

# LITERARY WORKS AS MANIFESTOS

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## Abstract

*It is not difficult at all to talk about literary creations as quests, initiations or manifestos since the writers' literary geniuses fulfil this inner need of using art as a tool of expressing attitudes towards or against the outside world that surrounds them. There is a myriad of examples in point throughout the literature of all times and cultures, but I believe that the modern one presents a more grounded approach in an attempt to exemplify the power and impact of such a literary creation on generations of young people worldwide. And what better example could I think of if not J. D. Salinger's novel "The Catcher in the Rye"? This article tries to outline the most important themes and patterns in the novel and connect them to other relevant and similar ones.*

**Keywords:** Themes and patterns; J. D. Salinger; outcast; quest; protest; phoniness.

**JEL Classification:** I21, I29.

## Introduction

**The Catcher in the Rye** exercises a unique seductive power, not just for the young readers who discover it, but also for the millions of admirers who still view Holden Caulfield with a fondness that is weirdly personal, and almost possessive. What more audacious opening to the novel could be imagined than the one it already has?

"If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you'll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don't feel like going into it, if you want to know the truth." (Salinger, 1951: 3)

Salinger worked on his novel step by step, starting early in his youth. Although Salinger has written many short stories, **The Catcher in the Rye** is his only novel and also his most notable work. The novel is the culmination of themes that appeared throughout a number of Salinger's short stories, however, some of which form the basis of individual chapters in **The Catcher**. The Caulfield family is the subject of two of Salinger's major stories: **I'm crazy** and **This Sandwich Has No Mayonnaise**, as well as a number of unpublished works, such as **An Ocean Full of Bowling Balls** and **The Last and Best of the Peter Pans** and others.

## Salinger's Novel as a Manifesto

Though controversial, **The Catcher in the Rye** immediately appealed to a great number of people. It was a hugely popular best seller and general critical success. Salinger's writing seemed to tap into the emotions of readers in a completely unprecedented way. As counter-cultural revolt began to grow during the 1950's and 1960's, **The Catcher** was frequently read as a tale of an individual's alienation within a heartless world. Holden seemed to stand for young people everywhere, who felt themselves beset on all sides by pressures to grow up and live their lives according to the rules, to disengage from meaningful human connection, and to restrict their own personalities and conform to a bland cultural norm. Many readers saw Holden Caulfield as a symbol of pure, unfettered individuality in the face of cultural oppression.

A more daring approach of the novel can be that of considering it a "war novel," a war between childhood and adulthood. Holden Caulfield sees childhood as the ideal state of being. He thinks adulthood is filled with corrupt people. The only way one can win, in the adult world, is if the cards are stacked in his favor. The characters in the novel play a diverse set of roles in the war between childhood and adulthood.

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Children do not think of appearances very highly, but in order to be respected in the adult world you must always look your best. Holden did not care what people thought about him as long as he felt good. He would wear his red hunting cap backwards and he would have his hair cut crew style, which is thought as a kid's haircut. Ackley is the absolute extreme: he didn't just look bad, but also had terrible hygiene. He had mossy yellow teeth from not brushing them and bad acne too. Adults always hide their imperfections to make themselves look good, but many are, as Holden calls them, "secret slobs." And Stradlater is a perfect example of this. He always shaves twice but never cleans his razor. He would spend forever making sure his hair is perfect and all his cloths look just right.

Sonny, the prostitute, bleaches her hair and dresses up nice to fit into the adult world. Mrs. Antolini, a married woman, needs to look good when she goes out in public. But the night Holden stops over their place for a while; she looks terrible without her make-up and with rollers in her hair. All that matters is that she looks good by society's standards so she can be accepted into the adult world.

Children live on lasting compassionate memories, while adults go for all kind of empty conquests. Holden remembers that Jane would always keep her kings in the back row when they played checkers because they looked pretty there. When Holden comes home, he stops and buys "Little Shirley Beans" record for Phoebe, and even though he breaks it, he still gives it to her. She loves it just as much as if it were not broken. Holden also remembers Allie by his baseball mitt with the poems on it. But when he tried to bring meaning into the adult way of things, he was outcaste. After he told Maurice to send up a prostitute, he did not try to do anything with her, but to talk to her. He tried to make something meaningful out of it but Sunny did not understand. The three girls Holden meets in the bar may be the worst of all. They could care less about anybody, but would die to get with a movie star. All these memories show thought and love which are a lot stronger than the empty conquests, mostly sexual, of adults.

Children move through their childhood without a care in the world, but have a wonderful time doing it, while adults push kids to become more adult like and figure out what they want to accomplish. As Holden is waiting for Phoebe to show up to say good-bye to her, he takes two boys who are skipping school to see the mummies. These kids do not care about math class; they just want to have a good time by going to the museum. This causes Holden to remember the museum and how it has always been the same. Later on, when he takes his sister to the Ferris Wheel, he wishes that it could always be this way for him and for her.

Holden's history teacher, Mr. Spencer, tries to get him to understand that he has to focus in order to make a living. Mr. Antolini gets through to Holden a little better but is unable to keep his attention. Carl Luce is just a few years older than Holden, but he basically tells him he is immature and will always be the same. Kids really want things to stay the same, while adults want things to change and grow quicker than they should.

Holden seems to be the only one fighting this "war." When he makes an adult decision he always gets sick. When someone he loves makes an adult decision he gets very mad at them. The more he tries to keep kids from turning into adults, by being a catcher in the rye, the more depressed he becomes. As he goes crazy, life will become hell for him.

In discussing some of the themes of the novel, we can say that science can be seen as the study of what is held in common between many particular instances. Art, among other things, is an attempt to capture the specific, and, thus, illuminate the general. Salinger's **The Catcher in the Rye** is the first and the foremost about the journey of one individual, Holden Caulfield, into self-discovery. However, in writing about Holden, Salinger has somehow managed to capture the conflicts and identity crises which many young adults his age are caught in. Also, despite Holden's protests that he is not trying to write something along the

lines of Charles Dickens, there is little doubt that the novel is intended also as a piece of social criticism, calling for integrity and human interaction in a mechanized society.

Perhaps the deepest-running theme of the book is Holden's stance against phoniness. It is no coincidence that Holden's journeys take him through a cross-section of American society: the school, bars, city streets, family, friends, etc. Salinger aims to show how widespread this phoniness has become. However, Holden's criticism is not necessarily a good thing, and indeed it is this constant criticism which detaches him from society and also results in some self-loathing. In demonstrating the effects of this detachment on Holden, Salinger encourages the building of human relationships.

Holden abhors movies and shows because they are larger than life, because they generate a sort of passiveness among society. He is depressed when someone says "good-luck" because the statement implies that fortune supersedes human effort.

Another theme is, as we have already discussed, that of childhood versus adulthood. Holden belongs in neither of these two worlds (as do many adolescents), and finds himself in a position to see which category he would rather choose. In the end his choice is to be neither immature, arguably the hindrance of childhood, nor phony, the evil of adulthood. There is nothing wrong with growing up, according to Salinger. There is something wrong with growing phony. And a Freudian idea says that no one can grow up if they do not deal with the awful side of themselves that hates everything. To repress it, is to give it power.

Another central aspect closely connected with Holden's hatred against phoniness and which has puzzled people both inside and outside the novel for fifty years is Holden's question where the ducks go when the lagoon in Central Park freezes over.

The first cab driver Holden asks in chapter 9 thinks Holden is trying to kid him. Then, in chapter 12, Holden has this famous and funny conversation with Horwitz, the second cab driver. Horwitz has not got a clue where the ducks go and gets incredibly excited about the question, also comparing the ducks' situation to that of the fish in the lagoon. In fact, he gets so "sore" that he drives off "like a bat out of hell." (Salinger, 1951:109) So, Holden himself never finds out where the ducks go. But after fifty years Tim Lieder published the answer. He talked to the park commissioner, who had been contacted every year by people inquiring about the mystery posed by Holden, and according to him, the lagoon does not really freeze anymore. He also said that usually the ducks go to the middle of the lake, which is least likely to freeze. If it happens to freeze over, the ducks go somewhere else, but near, because they travel much less than they used to.

So the point is that Horwitz was basically right: Mother Nature takes care of the fish and the ducks, too. Holden cares about the ducks because he cares about helpless, innocent creatures who he feels should be protected from the brutal world. That goes for the ducks, for the nuns, for Jane Gallagher, and, of course, for his sister, Phoebe. It would be hard to imagine Ackley or Stradlater asking themselves where the ducks go.

Therefore, just like Holden eventually realizes in the carrousel scene that he has to allow Phoebe to make the experience of possibly falling off the horse or the carrousel (of life) - he should not worry too much about the ducks.

In the Bible, from Mathew 6/26, there is an interesting parallel with what we have just discussed: "Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them."

For a more complete structural analysis of **The Catcher in the Rye**, we need to consider three main patterns. Although the novel is embellished, it still is the account of a nervous breakdown of a sixteen-year-old boy; and it concentrates on the evens of its critical stage.

Even though Holden acknowledges being attended by a psychoanalyst at the end of the book, his breakdown is clearly not just mental; he is physically ill too. He has grown six and a half inches in a year, he has TB, he is "skinny," he has not kept the diet to gain weight.

Holden's condition is complicated, however, by emotional problems. His mother is ill and nervous, and his father is so busy being successful that he never discusses things with his son. Holden is thus without the kind of parental guidance an adolescent needs during this crucial period. The school to which he has been sent fails to take the place of his parents.

Altogether, **The Catcher in the Rye** is a story of initiation. Its hero is innocent, but not naïve; 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.

The central conflict, as we have said, is the traditional one between innocence and experience. "Holden has a messianic sense: he wants to save people from sin - their own and the world's. But like most messiahs, he fails: he learns that it is impossible to be the catcher in the rye, to save the innocents from the fall into experience. As the frame of the book suggests, the story itself is both a case study and a therapeutic confession." (Harper, Jr., 1967:67)

**The Catcher** is filled with Holden's aversions, and the most obvious one is to phoniness. Everyone in the book, except for Phoebe, is a phony, pretending to be someone he is not - also as a characteristic of the adults.

**The Catcher in the Rye** is a deceptively simple, enormously rich book whose sources of appeal run in deep and complexly varied veins. Young people are likely to identify with Holden and to see the adult world in which he sojourns as completely phony and worthless; the book thus becomes a handbook for rebels and "a guide to identification of squares." The older generation is likely to identify with some part of the society that is satirized, and to see Holden as a bright but sick boy whose psyche needs adjustment before he can, as he will, find his niche and settle down. Holden as ideal rebel or Holden as neurotic misfit, the evidence for either interpretation lies loosely on the surface of the novel. Beneath the surface lies the evidence for a more complicated as well as more convincing Holden than some of his admirers are willing to recognize.

It was inevitable that **The Catcher in the Rye** would be compared to the greatest American odyssey of initiation, **The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn** by Mark Twain. The exciting and striking similarities between the two books have been justly noted by a number of critics and they are obvious in their narrative framework, their episodic structure, their colloquial style, their social criticism, the comic irony, the picaresque structure, the theme of anti-phoniness, the characters' rebellion against society, the inspiration of their honesty against sham and the sympathetic awareness of their melancholy roles.

Huck Finn introduces himself in the first paragraph as the narrator of the story, and in the last paragraph he remarks that "there ain't nothing more to write about, and I am rotten glad of it, because if I'd a knowed what a trouble it was to make a book I wouldn't a tackled it and ain't agoing to no more." (Harper, Jr., 1967: 68)

**The Catcher** is the American novel of its generation, for in Holden Caulfield Salinger created a myth-figure with which millions of young people have identified themselves. In Holden's monologue (this is what the novel is), Salinger has created the dialect of a generation - a triumph of a special kind of vernacular writing. Like **Huckleberry Finn**, **The Catcher** is a picaresque novel about initiation into manhood. But though Twain's - or Huck's - attitude towards initiation is ambiguous, at least Huck intervenes in the activities of the adult world and makes deliberate moral choices, for all that at the end he seems to repudiate the adult world. In **The Catcher**, however, the attitude towards initiation is not even ambiguous, it is rejected. In the end he is ill and it seems that he is writing the book under the influence of psychoanalytical treatment - which represents a kind of facing of reality.

Salinger's novel belongs to an ancient narrative tradition, probably the most profound in Western fiction, the tradition of the Quest. This medieval term means the seeking after what is tremendous, greater than the love of a woman. Of course, the love of a woman may be part of the seeking, even of the object sought; but if this kind of love is essential, then we have to do with a romance. A. Heiserman and J. E. Miller, Jr. consider that these two terms - quest and romance - distinguish thematic patterns, and have nothing to do with tragic or comic effects. There are more kinds of quests, depending upon the object sought. One could be seeking acceptance and stability, the other the opposite. For example protagonists like Bloom in **The Waste Land**, the Joads, Alyosha Karamazov, Ulysses, Gatsby, seek acceptance, stability, a life based upon what is known and can be trusted. Characters like Dedalus, Huck Finn, Ishmael, Dostoevsky's **Idiot** or Huxley's heroes place themselves outside the bounds of what is known and seek not stability "but a Truth which is unwrapped by stability."

American literature seems fascinated with the outcast, the person who defies tradition in order to arrive to a certain type of knowledge and some personal integrity. All the virtues of the American heroes are personal ones, and most often they are in conflict with home, family, church, so the American hero has to flee these "institutions." And if the hero does not flee, at least he defies them.

Holden Caulfield is one of these American heroes, but with an important and significant difference. He seems to be engaged in both quests at once: he needs to go home and he needs to leave it. Unlike the other heroes, Holden "seeks Virtue second to love." He wants to be good, he wants to be the one who catches the children playing in the rye field before they fall off the cliff. He is not driven towards love of woman, but towards love of his fellow man and charity. Holden is actually frightened by a frontier code of masculinity. But he is a wanderer because in order to be good he has to be more of a bad boy than the puritanical Huck could have imagined. Thus Salinger translates the old tradition into contemporary terms. The phoniness of society forces Holden to leave it, but he is seeking nothing less than stability and love. Holden's Quest takes him outside society, but the grail he seeks is the world and it is full of love. "To be a catcher in the rye in this world is possible only at the price of leaving it." (Grunwald, 1962: 199) The only role that would allow Holden to be a catcher in this world is that of a child and this is what he is looking for. But his tragedy is that he is sixteen and can never be less. In childhood he can find what he is seeking now: non-phoniness, truth, innocence. He can still find all this, but only in Phoebe, in his dead brother Allie's baseball mitt, in the red hunting cap and in the tender nuns. Holden is different from us because he refuses to compromise with adulthood and its necessary adulteries. Holden's quest may be stated in a number of ways. In one sense, his quest is a quest to preserve an innocence that is in peril of vanishing - the innocence of childhood. In another sense, the quest is a quest for an ideal but inhuman love that will meet all demands but make none. Perhaps in its profoundest sense Holden's quest is a quest for the self - he does, for example, go through a number of guises, such as Rudolf Schmidt when he talks with his classmate's mother or Jim Steele when he is visited by the prostitute Sunny. "But he remains Holden Caulfield, and the self he is led to discover is Holden's and none other. And that self he discovers is a human self and an involved self that cannot, finally, break what Hawthorne once called 'the magnetic chain of humanity'; he cannot deny the love within him when he begins to miss all people, 'bastards' included, he has told about." (Miller, Jr.; 1965: 12-13)

If we could keep the spontaneity of childhood, our social and personal problems would disappear. Huck and Holden, and other characters, seek to return to a lost childhood for precisely the same reasons. The flight out of the world, out of the ordinary into an Eden of innocence or childhood is a common flight, and it is one which Salinger's heroes are constantly attempting.

Holden Caulfield, like Huck Finn, tells his own story and a great part of the humor lies, in both novels, in the language of telling it.

Huck begins: "You don't know about me without you have read a book by the name of **The Adventures of Tom Sawyer**: but that ain't no matter." (Grunwald, 1962:202) Thus he speaks about his relationship to the alien adult world in which he finds himself a tourist.

Holden, Huck's twentieth-century counterpart, is probably more correct but none the less distinctive. There is a note of skepticism in his case, "if you want to know the truth," which suggests that in his world very few people do.

Huck's spelling of *sivilization* makes us think that it stands for "distasteful." Holden's incorrectness frequently appears to be straining after correctness ("She'd give Allie or I a push") which suggests a subconscious will to nonconformity. Each novel employs an appropriate first person vernacular. Holden has the more "educated" vocabulary; he speaks with a modern schoolboy's idiom and slang and he can spell and he can also swear. Huck's speech, usually dispassionate and matter-of-fact, is relaxed and flexibly rhythmical. His direct apprehension gives us an objective recording rich in implication. Huck's speech reflects his personality, just as is the case for Holden.

But next to the many similarities there are a lot of differences too. Both boys are fugitives from education, but Holden has suffered more of the evil than Huck. Holden's best subject in the several schools he has gone to is English. And he is a child of the twentieth century too.

Another similarity, this time concerning the two authors, is that they did not copy faithfully the language and their genius lies in their mastery of the technique of the first person narration which, through meticulous selection, creates the illusion of life. The fact that Huck and Holden appear to reveal themselves is a mark of their creator's mastery.

Holden Caulfield relied on his former teacher, Mr. Antolini, until his, assumed by Holden, homosexual pettings made him flee in panic. Huck Finn, in his "close place" a century earlier, relies on his best teacher, Jim. Huck can always depend on Jim.

Holden's society is different from Huck's society, just as Broadway is different from the Mississippi a century ago. Yet a flight down the river and a flight through New York streets turn out to be not so different after all. Holden and Huck have essentially the same pattern of existence. **The Catcher in the Rye** is in fact a kind of **Huckleberry Finn** "in modern dress."

Huck initially flees conventionalities, constraint and terror. On the river he meets murderous thieves, a treacherous fog, Negro hunters and a steamboat that rips through the raft and thrusts him among feuding country gentility. He lives with professional crooks. But experience teaches Huck that truth is usually weak, trouble best avoided and evil often inevitable.

Holden Caulfield, intensely troubled, escapes initially from the stupid constraints and violence of his Prep school life. Like Huck, he enters a jungle world, New York City, where he knows his way around but from which he is alienated. There, for two days, start his "adventures" with fearsome "dopes," "fakers," "morons" and sluggers. On this journey Holden's Jim is the image of Jane Gallagher, an old friend who needs love and whom he loves with strange unawareness. Holden's Jim is also all the little children whom he wants to save from the adult world.

It is clear that Mark Twain and J. D. Salinger present parallel myths of American young man confronting his world - Huck Finn over many months, when time was expendable; Holden over two days when, Salinger seems to imply, time is rapidly running out. In the corrupt world Holden lives in, he miraculously keeps his uncorrupted heart that reminds us of Huck Finn. He genuinely loves natural beauty and the socially unspoiled. In short, Holden, like Huck, respects human personality and hates whatever demeans it. He knows that snobbery is aggression, and that subordinating people to ideas and things destroys fruitful human intercourse.

**Huckleberry Finn** and **The Catcher in the Rye** are also alike in ethical-social import. Each book is a devastating criticism of American society and voices a morality of love and humanity. In many important matters, Huck and Holden - not to mention the other characters like Jim and Phoebe - affirm goodness, honesty and loyalty. Huck does so almost unconsciously, often against his conventional conscience, and Holden does so with an agonizing self-consciousness and a bitter spirit.

We have seen that the two books share certain ethical and social attitudes. Yet "Salinger's critical view assumes a cultural determinism that in *Huckleberry Finn*, although always present, permits freedom through self-guidance. Salinger's viewpoint also draws upon a mystical sense merely inchoate in Mark Twain's imagination. [...] But Mark Twain's moral vision is projected through prevailing normality of Huck's temperament." (Grunwald, 1962: 216)

To conclude, the two novels are clearly related in narrative pattern and style, characterization of the hero and critical import. **The Catcher in the Rye** takes place in a literary creation, that of Anderson, Lardner, Hemingway, Faulkner, and it has one of its great sources in **Huckleberry Finn**.

### Conclusions

The basis of **The Catcher in the Rye** as a series of unrelated short stories, as well as Salinger's affection for that form explains the pacing and relative lack of narrative continuity in the novel. Neither setting nor character recurs for more than one or two consecutive chapters. The first chapters of the novel, which are all set at Pencey, are the only ones that sustain the same characters and setting for an extended period. Holden, as narrator, is the only character who recurs throughout the entire story. Characters such as Sally Hayes or Mr. Antolini appear in only one chapter and then basically disappear. Furthermore, since Salinger reiterates thematic elements throughout the novel (in practically every chapter Holden complains about phonies), many of the characters can essentially stand as short stories in themselves.

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