

MANAGEMENT OF SUCCESSFUL LITERARY CREATION THROUGH PATTERNS AND RECURRENT MOTIFS

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Abstract:

One of the most long-living writers of the 21st century is the American short-story writer and novelist, Jerome David Salinger. He died at the age of 91 on 27th January 2010, a recluse, after a not very prolific literary activity, but a very glorious one, especially due to his only novel, "The Catcher in the Rye." Much of his fame that led to the mass translations of his novel and his earlier works, much of the craze created around the novel's main character, Holden Caulfield, film making inspired by this teenage hero and huge sales was mainly due to the controversy created around Salinger's name and the cultural and social context of the '50s - the time of his literary peak. This article tries to briefly look at the main patterns and recurrent motifs in Salinger's early works that later helped and created the writer's literary success as proof of good management of his literary skills and creation.

Keywords: literary creation; recurrent motif; translation; pattern; successful literary creation

J. D. Salinger's fiction abounds in certain attitudes, patterns, and motifs that repeat themselves, under different forms and names, and that evolved from his early short stories to his last published literary creations. Many critics have tried to identify and explain these patterns to better understand the meaning of Salinger's fiction. As it happens in the case of any important writer, there is a world of certain themes and attitudes that predominate and give a distinguishing note to the writer's fiction, rendering him or her unique. The exact same thing happened in the case of J. D. Salinger and his world of themes and attitudes. H. Grundwald, in the long introduction to his collection, states that Salinger "seems to allow a far greater variety of interpretation than almost any other contemporary writer" (xxvi). Some of the major themes identified by different critics in Salinger's fiction are also briefly enumerated in H. Grundwald's introduction: "faith, conformity vs. society, love of various kinds, the psychology of youth vs. age, the sentimentalization of the child, the dream of unfallen man, the repressed and perverted sex instinct, the emotional excess of the idle rich" (xxvi). Another brief look at Salinger's fictional world identifies and reveals some of the following major themes: the "misfit hero," "phony" and "nice" worlds, crucial moments of revelation or epiphanies, alienation and vulnerability, escapism, quest for a moral ideal, religion and Western philosophy, symbolism of names, childhood and adulthood, relationships, specific use of language, and so on. Salinger's style and writing technique are unique and they include a rather inspired use of detail, slang characteristic to the 20th century, vocabulary specific to teenagers, and colloquialisms.

The concept of the "misfit hero" can be attributed to Paul Levine who, in the article "J. D. Salinger: The Development of the Misfit Hero," traced and wrote about the condition and the evolution of the Salingerian hero. In his opinion, "[t]he hero in every Salinger story becomes a reflection of a moral code arising out of a cult of innocence, love, alienation, and finally redemption. These heroes form a particularly adolescent troupe of spiritual non-conformists, tough-minded and fragile, humorous and heartbreaking" (498). Thus, the main dilemma in Salinger's stories seems to focus on the moral hero who is "forced to compromise his integrity with a pragmatic society" (498). The vision of the Salingerian hero becomes the writer's trademark as he develops his writing talent. In "The Varioni Brothers" Salinger created for the first time the hero as an artist and, according to Warren French, he tried "to come up with a statement about the role of the artist in modern American society" (French 56).

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The definition of this type of hero, also called the “moral hero,” refers to a selected group of young characters who separate themselves from the others by sharing a special moral code that springs from innocence and true feelings of love, alienation and salvation. In Salinger’s short stories these heroes always have to face the difficulty of being forced to compromise their integrity because of the pragmatic and materialistic world in which they live and this always raises a moral conflict within them. The conclusion is that his early short stories cannot reach the level of exquisiteness of his “mature” works which intensify and expand his attitudes and themes proving thus a maturation of his style and writing technique.

All the characters that populate Salinger’s fictional world seem to be divided into two categories: those who belong to the “nice” world and those who belong to the “phony” world, and the characters from the “nice” world always try to do something to change or fight against the “phony” world and this makes up another one of Salinger’s recurrent attitudes or patterns. W. French remarks that Salinger’s first use of the word “phony” in print determined millions of people to regard it “as his trademark” (55). But Salinger’s characters are embattled against a world that often seems confusingly phony and nice at the same time. “Niceness,” characterized by I. Hassan as the earlier discussed “rare quixotic gesture,” can mean to Holden, for example, a little boy singing to himself “If a body catch a body coming through the rye” (Salinger Ch. 22, 155) or the nice feeling offered by wearing the red hunting cap, or holding hands with Jane Gallagher at the cinema.

On the other side of the barricade there is “phoniness.” It can be also considered “squalor,” which is what makes the story “For Esmé—with Love and Squalor” the highpoint of Salinger’s *Nine Stories* in J. Lundquist’s opinion and in other critics’ opinion as well, and which also makes it such a perfect representation of Salinger’s view of the world. “Phoniness” or “squalor” can be found in the ugliness of Eloise’s life in Connecticut, or in Sergeant X’s disillusioned and neurotic postwar universe, or in all the things Holden finds distasteful.

Thus, there are two typical Salingerian worlds: the “phony” world vs. the “nice” world and a recurrent motif of the fight between the characters representing each of the two worlds. The very use of the word “phony” was catalogued as a Salingerian “trademark.” One conclusion is that Salinger is more concerned with the effects rather than the causes of the human dilemma of choosing either the “nice” or the “phony” world and this refers to how to get along in a world of “niceness” and “phoniness” or “squalor.”

Another important aspect refers to a recent interpretation which focuses on Salinger’s early characters who view the war as opposed to the phoniness of the Hollywood film industry which did nothing else but present the war in an embellished version in which the actors were filmed from their “nice angles,” offering an unrealistic image which distorts reality making it become “phony,” the exact thing Salinger tries to fight against in his fiction.

There is an important Salingerian recurrent attitude that figures once again in “A Perfect Day for Bananafish,” next to the suicide theme, namely that of the main character’s inability to communicate. Seymour cannot communicate with the world that surrounds him, he cannot talk to his wife, Muriel, whom he calls “Miss Spiritual Tramp of 1948.” He can only find the pleasure of dialogue with the five-year-old Sybil Carpenter. This inability to communicate with the world in which he lives and come to terms with it finally leads Seymour to suicide, or better said, “is what kills him and plagues the rest of the Glass family” (Levine 499).

These two themes are strongly connected given that Seymour’s inability to communicate with anybody around him, especially with his wife Muriel (the only exception being Sybil, a child), leads him to commit suicide in the end. The interpretation of his suicide results in the conclusion that it represents a way of drawing his wife’s attention, a way of “disrupting her composure,” but Salinger never gives (enough) reasons for his characters’ gestures, he lets the readers find arguments and interpret from their own points of view.

Another important recurrent pattern is the adult (as “misfit hero”)—child relationship exemplified by the Seymour - Sybil relationship in which she proves to be the only one capable of understanding him. Closely connected to this Salingerian trademark is that of the “banana fever,” a fever that according to Seymour kills the bananafish. Most critics have interpreted it as a spiritual illness which characterizes an individual who is not able to differentiate between important and unimportant experiences or to understand his inability to retain all of them, leading to suicide in the end.

It has been universally accepted that the climax of Salinger’s literary creations is represented by **The Catcher in the Rye**, which seems to have a unique power on the young readers who discover it for the first time, and also for Salinger’s fans who usually identify themselves with Holden Caulfield and his experiences and feelings. Salinger’s use of colloquial language is present throughout the novel, and it offers humor, pathos, understanding and insight, and a unique view of the world. Holden Caulfield knew the difference between phoniness and truth. **The Catcher in the Rye** was published in New York on July 16, 1951, as the product of a ten-year labor. The *New York Times* reviewed it on the day of its publication, declaring it “an unusually brilliant novel. (...)You’ll look a long time before you meet another youngster like Holden Caulfield” and the *San Francisco Chronicle* called it “literature of a very high order” (Hamilton 116).

Needless to say that there have been a few negative reactions to J. D. Salinger’s novel as well. We may say that the novel was not actually the immediate success we think it was. It had an ascending struggle for two years before establishing itself at the top of post-war fiction. Briefly, there were many reactions; some positive, some negative, and Ian Hamilton managed to encapsulate some of the most important critiques and reviews in his book (111-21). Some publications found the language of the book “an endless stream of blasphemy and obscenity” (Hamilton 120), some found the book essentially a “sentimental” one; others were charmed by its own taste and found it “intelligent, humorous, acute and sympathetic” (Hamilton 121).

Nevertheless, the book has been steeped into controversy since it was banned in America after its first publication. It was banned because it was considered “dangerous” because of vulgarity, occultism, violence, and sexual content. The first attempt to ban the book was in 1955 and since 1960 it has been banned in several states of America, especially from schools and school libraries, or removed from required reading lists of high schools.

The Catcher in the Rye is a novel about the development or maturation of the hero, and it is not a single case in American or worldwide literature, since there are many examples of novel that deal with the same theme: Twain’s **The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn**, Crane’s **The Red Badge of Courage**, Joyce’s **A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man**, Lawrence’s **Sons and Lovers**, Faulkner’s **The Bear**, Mann’s **The Magic Mountain**, and so on. Although this type of novel has a strong universal appeal, Salinger’s literary creation presents numerous differences when compared to some of the above-mentioned novels, most of them concerning his writing technique, attitudes expressed in the novel, patterns, and symbols, which will be later on developed and which make Salinger’s creations unique. The major theme, and the subject of the novel, is growing up along with all its difficult experiences, including the passage from innocence to experience. Many critics have taken into account the novel’s “shape,” that of a circle, given its starting point, in Holden’s home when he starts telling about the experiences that lead to his breakdown, and its ending point, home again, completing thus the circle. Salinger manages to intensify the circular structure of the novel by repeating the same symbols and themes at the conclusion of the novel that he used at the beginning, and this demonstrates the maturation and development of Salinger’s writing technique.

The language used in the novel has paramount importance. Salinger's colloquial and slang language helps to increase Holden's portrayal and to control the pace of the novel. Holden addresses the reader directly and "[t]his sense of connection between Holden and the reader is one of the key aspects of the novel's power" (Graham 19). Many critics have noticed that Holden's brusque speech serves to show his inarticulate and rebellious personality. Donald Costello in "The Language of *The Catcher in the Rye*," managed to encapsulate the numerous instances of Holden's speech, demonstrating the importance of Salinger's use of italicized words or syllables, Holden's use of the same word in many different contexts, all the subtle aspects that force the reader to pay close attention in order to understand the exact shades of meaning Holden intends. Some of the most important symbols that can be identified in the novel are the song by Robert Burns, the red hunting hat, and the sports images that appear throughout the novel, and so forth.

Salinger used another key symbol in his literary writings—children—who symbolize the unlimited freedom (Lundquist 78). All Salinger's literary creation is populated with such symbols: Sybil, Ramona, Esmé, Teddy, Phoebe, etc. Salinger's repertoire of children "shows how wonderfully Salinger depicts small children, especially girls, mostly through his ability to capture their particular forms of speech and logical illogic" (Gelfant and Graver 497). They are all symbols of the state of enlightenment that stands against the conventional wisdom of the adults. The grown-ups represented by different characters "must struggle with the *koan* paradox until their minds are literally dragged to the edge of Holden Caulfield's 'crazy cliff' and beyond" in order to become like the children embodied by Salinger's characters (Lundquist 79). And because all of Salinger's stories end in a perplexing way, Lundquist explains, the reader is forced to look for the meaning of the story, to ask questions and try to solve the dilemma—just as the Zen student. Thus, Salinger tries to make the reader behave like the Zen student in search of the state of awakening; he tries to make his reader "vomit up the apple of logic" (Lundquist 79).

Sarah Downey wrote an interesting critical essay called "The Etymology and Symbolism of Characters' Names," in which she pointed out that it would be hard to believe that the brilliant J. D. Salinger would have picked the protagonists' names in **The Catcher in the Rye** without reason. She mentioned that the "[a]nalysis of this fact uncovers connections between themes and mannerisms that are far too relevant to have been coincidental." Sarah Downey analyzed certain scenes in the novel, thus reminding the readers of the force of symbolism and of Salinger's insight, imagination and playfulness, especially when dealing with words, meanings and symbols. Referring to the symbolism of Holden's name, which sounds close to something that "holds back," Downey believes it is of utmost importance as Holden "flawlessly portrays his inability to join society because of his high ideals for it." W. Glasser noticed first the symbolism contained in Holden's name and mentioned that "*Holden* is an archaic past participle of *hold*, and *Caul*, traced back to Old French *cale*, a kind of cap, is a membrane sometimes enveloping the head of a child at birth" (104). S. Downey followed Glasser's direction and wrote that Holden's last name "relates to [the] recurring theme of childhood innocence," and that "[a] 'caul' is defined as a part of the amnion, one of the membranes enveloping the fetus, which sometimes is around the head of a child at its birth. The caul protects young children, just as Holden dreams to do when he tells Phoebe his ideal profession would be the catcher in the field of rye. Of course, the second section of his last name represents the field of rye."

Salinger introduced a magnificent character in the novel, one of the best portrayals of his repertoire of children, Holden's sister, Phoebe. Holden loves her very much and this can be seen in his description of her. Phoebe's role in the novel, S. Downey believes, is "to keep Holden anchored to reality; to prevent him from ruining his life completely and losing all hope in his future." W. Glasser associated Phoebe's name with the moon, and "the moon goes

'around and around,' it constantly changes, moving through phases that have been used for ages as a standard of time" (112). But Phoebe also uses a pseudonym in the novel, that of Hazel Weatherfield. W. Glasser notes that "Holden says that Phoebe misspells the first name as Hazle, an archaic word meaning 'dry,' which can be joined with the initial part of the second name to form a meaningful phrase: Hazle Weather" (102). Thus, by her pseudonym, she can be associated with "dry weather." This association seems to help "clarify the meaning of wet weather, or rain, which is used throughout the novel to symbolize what the child has not yet been altered by: the inevitably corrupting experiences of this world" (Glasser 102). So, Phoebe can be seen as both a symbol for the moon and for dry weather. W. Glasser pointed out that Phoebe, through her association with wet weather is connected "with the moon, which has been traditionally viewed as having control over the rain" (112). The symbolism of her name also has great value, helping to characterize her, to show how Salinger views children, and to establish her part in Holden's life.

But Salinger did not stop at Holden and Phoebe with the symbolism of their names; the other characters in the novel prove to bear the characterizations of their personalities in their names. Thus, Robert Ackley, for example, is Holden's neighbor at Pencey, and he describes him as "one of these very, very tall, round-shouldered guys (...) with lousy teeth. (...) I never even once saw him brush his teeth. (...) Besides that, he had a lot of pimples. Not just on his forehead or his chin, like most guys, but all over his whole face. And not only that, he had a terrible personality. He was also sort of a nasty guy" (Salinger Ch. 3, 16-7). Holden's frank description disgusts the reader and offers a realistic account of Ackley, whose name, S. Downey says, "sounds like acne, one of Ackley's more obvious features. It also sounds similar to a reaction of disgust. When hurt, humans use 'ouch' as an exclamation of their pain; when disgusted, people tend to make an 'ecch' or 'ack' noise." It is easy to believe that Ackley's repugnant features could easily suggest this type of reaction. Ackley frustrated and disgusted Holden; but even in his distaste for his roommate, Holden admits in the end that despite Ackley's disgusting features and habits, he still missed him.

From this brief analysis I can draw the conclusion that Salinger paid great attention to the names chosen for his characters as they symbolize the very features that characterize each of them and this attention stands as a proof of Salinger's attentiveness to detail, his genius and his exquisiteness in creating genuine characters. Thus, one of the most evident uses of symbolism is that of names which seem to encapsulate the essence of the characters that bear them, as I have exemplified above using the studies of important critics to support this idea. I have tried to demonstrate my belief that Salinger's use of so many symbols throughout his fiction means that he works with philosophical symbols and ideas at all levels, not only in explicit ways, such as lines and his characters' words, but also on indirect, hidden levels, such as those of symbolism in all its forms to convey messages, Salinger's own messages.

An important conclusion is that Salinger uses children as major symbols throughout his fiction and they are believed to symbolize unlimited freedom. This is a strong argument in favor of Salinger's repertoire of children and his tendency to "populate" his literary creations with children as they oppose the adults' conventional wisdom.

Conclusion

In this article I have tried to focus on J. D. Salinger's place in world literature, to gather different critics' opinions in order to discuss Salinger's writing style and the most important influences on his writing style, the cultural and historical background behind his literary works and how they influenced and were reflected in his literary creations. I have also tried to focus intensely on the most important patterns, themes and motifs in Salinger's fiction and discuss them, such as the misfit hero, the phony vs. the nice world, the crucial moments of epiphany, alienation and vulnerability, love of different kinds, quest for a moral ideal,

symbolism of names, specific use of language, other major symbols, suicide, marriage, the place of the artist in the society and so forth. I have approached the issue concerning the controversy created around Salinger and his ability to maintain his reputation in the context of his self-imposed reclusive lifestyle. The main reasons behind his “retirement” from the public world refer to his great disappointment with the disturbing elements brought along by success and his desire to find a peaceful existence, most likely as a result of the Second World War experiences and, later on, of the strong influences of Zen philosophy.

I have also presented my belief that Salinger’s secluded lifestyle had its share of contribution and impact on the very popularity he has rejected and on the implicit controversy. A major theme and also influence concerns the war and the army life present throughout his short stories, especially during and after his participation in the Second World War.

The conclusion is that the major themes and patterns that recur in Salinger’s fiction, and which are his trademarks, mainly refer to: Salinger’s pattern of using a cast of characters for dominant families (the case of John “Babe” Gladwaller or the Glass family); the presence of the child and what it symbolizes; Salinger’s predisposition of creating characters that recur in his works; the use of names as symbols for the characters bearing them; Salinger’s attentiveness to details and careful choice of words; his special treatment of colors; his penchant for citing novels, titles, literary characters, authors, songs; Salinger’s use of italics usually to highlight oral speech; the recurrent motif of the letter or note and their repeated reading or memorizing; the pattern of using extended telephone conversations as a way of avoiding direct communication, but also to display his gift for dialogue; Salinger’s use of the sequel pattern; themes of war, army life, squalor, separation from society, death, aversion against physical violence; but also themes of love, niceness, religion and philosophy and so forth.

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