, Holden's quest should be done. But is it?

The happy ending to the conflict might take place inside the mind of the character. He is happy within himself, thus for the symbolism of a solitary man standing in the rain – he just doesn't mind the rain. But from the very beginning, as the story progresses, Holden's mental state seems to be getting worse; then there is the scene in the rain when he claims to be happy, but then the circle is closed and the story gets back to the beginning – we are back in the sanatorium.

The other possible interpretation of the last scene brings us back to the rain in the cemetery. His happiness while standing in the rain might come from the feeling of belonging – he did not leave Allie alone in the rain.

2.23 Nonconformity

“You always do everything backasswards.” He looked at me. “No wonder you are flunking the hell out of here,” he said. “You don’t do *one damn thing* the way you’re supposed to. I mean it. Not one damn thing” (Salinger 41).

Stradlater’s description of Holden’s actions may be a little exaggerated but it serves perfectly as part of his diagnosis – nonconformity.

Holden’s nonconformity is closely related to the motif of the road. Nonconformity is definitely an integral part of Holden’s road. However, his nonconformity may not be only a side effect of his rebellion but also a constraint on his getting well. He is agonized by the adult world, which, according to Holden, requires one to become a phoney. Opland conveyed the idea that his hospitalization should teach Holden how to conform, which supports the idea of nonconformity as a constraint in Holden’s quest:

In the sanatorium he is taught how to conform, and his treatment leads him to accept people like the despicable Maurice. Holden was on a quest for his identity; the mass society denied him his individuality. As a punishment for his refusal to conform he is committed to a sanatorium and brainwashed until he accepts society as it is and can join it. But Maurice was corrupt and Holden was right to revolt against people like him, he was right to dislike the schoolboys for excluding Ackley, he was right about the commercialization of Christmas. Yet society cannot accept rebels. So this corrupt society processes Holden and teaches him to conform to its corruption. Holden has been denied his individuality (37).

This statement makes the story end on a sad note. So, does the hospitalization negate the ostensible happy ending of the scene in the rain? Was Holden’s reconciliation with himself denied? The scene in the rain may symbolize self-acceptance and the treatment in the sanatorium may lead to harmony between the outer and inner aspects of his quest. Though he seems to have come to terms with the inevitability of the fall from the cliff of the rye field, does it make him comfortable with the people around him? Throughout the story he often claims to be irritated by the behavior of other people. At the same time, he is the one who irritates people by doing “everything backasswards”, which leads to him being excluded by the others (even though he is a good person in general).

This view supports the theory that his time spent in the sanatorium should teach him how to conform.

But can Holden be himself and be taught how to conform at the same time? Does it mean a compromise and calming down his affected character (connected with his adolescent age)? Standing in the rain on his own, Holden seems to be happy, despite his alienation.

The symbol of nonconformity is present in Holden's fantasy of escape – he is basically planning to take another road. He excludes himself from every group of people and is afraid of joining another.

With Allie's death being present in his motivation, his feeling of unwillingness to "fit in" might be caused by this experience. He has experienced something that most of his peers have not, and his insufficient adaptation to such an experience has caused his feeling of alienation among his schoolmates.

2.24 The "it"

Considering the symbolic aim of the therapy as medication for his nonconformity, we can go back to the beginning of the story, which starts with a famous sentence "If you really want to hear about it..." and then Holden explains his refusal to tell us his "whole goddamn autobiography or anything" (Salinger 1). After that, he specifies that he will tell us "this madman stuff that happened to me around last Christmas just before I got pretty run-down and had to come out here and take it easy" (1). This completely contradicts any idea of a happy ending in the rain scene. Should we believe him, then? In fact, there is a gap between the last scene of the retrospectively narrated events and the actual present when the narrative is told (in the sanatorium). Holden, who is the producer of the narrative, leaves a gap there. We can only guess what happened then.

What is this "it" in the very first sentence he gives us the chance to hear about from him? Is it the very purpose of the story? We actually do not know why he is telling us about it. We do not even know any background information about Holden actually telling the story – we know he is in the sanatorium now, but *why* does he tell us the story? And is the story his piece of writing or is the narrative supposed to be a document of his actual speech? It might be the key to the unclear area concerning what the therapy and the sudden happiness in the rain meant for Holden. In this case, the whole purpose

of the story might be hidden behind “it” – why does he make such a confession? Both this and the addressee remain unclear.

The “it” marks this episode of Holden’s life as the resolution of one phase. As we know, this was neither his first departure from a school, nor his first nervous breakdown. For Holden, “it” may be a life-changing experience. In such a case, “it” means something like “telling you about my case”. And the subsequent refusal to tell the reader about his previous life would be likely to support this idea. In such a case, Holden’s journey is a real quest for “mental stability” but the resolution – whether the stay in the sanatorium really was effective – is rather ambiguous. However, he seems to show some will to “make it this time” in the last chapter, as he says he *thinks* he is going to apply himself when he gets back to school, but doubts it at the same time by saying “how do you know what you’re going to do till you *do* it?” (213). His impulsive attitude seems to remain unchanged. But then, at the very end, he claims to miss everybody, even the people he didn’t like initially. Holden is contradicting himself – and not for the first time. This is an example of Holden’s confusing and contradictory speech, which leaves space for the reader’s own interpretation.

The picture of Holden in the sanatorium – the story behind the story – remains unclear, too. But it is important with regard to the previously discussed topic of nonconformity as a constraint on Holden’s ability to feel all right among people. As already stated, the story comes back to the sanatorium in the end. However, the sanatorium is present throughout the whole story – it is told from the sanatorium.

Holden’s acceptance of society is an acceptance of the fact that he will always be deeply estranged from its dominant social values and, in any sense, a stranger to its people as well (Harper 70-71).

According to this idea, Holden is destined to be estranged within himself, but his treatment in the sanatorium makes him an acceptable and trouble-free person for those who he became sound enough to accept.

2.3 Holden's Parents

The family is “an institution” which usually plays the chief part in most teenagers’ troubles (in the adolescent’s opinion) and is frequently talked about, parents especially. But in Holden’s case, it is different. He never blames his parents for anything (explicitly). He rarely speaks about them. In the beginning, he even claims he is not going to tell us about them, listing reasons why he would not do so. He praises his younger siblings – his sister Phoebe and brother Allie, who died of leukemia. He seems to be rather sarcastic when he speaks about his brother D. B., who is a successful writer in Hollywood, “being a prostitute”(Salinger 1), but he actually seems to be actually Holden’s confidant:

I’ll tell you about this madman stuff that happened to me around last Christmas (...). I mean, that’s all I told D.B. about, and he’s my *brother* and all (1).

Throughout the whole story (the retrospectively narrated events and in the sanatorium) he is not in actual connection with his parents – he is physically separated from them. He is only near his mother, indirectly, when he secretly goes to their apartment – as he is hidden in the closet in D.B’s room when his mother comes in. His father is only present through the agency of Mr. Antolini, who claims to have spoken to him about Holden. And his parents are mentioned by Mr. Spencer, who said he had talked to them about their son. This physical separation from his parents might be symbolic. He, the proclaimed rebel, does not even say a bad word about his parents – actually, he does not speak much at all about them. At the very beginning, he even claims that he is “not going into it” (1), giving us two reasons for that: first, it bores him, and second, his parents are “quite touchy about anything like that” (1).

As Graham mentions in *Salinger’s The Catcher in the Rye*, his parents’ significance lies in their absence (33). It is not unusual for a seventeen-year-old to talk about his parents quite often (or at least complain about them).

2.31 The Fall

The story is full of the motif of the fall – the two most apparent cases are the fall from the cliff and the fall Mr. Antolini warned Holden about. And the same for “the

catch” which got into the novel’s name. Where one of them is mentioned, the other is also present. The fall is danger and the act of catching is the rescue – these motifs are counterparts.

The coherence between these motifs and Holden’s parents lies in its meaning. Holden feels himself falling, and the word “catch”, with a shifted meaning, is present in an important moment when he leaves after his secret visit to his parents’ apartment:

For one thing, I didn’t give much of a damn any more if they caught me. I really didn’t. I figured if they caught me, they caught me. I almost wished they did, in a way (Salinger 180).

To Holden, being caught means, being saved from his separation from his family.

More of the motif of the fall was discussed in the self-image section – the depiction of the fall by means of Holden’s vision.

Concerning the motif itself, the fall is also present in multiple ways. There are (at least) two kinds of fall: the fall Holden is “driving himself into” (as Mr. Antolini said) – the fall Holden should avoid, and the fall from the cliff near the rye – the fall he should be willing to take. These falls contradict each other.

2.32 Mr. Antolini and his role in Holden’s family

Mr. Antolini is like a link between Holden’s trouble and his parents. After his late-night “visit” home, he would rather go to Antolini’s. During his visit there, Antolini tells Holden about him and his father discussing Holden. In fact, Antolini may play an important part in Holden’s quest.

He feels betrayed again – though, as was discussed above, Holden might have misinterpreted the event of Mr. Antolini patting his head. Even Holden himself admits he might be too quick in judging the event.

I mean I wondered if just maybe I was wrong about thinking he was making a flitty pass at me. I wondered if maybe he just liked to pat guys on the head when they’re asleep. I mean how can you tell about that stuff for sure? You can’t (Salinger 194-195).

This citation actually expresses the aim of Holden’s quest (or one of the searched quests of Holden’s journey). It casts doubt upon Holden’s selective attitude about all the things

around him being of a negative nature. And what is more, Holden immediately starts accepting the possible “perversion” – his attitude loses its one-sidedness:

I mean I started thinking that even if he was a flit he certainly'd been very nice to me. I thought how he hadn't minded it when I'd called him up so late, and how he'd told me to come right over if I felt like it. And how he went to all that trouble giving me that advice about finding out the size of your mind and all, and how he was the only guy that'd even gone *near* that boy James Castle I told you about when he was dead (195).

Another moment that proves Antolini's importance (as a person who leads Holden in his quest) is the one when Antolini asks Holden whether he would keep the paper with the quote he would give him. Holden makes a statement (the commentary from “behind the story” – the Holden-in-sanatorium commentary): “I still have the paper he gave me” (188).

Mr. Antolini's influence might be a gateway to Holden's acceptance of the world. Through this event, Holden starts to realize that the world is not just black and white. The figure of Mr. Antolini is more than a father figure. He is a teacher, more than in terms of his occupation. As already stated, Holden sympathizes with him because he is not afraid to overcome the natural human loathing of death, and later on, he learns a lesson when the event at Antolini's gets him to realize the variety of life.

2.4 Childhood vs. Adulthood

Briefly put, the novel is about Holden trying to protect innocent childhood from corrupting adulthood. Despite Holden's many sound opinions, this field is seen in a rather simplified way in his view. It is black and white. The narrowness of his view is best depicted in this field.

2.41 The motif of Death

Holden himself is the one whose childhood was corrupted. He often mentions his brother Allie. His death, as mentioned above, was a crucial point not only in his life, but also in his struggle, which is treated in the text. The death was the reason for his

involuntary plunge into the adult world, the loss of his innocence, and his mental instability. Death seems to be connected with adulthood. The experience of death is a tool of corruption, the gateway to the adult world. Although death was what caused his outlook on the world (and thus his trouble), he seems to accept it – he is not repelled by it. He admires Mr. Antolini for “not giving a damn if his coat got all bloody” when he picked up the dead body of James Castle (Salinger 174). He is troubled by other people’s reservations about death. Simply, as he says to Phoebe: “Just because somebody’s dead, you don’t just stop liking them (...)” (171).

This definitely noble trait of his, on the other hand, alienates him from the others. What is dead does not change. It stays the same for ever; there is no moving forward. Now, Allie is eleven for ever. Holden is afraid of forward movement. This is one of the possible aspects which is reflected in Holden’s character: stability, the value he lacks most, but which he looks for in the wrong places. He sees it in many objects he comes across throughout his narrative: the museum, the mummies in it, the school, and the carousel playing the same song – these have not changed since Holden’s childhood. Indicating Holden’s obligation to move on, the school and the tomb in the museum were “corrupted” by impolite signs.

As Opland points out, the importance of death and insanity can be read directly from the ostensibly meaningless phrases Holden uses very frequently:

People or actions are always killing Holden or driving him crazy. These phrases are not unusual, yet in the context of this book, they suggest Holden’s major preoccupations with insanity and death (16).

Actually, death leads him to insanity. The novel cannot be read only as the story of a rebellious teenager who is going through some kind of “phase”, but also as the story of an individual who is suffering from the loss of his sibling and “happens to be” a teenager (which gives the situation a specific context).

Galloway explains a similar idea that adolescence might not be the crucial aspect of the conflict that Holden faces:

Holden does not refuse to grow up so much as he agonizes over the state of growing up. The innocent world of childhood is amply represented in *The Catcher in the Rye*, but Holden, as a frustrated, disillusioned, anxious hero, stands for modern man rather than merely for the modern adolescent. He is self-conscious and often ridiculous, but he is also an anguished human being of special sensitivity. Even though he is often

childishly ingenuous, and his language is frequently comic, Holden must be seen as both a representative and critic of the modern environment, as the highly subjective tone of the novel suggests (204).

2.42 Children the divine – Holden’s depiction of children’s nature

Holden Caulfield sees his ideal in children. It is their ingeniousness and freedom to be what they are that he adores about them. Unlike adults, who are bound to fit the pattern. Childhood, together with innocence, is a state of mind that is not only dependent on physical development. It is more dependent on life experience. In children’s world everything should have a happy ending – that is how the innocence, or a lack of awareness of cruelties of life, ought to be preserved. Since he experienced death too early, Holden is aware of this.

Only children are innocent, and Holden wages a desperate campaign to protect the innocence that is threatened by adult corruption. For Holden is an adolescent, on the threshold of maturity, and he is reluctant to leave behind the purity and innocence of childhood. It is significant of this state that Holden is preoccupied amongst other things with sex and death (Opland 19).

He sets off on a mission to save all children from corruption by the adult world.

In Salinger’s fiction, it is peculiar that we often see a clever child speaking words of wisdom, as Graham pointed out: “Salinger’s most pointed critique of post-war American values often comes from children, whose innocence implies the truthfulness of their words” (26).

Children are divine in Holden’s eyes. He does not even suspect them of writing the impolite signs on the walls in Phoebe’s school:

(...) when I was sitting down, I saw something that drove me crazy. Somebody’d written “Fuck you” on the wall. It drove me damn near crazy. I thought how Phoebe and all the other little kids would see it, and how they’d wonder what the hell it meant, and then finally some dirty kid would tell them – all cockeyed, naturally – what it meant, and how they’d all *think* about it and maybe even *worry* about it for a couple of days. I kept wanting to kill whoever’d written it. I figured it was some pervert

bum that'd sneaked in the school late at night to take a leak or something and then wrote it on the wall (Salinger 201).

He is completely blind to the possibility that the sign could have been written by a child. Children are good, adults are bad. He seeks clearly defined qualities and in this he sees the certainty he lost too early in his life. And, this simplified view of the world is one of the most important components of his portrayal as a literary character.

Conclusion

The Catcher in the Rye is a text that does not only speak of its time through the eyes of American youth – it is also a picture of the struggle of an individual facing the incomprehension of society. The intensity of the message is strengthened by its rebellious teenage protagonist, who faces a mental struggle that leads to a nervous breakdown. It shows how the simplifying nature of human society harms the potential of the compassionate mind of an individual. In the case of Holden Caulfield, we can see how fragile such a mind could be when confronting the expectations of society.

By means of his claims, the discussion of Holden's self-image revealed the constituents of his unhealthy self-perception that cause his feeling of self-consciousness and isolation from society and even his family, which grows bigger throughout the progress of the story. His self-image does not correspond with reality, since Holden's perception is affected by his negative outlook on the world. His imagery, including the dream of being a catcher in the rye, is proof of his alienation. Holden's alienation comes from the fact that he has already been discarded from the innocent world of children and he is not willing to enter the adult one, standing on the cliff near the field of the rye. He tries to cope with his mental isolation with the aid of the physical isolation – as implied by his plans to build a cabin in the woods. All of his plans for a "better future" are actually counter-productive.

Holden's portrayal speaks of the desperate quest of an individual struggling with the early experience of death to get back to his family and consequently to himself. All along his way, he is accompanied by his selective view of reality and black-and-white set of values. It is apparent that Holden's attitude is strongly affected by his early experience of the death of his younger brother. The motif of death is not only present in Allie, it also symbolizes contradictory values – his ultimate wish for stability, together with a feeling of alienation. The meaning of alienation in connection with death is also multiple; the experience of death alienated him from other young people of his own age, simply because they do not share the traumatic experience, on one hand, and the isolation of the dead, which Holden identifies himself with, on the other.

Accompanied by memories of Allie, he follows a path the realization that he, and all the children, are obliged to take the fall from the cliff. The main obstacle to doing so for Holden is his nonconformity. It is his device for self-protection, but at the same time it acts as a constraint on his ability to heal his mind. The self-proclaimed protector of their

innocence, Holden Caulfield sees his ideal in children. They depict his ultimate wish for stable values. But Holden simplifies his view by seeing the world as black and white and considering children as the only thing that is good in the world, while in the adult world, everything is corrupt.

Despite Holden's unwillingness to conform, he seeks answers. His visit to Antolini's is beneficial in many ways, though Holden does not realize it, and the reader (under the influence of Holden's evaluation of the situation) may not realize it either. The limits of his narrow scope of perception are broadened when he realizes that he might have been wrong in the judgments he passed on Mr. Antolini.

Though we are not allowed to see, Holden's journey might have come to some kind of happy ending – in Holden's own way. However desperate his case may seem, Holden, with his typical sarcastic attitude and sharp commentary, still shows a will to share his experience "if you really want to hear about it".

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