

(Un)Problematic Holden: Dichotomous reception of *The Catcher in the Rye*

Alina Abu, Class of 2020

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Capstone Adviser: James Nikopoulos

Second Reader: Reza Taherkermani

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Abstract

Is the main character of *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden Caulfield, an innocent teenager who struggles with the faults of the cruel and unjust adult world, or is he a “phony” hypocrite himself who due to his immaturity is not actually capable of creating the right judgments? This dichotomy of interpreting one of the most popular characters of American literature is the main concern of this paper. This research engages with two literary theories proposed by Wolfgang Iser (1972) and James Phelan (1989) in order to develop a systematic explanation for the character’s heterogeneous interpretation. This research argues that the ambivalence of Holden’s language and the finale of the narration create the biggest gaps that endow the reader with a higher level of freedom to interpret the character. This uncertainty hidden under the confessional mode of the narration make readers perceive the character either with sympathy or with antipathy.

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Introduction

The first-person narration in *The Catcher in the Rye* comes from a seventeen years old teenager, who shares with the reader the events that happened to him after he was expelled from his elite school in Pennsylvania. Holden Caulfield is narrating from a mental institution or a sanatorium, where he was put soon after these events. Despite that Holden insists on only describing his three-days odyssey that started in Pencey Prep and lasted for several days in New York, the character's narration is full of flashbacks and digressions. During one of those Holden shares that he hates "phony" people and that he is ready to do anything in order to escape from them. This very hatred towards "phonies" has become a descriptive feature of the hero and engendered contradicting opinions among the readers. Since the year of the book's publication in 1951, the readers have been trying to answer the following questions. Is Holden Caulfield an innocent teenager who struggles with the faults of the cruel and unjust adult world, or is he a "phony" hypocrite himself who due to his immaturity is not, in fact, capable of creating the right judgments? These are the two main ways in which both literary critics and media reviews have interpreted one of the most popular characters of American literature. As the dichotomous interpretation of Holden Caulfield has not been resolved up until this time, this paper analyzes what aspects of Holden's characterization make him so polyphonic and lead to bifurcate critical reception.

Narratology provides a systematic explanation for heterogenous interpretations of literary characters. In "Reading People, Reading Plots: Characters, Progression, and the Interpretation of the Narrative," (1998) James Phelan distinguishes three domains in which the character of a novel can be interpreted: mimetic, thematic and synthetic. This research applies this theory to the critical perception of *The Catcher in The Rye* and on its basis proposes a framework for understanding critics' attitude towards Holden. Moreover, it is necessary to define what exactly in the text makes Holden Caulfield so polyphonic. To do

that, this research relies on the Reception Theory proposed by Wolfgang Iser and his theory of gaps. The main idea behind this theory is that each reader has his own individual background, by activating which and by engaging with the text he is more or less free to interpret a character in various ways. However, the implied subjectivity is not unconfined and is rather limited by the text. Therefore, to understand the source of Holden's dichotomous nature, it is necessary to establish what parts of the text provide the reader with the most liberty and leave space for diverging interpretation. There are three main aspects of the character's narration analyzing which the critics come to diverging conclusions. Firstly, many scholars don't agree on Holden's reliability as a narrator and analyzing his confessional mode of speech come to different conclusions. Secondly, the overt ambiguity of the book's finale and the fact that Holden doesn't explain why he decided to return at home make the readers reflect on the whole narration and make their own inferences about the ending. Thirdly, despite that Holden openly claims that he does not want to live in the world of phoniness and pretense, the critics assume that Holden's depression and his staying in mental institution can be explained by other hidden psychological problems.

Popular Media Reviews

The popularity of *The Catcher in the Rye* was instant when it first hit the American bookshelves back in 1951 and it has not diminished yet up until this time as "it still sells about a million copies a year, bringing its grand total to somewhere in the region of 70 million" ("The First Reviews...", 2018). In 2005, TIME Magazine included *The Catcher in the Rye* in its "ALL-TIME 100 Novels," their list of the best novels published from 1923 till 2010. Despite the fact that the book was censored for its vulgar language, sexual references, and its encouragement of rebellion, it has become one of the most frequently taught books in the American school and college curriculums (Andrychuk, 2004). The popularity of the book stems, therefore, not from the universally positive attitude of the readers towards the book.

The character of Holden Caulfield rather causes controversial attitudes since the first year of its publication and up until today the reviews in the notable media sources reveal the partition of attitudes among the readers.

One group of the reviews, including Stern (1951) writing for *The New York Times* and Behrman (1951) writing for *The New Yorker*, interprets Holden as a teenager whose “troubles, [and] failings are not of his own making but of a world that is out of joint” (Burger, 1951). The features that they emphasize in the hero are his innocence, hypersensitivity and wisdom. This positive reading of Holden Caulfield presents him as a precocious young man who is not afraid to openly criticize the faulted world of adults. The second group of reviews provides the readers with a similar emphatic interpretation of the hero but emphasizes the tragedy of his situation that stems from his problematic rebellious nature. This reading of the hero contributes the most to the coming-of-age status of the book and focus on character’s development throughout the book. *The Associated Press* (as cited in *Book Marks*, 2018) describes the book as “a tragic story of a problem child [who]...bursts into tears as the climax to his mad escapade”. This group of critics justify Holden’s depression by vulnerability of teenagers’ psyche and their tendency to rebel. However, there is the third group of reviews who are less sympathetic towards Holden as they accuse him of being “self-centered...[and] not as sensitive and perceptive” as people claim (Goodman, 1951; as cited in *Book Marks*, 2018). In her recent review for *The Guardian*, Dana Czapnik (2019), explains that for the modern teenagers “Holden’s melancholia feels positively quaint in comparison to the problems kids face today” and that more and more adolescents today find “Holden’s malaise annoying instead of resonant”. From this perspective, Holden is only pretending to be authentic and wise. As a consequence, reading these diverging reviews the readers are left with two empathetic interpretations of Holden that acknowledge the gravity of the hero’s troubles and one negative reading that questions the hero’s alleged perceptivity.

Reception by the Literary Critics

The polarization that one can see in the popular media sources reflects the even more convoluted division among literary critics. The critical reception of *The Catcher in the Rye* has been divergent not only in respect to the approaches that were used in the analysis but also in respect to the perspectives the scholars have for Holden Caulfield. Similarly to the newspaper reviews, there are two opposing groups of literary critics. The first group believes in Holden's sincerity and perceptivity, whereas, the second group perceives him as an immature teenager that does not acknowledge his own faults and is unjustifiably judgmental of the world of adults. The first group, however, is also divided into two big categories, as part of them identifies Holden as a tragic hero who is not able to mitigate his pain, and the second part sees him as a precocious teenager who is able to overcome the troubles and reach a happy ending. These varying interpretations of the character derive from different factors. However, it is worth mentioning that there are three main aspects in the novel analysis of which engenders different conclusions for different scholars.

The first aspect engages with Holden's peculiar use of colloquial language. There are numerous works that are solely dedicated to the analysis of the character's speech patterns and sociolinguistic aspects of his language. The majority of reviews emphasize that Holden's language was "an authentic rendering of teenage colloquial speech" of post war Northeastern America (Costello, 1959, p. 172). Despite the fact that critics agree on the authenticity of his language, they derive diverse implications about Holden's personality based on his language. The biggest peculiarity about the language of the narration is its ambivalence and flexibility. There are two main features about Holden's speech that confuse the readers. First, Holden is known for using more "crude" language full of slang when "reporting schoolboy dialogue" with Stradlater and Ackley in Pencey Prep and using "literate and expressive use" when addressing adult characters or addressing the reader directly (Costello, p.176; Strauch, 1961,

p. 176). Strauch and Costello justify this characteristic of the narrator by more affectionate interpretation and claim that it demonstrates Holden's innocent and highly perceptive inner world. Costello, for example, claims that "Holden's restraints help to characterize him as a sensitive youth... and that who never uses vulgarity to be 'one of the boys'" (p.175). In contrast, the representatives of the less empathetic readers see this linguistic feature as Holden's tendency to "create for himself a linguistic identity based on a group with which he wants to be identified (adult) and a group with which he does not want to be identified (adolescent)" (Antieau, 2003, p. 13). The author claims that Holden constantly finds himself in disappointing conversation and cannot fulfil "his quest to appear older than he is" (p. 14). This reading of the character positions Holden Caulfield as a problematic teenager that is not as perceptive and precocious and is rather immature and tragic.

Another linguistic feature that engenders contradictory implications about Holden's personality is his tendency to generalize and use imprecise phrases as "it kills/killed me", "crazy", "crap", "old", etc. Costello attributes this feature to the looseness and triteness intrinsic for a teenager speech (p. 176). However, when analyzing the ambivalence of the word "killed", Eik (2007) discerned a symbolic use of this word when Holden describes his little sister Phoebe by saying "she killed Allie, too" (Salinger, p. 37). The author asserts that "the word 'killed' is here used with a deeper, underlying meaning, as his use of words reveals his unconscious feeling of guilt for his brother's death" (p. 41). Eik continues by saying that "Holden not only longs for his brother and may feel guilty for his death, but he also longs for his own lost childhood innocence when the hypocrisy in the world was not visible to him" (p. 42). Edwards, however, associates this imprecise word with Holden's voyeuristic tendencies. He discerns "extreme concern and embarrassment" when the character says that a boy "who didn't even bother to go behind a post" to button up his pants "killed [Holden]" (Edwards, p. 559; Salinger, p. 109). Therefore, generally critics acknowledge the ambivalence in Holden's

language. However, when analyzing it in more details and trying to understand Holden's personality through this feature they receive contradictory conclusions.

Similarly, the next aspect upon which the opinions of the critics diverge are the source of Holden's problems and depression. As it was previously mentioned, Holden openly demonstrates his intolerance towards phony people. James Stern (as cited in Book Marks, 2018) adequately summarizes what bothers the narrator: "[Holden] finds the whole world's full of people say one thing and mean another and he doesn't like it; and he hates movies and phony slobs and snobs and crumby books and war". Taking into account this sentiment of Holden, the first group of scholars explain Holden's depression with his inability to reconcile with the overwhelming pretense of phony society. For this interpretation, Holden is not simply a teenager who is unreasonably rebelling against adults and who does not want to grow up. It accentuates the individual versus society dichotomy, revealing Holden's inner struggles and his Romantic hero potential. In this regard, Holden's accusations of faulted society are reasonable. For example, Carl F. Strauch (1961) arguing for the perceptiveness and innocence of Holden's "secret world" states that "Holden is another bothersome case of arrested development" (p. 29). In opposition to this view, however, the second group of critics deny the narrator's distinctiveness and explain Holden's problems by his psychological instability.

Different scholars of this group reveal different psychological problems of Holden but the common sentiment that they share, in opposition to the first group, is that Holden's problems come from him instead of society. For example, Duane Edwards (1977) proposes three different psychological problems of Holden that make him so depressed. He accuses the narrator of exhibitionism, the inability to sexually relate to females and voyeurism, the unhealthy traits that Holden fails to acknowledge and that lead to the narrator's distress. Edwards urges the readers not to idealize Holden for his "special ability to detect phoniness

everywhere” and keep in mind that “rebellion is all fantasy” (p. 563). Moreover, another common spread interpretation of Holden’s depression stems from his inability but desire to relate to exterior world. Hupert Zapf (1985) and Lamont Antieau demonstrate that Holden longed for the acceptance of adults and wanted to be related with them. From this interpretation, the main character’s depression stems from isolation and exclusion from society. Therefore, in regard to the source of Holden’s problems, the critical analysis of the book offers two unreconcilable perspectives in which Holden’s troubles are either justified or not.

Finally, ambivalence is inherent not only for the narrator’s language but also to the finale of the book. The biggest dilemma about the book’s ending is whether Holden was able to reconcile with the faults of society and live a happy life afterwards. In this regard, the group that argues for Holden’s acumen and intelligence conclude that the book has a happy ending. Strauch contending for an optimistic finale of the novel claims that Holden “does not require a psychoanalytical therapy, for he has miraculously wrought his own cure and has thus spiritually escaped the social rigidities that would be imposed upon him” (p.7). In contrast, Duane Edwards emphasizing the character’s immaturity and instability argues for a more pessimistic ending and says: “[Holden] has lost interest in life: he doesn't want to think about the past; he isn't interested in his future” (p. 562). For Edwards, Holden is rather repressed in the end of the novel because he fails to acknowledge his own problems and rather unjustly blames caring people around. Therefore, in regard to the narration’s ending, the critical reception offers two, positive and negative, interpretations.

Methodology

In 1989, an American literary scholar James Phelan proposed a rhetorical theory of character, which discusses the importance of distinguishing between *mimetic*, *synthetic* and *thematic* approaches to interpret characters in literary works. Opposing to David Lodge's argument that a fictional character can only be "explained by reference to an author's choice of language therefore ... is only a convenient abstraction from verbal signs", James Phelan proposes three dimensions within which a fictional character can be interpreted (p. 1). Firstly, a character possesses a *synthetic* component if the audience primarily sees him as a fictional character, not attributing to him the characteristics of a real person and realizing his constructed nature. Explaining this component, Phelan claims that "the unnamed emissary in [Robert Browning's] 'My Last Duchess' ... has no functions other than the synthetic one of being the appropriate addressee for the Duke's veiled warning" (p. 14). A great example of Holden Caulfield's *synthetic* analysis is seen in Carl F. Strauch's (1961) work, where he opposes those critics that argue for the "unsatisfactory conclusion" of the novel and the idea that Holden does not reach maturity in the end (p.6). Instead, the author claims that one needs to acknowledge the novel as "a work of art" and focus on "the symbolic structure of the language, motif, episode, and character" (p. 6). According to Strauch, focusing on the *synthetic* component of the character, namely the systematic "ambivalence of language" and other symbolic patterns one is able to discern Holden Caulfield's "private world of innocence" (p.7). Strauch claims that the hero symbolically uses slob language to show his polarized interaction with other people and uses "a literate and expressive" language to show his private world (p.7). Unlike the scholars who offer a psychological analysis of Holden, Strauch offers to understand the metaphorical dimension of the narration. For example, he concludes about the "psychological regeneration" of the character by analyzing "the wake-up pattern" throughout the novel (p. 24). The author emphasizes the importance of scenes where

Holden wakes up many characters (Ackley, Woodruff, Sally, Phoebe and the Antolinis) because through them “Salinger is suggesting that a brutalized society requires regeneration and must arouse itself from its mechanistic sloth” (p. 24). *Synthetic* dimension of the character is, thus, determined by the symbols and patterns that the author has ably constructed in the narration.

The next character component proposed by James Phelan is a *mimetic* component which enables a reader to perceive characters as “images of possible people”, and to judge or admire them for their “real” personality (p. 58). Referring once again to Browning’s poem “My Last Duchess”, Phelan demonstrates that “Browning’s task is to create the *illusion* that we are not reading a poem but overhearing part of a conversation” between the Duke and the unnamed emissary (p.5). From this perspective, the poem provides reader with “a complete portrait of [the Duke] ...within the limits of the implied dramatic situation” (p.5). The Duke, therefore, is perceived not only as a creation of the author, but as a real human with real and relatable emotions. When engaging with *mimetic* domain, readers frequently try to explain and justify the actions of a character through psychoanalysis or by drawing parallels with real life situations. Duane Edwards, for example, by applying psychoanalysis to Holden comes to the conclusion that Holden Caulfield “himself is a phony at times, and has virtually no self-awareness” (p.554). Interestingly enough, he directly opposes Strauch’s argument about Holden’s eventual re-birth and maturity by saying that the hero instead had a mental breakdown and became “mentally ill” (p.558). Edwards pinpoints three main problematic personality traits of Holden that made him rather a negative character: exhibitionism, the inability to sexually relate to females and voyeurism. By denying these traits in himself, Holden defines himself as “a victim of snobs, perverts, and phonies” and eventually has a mental breakdown (p.557). Thus, Edwards is a representative of the third group of critics who criticizes Holden for playing the role of a victim and blaming everyone around him.

Lastly, the *thematic* component of a literary character stands for his representative potential and goes beyond the realm of an individual character. Phelan pinpoints the relation of this component to Jonathan Culler's concept of "the rule of significance" (p.3). According to it, the reader should read literary works "as expressing a significant attitude concerning man and/or his relation to the universe" (p. 3). Explaining the *thematic* dimension of a character, Phelan describes Elizabeth Bennet from Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* as "a character whose individuality is joined to a representative function" (p.43). Author explains that "through Elizabeth Bennet's education Jane Austen communicates her vision of a 'properly constituted society'" (p.43). As to the *thematic* component of Holden Caulfield, the critical reading written by Denis Jonnes (2007) effectively demonstrates how the character can be representative of "the post-war teen-ager's 'spiritual odyssey', an adolescent's quest for identity, or the uncertainties associated with youth in the Cold War era" (p.104). Jonnes reads the novel through the prism of Trauma Theory and claims that Holden represents J.D. Salinger's own post-war trauma. He claims that Holden exhibits idealization of pre-trauma past when talking about his adolescence and school-life; and, at the same time he is "isolated and alone, obsessed with thoughts of death and dying, fraught with fears of illness and paralysis, periodically given to outbursts of violent rage", which are the clear signs of a traumatized person (p.104). In this respect, Holden's interpretation is extended from the individual level to a wider representative level and is put in the context of the Cold War.

To say that readers engage with a particular domain of a character does not imply that he is free to choose within which domain one should interpret a literary character. Phelan claims that the three components of a character can be, and are in most of the cases, present in the text simultaneously and there is a possibility for one of them to be the dominant one. Phelan seems to imply that text itself emphasizes one domain over another in particular moments. On the example of Browning's poem, Phelan explains:

In sum, the Duke is a character whose mimetic component is overtly emphasized while his synthetic component, though present, remains covert. At this stage of the analysis, his thematic component does not figure prominently, but I will later discuss its place in the poem (p.5).

Thus, applying the three domains of characterization to Holden's Caulfield interpretation one can discern what aspects of the text reveal particular features of Holden Caulfield. For example, Strauch's *synthetic* analysis seems to emphasize Holden's innocence and wisdom that needs to be discerned through his command of language and the symbolic patterns of the book. Whereas, Edward's *mimetic* reading of Holden aims at revealing his hidden psychological problems and unhealthy behavior patterns that define his personality. In contrast, thematic interpretation focuses more on Holden's sociohistorical background which shapes his character. This research does not claim that certain characteristic domain leads to a certain interpretation of a character. Rather these domains help to derive different aspects about Holden Caulfield that constitute his personality and because operating on different levels may lead to diverging interpretations.

If the previous paragraphs focused on the diverging approaches that the critics have been taking to analyze *The Catcher in the Rye*, the following section proposes the theoretical framework for detecting the source of this divergence and see what exactly about Holden Caulfield makes him so ambivalent. The Reception Theory proposed by Wolfgang Iser (1974) in his "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach" argues for the dynamic nature of a literary text. According to Iser, the process of reading always implies "the convergence of text and reader", meaning that the reader "uses the various perspectives offered him by the text in order to relate the patterns and 'schematized views' to one another" (p.280). Thus, literary text contains gaps which the reader should fill in by relying on his personal background and imagination. The critics of *The Catcher in the Rye* certainly took varying approaches to interpret Holden Caulfield's character as it was established in the

previous paragraphs. However, another important aspect of Iser's theory is that these gaps are never completely unrestricted as "the written text imposes certain limits on its unwritten implications in order to prevent these from becoming too blurred and hazy" (p.281). With this idea in mind, it is necessary to identify what particular gaps *The Catcher in the Rye* contains and to analyze these gaps through the dissonant critical reception of the book. Analyzing both the text and the critical reviews, one can discern three main gaps that the book comprises. Namely, the first analysis section of this work engages with the gaps in the narrator's speech and analyzes if Holden Caulfield is indeed that authentic and sincere. The second analysis section focuses on the sources of Holden's depression which eventually help to fill in the gap of the finale.

Ambivalence of Holden's language

The most prominent aspect of *The Catcher in the Rye* is Holden's first-person narration of "the madman stuff that happened to [him] around last Christmas" (p.1). Beginning in the novel's opening paragraph, and continuing throughout the narration, Holden establishes an informal, almost careless tone of narration. He refuses to tell "all that David Copperfield kind of crap" to the reader and uses slang phrases as "as hell", "goddam", "and all" and affirmatives as "I hate", "don't ever mention them to me", "it killed me". Holden utilizes a confessional and sincere mode of speech that invited the reader to see his authentic personality with all its faults and fragility. As has been noted by many critics, Holden's language creates an effect of a nonchalant and casual speech that is usually used between peers or close people. Moreover, the idiosyncrasy of Holden's language gives a lot of insights about his personality. Constant use of slang and repetition of certain expressions is not a mere indicator of Holden's affiliation to upper-class adolescents that tend to have a limited vocabulary. Firstly, because Holden has demonstrated his rich vocabulary in numerous occasions one understands that his repetitive speech patterns are used not without purpose.

Secondly, when analyzed closely these patterns are used to keep the authentic and nonchalant tone with the reader and at the same time allows a lot of things to be left unsaid. This is the feature of Holden's language that has created contradiction among the critics. On the one hand, he sounds casual, therefore, authentic. On the other hand, when deconstructed his speech tends to leave important topics inchoate or vague. In result, there are two groups of critics where the first one believes in Holden's authenticity and innocence, and the second one is frustrated by Holden's ambivalence and tendency to contradict his own words.

This peculiarity of Holden's language has a lot to do with the notion of expectations proposed by Iser. When talking about the limits set by literary text, Iser claims that "the individual sentences...form an expectation, [which, however,] are scarcely ever fulfilled" (p.282-283). He argues that it is important that those expectations are modified throughout the story "opening up a particular horizon" for reader to use his imagination (p.283). In case of Holden Caulfield's language, an expectation that is formed is Holden's authenticity and sincerity. He keeps forming this expectation by constantly using affirmative sentences as "if you want to know the truth", "to tell the truth", "it really does", "I really mean it", "if you really want to hear about it", "I swear to God". However, they are not a guarantee of Holden's reliability and each reader has to align this feature of the character with his other aspects in order to decide for himself if Holden can be trusted. For the first group of critics, this tendency of Holden is a sufficient criterion to recognize his trustworthiness. For example, Behrman (as cited in Costello, 1959) justifies this linguistic idiosyncrasy of the character by Holden's awareness of "slipping into phoniness himself" that makes him "repeat [these reaffirmations] over and over" (p. 174). In Castello's regard, this linguistic feature of Holden reveals the character's authenticity, individuality and innocence. Similarly, Strauch (1961) juxtaposes Holden's confessional mode of speech with the indifference to the truth of people around him, including his parents. He claims that "these phrasings... transcend their merely

conversational usage and become psychologically portentous”, thus revealing his secret world and desire to be heard (p.9). Nevertheless, for the second group of critics, the expectations set by the confessional style of narration are not met as for them other negative features of the character are more potent. For example, Edwards (1977) urges the reader to keep in mind the context of Holden’s narration, which is him telling this story from a mental institution. He states that in any other situation, Holden’s language would be in fact “innocent and unrevealing” (p.555). However, because Holden is mentally sick and “he doesn’t understand (or know) himself” the expectation set by Holden’s language cannot be fulfilled (p.555). Moreover, numerous critics have attributed Holden’s unreliability to his immaturity and inability “to see the faults in himself” (Seng, 1961, p. 205). This section engages with Holden’s repetitive phrasings that are unequivocal in their meaning, however, that are still interpreted differently in respect to intentions that lay behind them. This uncertainty is even more logical when clearly ambivalent phrasings of Holden are taken into account.

The second category of phrasings that Holden uses frequently are those that have bigger degree of ambiguity and avoid specification. Their ambivalence is different from the phrasings in the previous paragraph because the latter provide specific meaning and reveal Holden’s desire to appear authentic. This category of expressions aims at pinpointing the character’s emotional reaction to something, therefore, creating the illusion of sharing his inner world with the reader. However, content wise these phrases are extremely flexible and depending on the context can have both positive and negative connotation. For example, the phrase “it kills/killed me” conveys Holden’s negative disposition when addressed to Ackley, the tourist girls from the bar, his brother’s phony friends or his unfortunate date Jane. However, when unveiled each of the instances could also mean any of negative emotions as irritation, ridicule, abhorrence or disbelief. The same tendency can be observed when this phrased is used in a positive context and addressed to his childhood friend/love interest Jane,

his dead little brother Allie and his little sister Phoebe. Moreover, Holden uses this flexible phrase both in positive and negative connotation with Phoebe. With this phrase Holden expresses his affection towards her when she does something funny, his pain when Phoebe “chucked [the red hunting hat] right in his face”, or his astonishment when she put the hat back on his head when they made peace in the end (p. 64-85, p. 111, p. 114). In several occasions, Holden provides a short explanation after using this phrase which helps to understand his reaction better:

“That killed me. That guy Morrow was about as sensitive as a goddam toilet seat” (p. 30);

“She killed Allie, too. I mean he liked her, too”; (p. 37);

“Which always kills me. I'm always saying "Glad to've met you" to somebody I'm not at all glad I met. If you want to stay alive, you have to say that stuff, though” (p.47)

Nevertheless, more frequently he simply finishes his observations with these ambivalent phrases leaving the reader to think through his reaction relying on the context provided. This category of ambivalent phrases is not limited by “it kills/killed me” and includes other generalizing and evasive phrases as “and all”, “or something”, “or anything”, “it drives me crazy/ it is crazy”, “I didn’t feel like it”, “ you have to be in a mood for this”, etc. It is true that in most cases Holden provides enough context so that the reader is not completely confused by his evasive expressions. Yet, it is necessary to rationalize Holden’s choice to constantly use these phrases and establish how this consistent linguistic feature shapes Holden’s characterization.

Holden tendency to use equivocal narration is also seen during several insightful instances in which Holden attempts to philosophize and provide his moral verdicts. In this speech pattern of the hero, the ambivalence of his narration exerted not through omission but through incompleteness. One of the features for which Holden is praised by the first group of critics is his intolerance of “phoniness and pretense” (Seng, 1961, p. 206). Holden’s inference about “cheap suitcases” contributes to such positive characterization of Holden because there

he seems to complain about how social inequality impedes the formation of sincere and simple relationships between two people from different classes. When meeting the two nuns with cheap suitcases Holden shares his story about his roommate, Dick Slagle, who despite being “intelligent and all...and [having] a good sense of humor” had “inferiority complex” about his cheap suitcases. He used to mock Holden for having “bourgeois” staff but was secretly pretending that Holden’s expensive suitcases are his (p. 59). What is peculiar about Holden’s narration here is that concluding describing this situation he says:

The thing is, it's really hard to be roommates with people if your suitcases are much better than theirs--if yours are really good ones and theirs aren't. You think if they're intelligent and all, the other person, and have a good sense of humor, that they don't give a damn whose suitcases are better, but they do. They really do. It's one of the reasons why I roomed with a stupid bastard like Stradlater. At least his suitcases were as good as mine (p. 59).

Holden’s disappointment about his roommate’s pretense and shallowness is limited in his contempt towards cheap suitcases. The word and grammar choice used in this underdeveloped conclusion doubtlessly creates a humorous effect but also aligns with Holden’s overall tendency to leave things unsaid. He does not explicitly say that he is disappointed by people’s pretense overall and prefers to provide the reader with a repetitive summary of the story. In similar manner, Holden attempts to warn the reader against making false judgements by sharing his story about another roommate, Harris Mackim, who “was very intelligent and all, but he was one of the biggest bores [Holden] ever met” (p.66). Holden explains that he had changed his opinion about Harris being boring when he learned what a good whistler the latter was. He concludes this observation with another repetitive observation and does not unfold his argument hiding an imperative moral judgement between the lines:

So I don't know about bores. Maybe you shouldn't feel too sorry if you see some swell girl getting married to them. They don't hurt anybody, most of them, and maybe they're secretly all terrific whistlers or something. Who the hell knows? Not me (p.67).

The level of speculation at which Holden decides to stay during these instances can be attributed to his young age and his inability to express himself and his judgements correctly. These conclusions sound as almost logical fallacies that undermine Holden's inner perceptiveness.

Numerous critics have attributed this linguistic idiosyncrasy of Holden to overall "looseness of expression and looseness of thought" that is inherent for a sloppy teenager language (Costello, p.173). However, Costello demonstrates that Holden's language is quite idiosyncratic and extending beyond an average teenage slang confirms his individuality. This implies that all of these ambivalent phrases are systematic and have functional purpose to them. Because these phrases are so pervasive throughout the novel, they define the tone of the whole narration. Therefore, the narration and consequently Holden appear to be only attempting to share his inner worries and judgements. As a result, each reader decides for himself if this attempt was successful or not based on other aspects of the narration and based on his personal attitude towards Holden. Iser claims that "only through inevitable omissions that a story will gain its dynamism" (p. 284). Because it is a first-person narration, these omission or more specifically linguistic ambivalence serves as an instigator for the reader to analyze the character more scrupulously. If Holden did not save a certain degree of ambiguity, the process of reading wouldn't be as "dynamic", and the reader would be deprived of forming his own objective opinion about the hero.

What Happened in the Finale: Importance of Retrospection

From the previous section one can understand that throughout the narration Holden at least attempts to convey his inner state though generic phrases, which in combination with the context allows the reader to decipher Holden's feelings. In contrast to very detailed and eventful narration of all twenty-five chapters, the last twenty-sixth chapter is overtly reluctant to provide any definite conclusions. Holden's simply "[doesn't] feel like" telling what

happened after he and Phoebe made peace in the park (p.114). One last time he generalizes his experience (which this time is the whole narration) to “all this stuff I told you about” (p. 114). He shares that he himself “[doesn’t] know what to think about” his New York adventures and forces the readers to make inferences about Holden’s situation because now the reader has to reason out for himself what was “all this stuff” about (p.114). The reader cannot deny the positive change in Holden’s mood and his emphatic “I felt so damn happy all of sudden” (p. 114). However, the narrator that up to this point has been attempting to rationalize his actions or feelings, is reluctant to provide any explanation for his fast transformation.

Describing the plot of the book, Sarah Graham (2013) rightfully remarks that the finale is perceived as either “revelation or breakdown, depending on interpretation” (p. 19). The only thing that the reader can rely on when forming his interpretation is retrospection. The individual reading of the novel is utterly determined by the way the reader has been filling in the gaps throughout the whole story. Carl Strauch emphasizing the incompleteness of the finale claims that the last line of the narration does not “yield to logical analysis but that, on the contrary, sends the mind back over the experience recorded” (p. 28-29). This process of reflection and recollection is supported by Iser’s theory of reading process. Iser explains that reading process requires the activation of the reader’s memory which is highly subjective and individual. Reading process, Iser claims, is not only the reader perceiving “the raw material of the text” but also the reader “establishing the interrelations between past, present and future” (p. 283). When the finale is so ambivalent as in *The Catcher in the Rye*, these subjective interrelations are the only tool of the reader to complete this final gap.

The subjectivity of interpretation, however, does not stem only from promiscuity of memory but also from reader’s pre-intention to interpret a character in a particular way.

Responding to the structuralist movement, James Phelan proposes following questions in regard to interpreting literary characters:

The logical next questions are whether the synthetic [component], by virtue of its ineradicable presence, ought to be privileged in our theoretical account of character and whether we can determine under what general conditions the mimetic and thematic components get more or less developed (p.3).

When it comes to *The Catcher in the Rye*, Iser's theory of gaps does not provide exhaustive answers to these questions and does not explain why certain critics choose to focus more on one or another component of Holden's character. However, because the gaps within the text are the places where the reader is given the most liberty establishing them helps to detect what aspects of the text have contributed to one or another interpretation. The clearest implication from Holden's narration is that he had been feeling down and "all of a sudden" feels better. From the critical reception, it is evident that neither the reason for Holden's depression nor the reason for his recovery are universal for different critics. Therefore, this section tries to establish why critics' opinion about the source of Holden's depression diverse.

From the first chapter, Holden has been in a constant move or more particularly his actions are driven by his desire to "get the hell out" (p.3). Despite that Holden explains that he was expelled from the school for "flunking four subjects and not applying myself and all", he sounds to be leaving this place deliberately and consciously. Holden constantly wants to "get the hell out", "say good-by", "know that [he is] leaving the place" or he "felts like running", "couldn't hang around there any longer", "feeling so lonesome and rotten", "didn't want to hang out in that stupid atmosphere anymore" and finally he "decided to go" and it "only took him about two minutes to pack" (chapters 1-7). This deliberateness makes the reader wonder why Holden wants to leave this place so much and why it makes him feel depressed. During his conversation with Mr. Spencer, he explains that he had left his previous school because he "was surrounded by phonies" and that he "can't stand that stuff"

(p. 8). The group that perceives Holden as a precocious and sensitive young man seeing that the narrator constantly demonstrates his intolerance towards insincere adult society takes this as a primary rationale for Holden's struggles. Sarah Graham (2007) endorses that Holden's desire to flee and depression stem from something more profound than laziness or immaturity:

...his scathing comments about the flaws he perceives in the dominant ideologies of his society – and the limitations they impose upon him as an individual – make him a much more challenging, even subversive, figure than the stereotypical teenage rebel (p.16).

Iser (as cited in Shi, 2013) claims that “the reader's travelling through the book is a continuous process of adjustments” (p.984). Trying to understand Holden's motifs to escape, this group of critics memorizes Holden's humanitarian dilemma and subsequently resolves the main ambiguities in the narration and the finale from this point of view. The critics that try to rationalize Holden's anxiety and sabotaging actions through his unwillingness to “play the game” and his desire to escape from phonies explain the hero's sudden happiness in the finale through him yielding to this lifestyle and finding “organic relation between childhood and maturity” (Strauch, p. 27). Therefore, according to this interpretation Holden striving to run away from his problems throughout the whole narration, eventually arrives to a positive and liberating state of mind.

As exhaustive and complete this explanation renders to be, the reader cannot deny other recursive gaps throughout the narration that cannot be fully resolved by Holden's interpretation of a humanitarian savior. He frequently “doesn't feel like doing” something or “doesn't know what he was thinking about” which is juxtaposed to his perceptivity and is interpreted either as a sign of his tortuosity or inability to self-reflect. There are two main relationships in the novel that to some extent contradict Holden's image of precocious teenager: the relationships with Jane and Mr. Antolini. These two figures especially stand out

if to remember Holden's desire to run away from the beginning of the novel. Except for his own home, Jane and Mr. Antolini were the only people to whom Holden wanted to run to and with whom he had warm relationships. Hubert Zapf applying structuralist analysis to the novel, demonstrates that Holden's desire to call Jane and his visit to Mr. Antolini reflect the his "overemphasis of childhood state" (p. 269). Zapf demonstrates that this is not the only state of the character and offers three more states which determine Holden's actions: overemphasis of adulthood, rejection of world of adults, rejection by world of adults (p. 269). Zapf does not provide a definite interpretation of the finale or does not explain which of these states are dominant for understanding Holden's character. However, decomposing Holden's relationships with Jane and Mr. Antolini in accordance to these states, reader can fill in the following gaps that concern with them.

The biggest linguistic gaps of the book concern these two characters as Holden wanting to "call up" Jane always ended up "not being in the mood" (p. 63). Or, eventually feeling more or less save in Mr. Antolini's house Holden flees in the middle of the night because his teacher scared him by "petting [him] or patting [him] on the goddam head" (p. 103). For the reader, it's not completely clear why Holden's was "not in the mood" to call to Jane and what exact mood he refers to when saying: "You really have to be in the mood for that stuff" (p. 63). Even less clear if Mr. Antolini was in fact a "damn pervert" because his surprised reaction to Holden's departure makes the reader distrustful towards Holden's reaction.

A lot of critics point out the importance of Mr. Antolini for Holden's transformation. For the first group of critics, in hope to find shelter from a trusted figure Holden goes to his former teacher only to get disappointed once again. Strauch recollects that Mr. Antolini "arrived too late to catch young Castle who jumped out the window to escape the persecution of his contemporaries" (p. 10). Therefore, Holden trying to escape from his former teacher

eventually has to flee because Mr. Antolini “is capable of ... no more than talk” and is “a linguistic phony” (Strauch, p.10). In contrast, the second group of readers who blame Holden’s personal problems rather than the faulted society claim that Mr. Antolini is in fact a friend whom imperceptive Holden is not able to appreciate. Seng, for example, the role of Mr. Antolini is to predict the final “special kind of fall, a horrible fall” of the character (p. 207). From this point of view, Mr. Antolini is an adult is able to discern the problem of a troubled kid and has to warn him about the repercussions of his behavior. Moreover, for the group of critics who see Holden as a psychologically repressed teenager reveal that Holden “is projecting his desire for homosexual expression onto Antolini” when accusing him of harassment (Edwards, p. 561). From these diverging reviews, one can see that each critic has chosen one particular aspect about Mr. Antolini (his inability to save a child, his didactic speech towards Holden, and his possible sexual harassment) and used it to determine Holden’s character.

Similarly, Holden’s attitude towards Jane are more interpreted in a negative way despite that Jane can be seen as a representation of innocent childhood for Holden and lack of phoniness. However, the critics who analyze the fight scene between Holden and Stradlater claims that “he regards Jane as part of his property” and find it hypocrite that being so angry at Stradlater for “making time” with Jane, Holden attempts to “make time with burlesque stripper and a hotel girl” (Seng, p. 205). Therefore, the discrepancy between Holden’s desire to see Jane and decision not to do that engender numerous interpretations.

Conclusion

The incompleteness and ambiguity of the book’s finale make readers to retrospect the narration once again in order to reason out the ending. Iser’s theory of gaps that argues for the subjectivity of reading process helps to explain by what logic reader of the *Catcher in the*

rye describe Holden's character. Analysis of the gaps in the text reveal that there are numerous aspects of the narration that can lead reader's attention in different directions and lead them to make opposing conclusions.

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