

A TRANSLATOR'S POSITION IN DIFFERENT CULTURES AND EPOCHS

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Abstract:

This article aims to present facts and critics' points of view on two different social and cultural contexts that are related to an author's, in this case J. D. Salinger, creation and publication of a novel, namely "The Catcher in the Rye." The first is the American culture of the 1950s and the second is the Romanian cultural and social context at the time of the publication of the first Romanian translation - the 1960s. The presentation of these contexts is beneficial for deeply understanding the influences and the period in which a writer lived and created his fiction. This approach also involves an interdisciplinary perspective, focusing on historical, political, economic, social and cultural aspects of the two cultures involved in the translation process: the Source Culture and the Target Culture. This approach can reveal how important it is for a translator to take into account the specific cultures in question and to use the "tools" specific to each of them. The main aim of this outlook is to help explain how the decisions and choices made by translators can be affected by socio-cultural contexts.

Keywords: translation, Source culture, Target culture, translator's position, socio-cultural context

Introduction

J. D. Salinger's literary masterpiece, as any other literary creation, cannot be profoundly understood without taking into consideration the social and cultural context and the influences of the period in which the author, in this particular case, Salinger lived and created his fiction. This involves an interdisciplinary approach of the topic, dealing mainly with historical, political, economic, social and cultural aspects of the 1950s. Although Salinger started working on his novel much earlier, in the 1940, the '50s is the period in which the novel was published and rapidly gained national and international reputation. But without the specific events that took place in post-war America, the huge popularity of Salinger's novel may not even have been possible. In order to emphasize the main events I shall make reference to some very recent studies, mainly belonging to Sarah Graham and Martin Halliwell.

Social and Historical Contexts

The period right before, during and after the Second World War had a huge impact, at all levels, on all the nations involved, since the war affected life and its evolution in the two countries involved in this research: Romania and the USA. This part represents the core of understanding how all the new changes and developments, both in positive and negative directions, in the post-war era were actually shaped and how they influenced life, in all its spheres, with an emphasis on literature in this unique context in the above-mentioned nations.

Martin Halliwell in American Culture in the 1950s, published in 2007, starts his *Introduction* section by a discussion of a comeback concerning censorship, just as the one in the fifties, giving examples of social and political issues going on in 2004 (such as Janet Jackson's concert incident, the terrorist attacks from 9 /11, George Bush's last year of his first term, etc.) (1). Before embarking on discussing and presenting the most important events from the decade of the 1950s, I believe it is important to briefly remind what the atmosphere was like in the mid-1940s, when Salinger had actually started working on his novel. The respective period "had seen an almost complete reversal of the alliances of World War II: the Germans and Japanese were no longer the sworn enemy, even though West Coast Japanese Americans has been interned and relocated *en masse* in the late 1940s, causing widespread resentment" (Halliwell 28). The real dangers or threats were now Red China and the Soviet Union.

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But in order to better understand the post-war period we have to look even further back in the history of the USA, to the period of the Great Depression. Sarah Graham, in her book J. D. Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye, published in 2007, in a chapter entitled "Post-war America: society and culture," mentions that the post-war American atmosphere cannot be really understood without going back to the Wall Street Crash in 1929, when the US stock market suffered an immense collapse which lasted until the beginning of World War II in 1939 and which was known as the Great Depression, "an economic crisis that threw millions of people into poverty" (Graham 9). The USA had hoped to avoid getting involved in the war. "Anxious about the rise of communism, keen to limit immigration, and resistant to a European influence on American identity, the USA was happy to stay isolated from the rest of the world" (Graham 9). But Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on 17 December 1941 killed more than 2,400 American service people and civilians and this fact made the USA decide by 11 December to go to war with Japan, Germany and Italy. America's participation in the war pulled her out of the Depression by creating many jobs, especially new ones. S. Graham mentions that "[s]ix million women (of a female population at that time of 66 million) entered the American workforce during the war, and although women were encouraged to return to the home when the war was over, many enjoyed the opportunity to have a role outside the family and make money in their own" (9). Of course, this increasing number of women that decided to stay employed after the end of the war developed the economic boom of post-war America.

There were devastating effects of the discovery and use of the atomic bomb, "not only for Japan, which suffered the loss of thousands of lives when the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were bombed by the USA in August 1945 (forcing Japan's surrender)" (Graham 10), but for the entire world which was now entering "the perilous atomic age." S. Graham provides statistic data which suggest that "the USA lost around 400,000 lives in the war, most of them in the battle. (...) Around 35 million people died in the Second World War, about half of them civilians" (10).

The two major dangers that America was facing after the end of the war were: "the possible spread of Communism from the USSR and the fear that the Soviets would develop and use atomic weapons" (Graham 10). These dangers influenced America in all its major fields of life for many years. Capitalism and Soviet Communism are deeply opposing concepts. For Americans capitalism means that "individuals or companies own the means of production and employ a workforce" (Graham 10). Soviet Communism is at the opposite pole, it is "a state-run, rather than privately owned economic system in which, ideally, the workforce owns the means of production" (Graham 10). These are the reasons which led to the 'Cold War' between America and the USSR. "The boom of America's economy was a very important aspect and an influential one in everybody's life" (Graham 10). Martin Halliwell believes that the "Cold War ideology is central to understanding 1950s culture but it was also a period in which the economic prosperity that began during World War II started to have tangible effects on middle class life" (2).

Social and Cultural Symbols

The American economic boom had very important and obvious symbols, and S. Graham mentions, for example, that cars represented the symbol of luxury, the appearance of fast-food restaurants was the side effect of "the relocation from city dwelling to the suburbs," and the appearance of "drive-in movie theatres and chains of motels" stood as a symbol for a "population that was mobile and affluent in a way it had never been before" (12). Martin Halliwell believes that "(...) on closer inspection the decade reveals a number of political, social and cultural currents that cannot easily be expressed as 'cold war culture'" (3). To all these symbols mentioned by S. Graham, Martin Halliwell adds the ones from the popular culture, such as the birth of Elvis Presley, king of rock-and-roll, that of "high-school

romances, Tupperware, the *Peanuts* comic strip, Hollywood blondes, 3-D cinema, and black baseball star Jackie Robinson helping the Brooklyn Dodgers to six World Series finals” (3)

Some other advantages created by the economic boom in the post-war period in America were: a shorter working week, which meant more leisure time, leisure activities, such as church-going. At the same time the post-war period in the USA presented paradoxical effects since there were two opposing views on domesticity: it “was promoted as an ideal for women and many women were perfectly content with marriage and children, but a significant number were dissatisfied” (Graham 15). But women’s lifestyle and women’s emancipation were not the only new concepts in post-war American culture. The same happened to the concept of “teen-ager,” which was, as S. Graham mentions, “first identified as a recognized developmental period and social phenomenon in the 1950s,” due to the nation’s prosperity, “wider inclusion in high-school education,” and even to “the greater mobility afforded by the boom in the car ownership” (16). All these new elements, S. Graham continues, “combined to create ‘peer culture’ (that is, one in which young people refer to each other for a sense of belonging and shared values, rather than to the older generation) such as never seen before” (16). This seems to have created the perfect environment for the appearance of such a character as Holden Caulfield. S. Graham notices that these young people, from an entirely new generation, had to “express their sense of difference from the world created by their parents,” and to do this they needed “films, music, clothes, books and innumerable other products that were designed especially for them” (16).

As a conclusion it can be easily said that the period of the 1950s was one of great changes and developments in the USA, at all levels: social, political, economic, scientific, and technological; there were also new approaches and perspectives on gender issues. The appearance and development of television had great impacts on people and their leisure habits and family life; it was the beginning of the entertainment industry which was to have huge effects on the entire world in the second half of the 20th century. It was a decade of transition, of new beginnings, of prosperity, developments and changes (both positive and negative) which affected not only the entire American nation but also had effects sooner or later in the entire world. Without knowing and understanding this period from the American history we cannot claim to understand the literary masterpieces written during this decade, J. D. Salinger’s novel included, and that is why I considered it essential to approach.

Romania in the 1960s

It is also very important to focus on the period in which the first Romanian translation of Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* appeared in our country, namely in 1964, done by Catinca Ralea and Lucian Bratu and entitled *De Veghe în Lanul de Secară*. The period was that of Communism, the much feared threat of the USA. This means that Romania which met Holden Caulfield for the first time had the exact political and social context that the Americans, Holden’s compatriots, were fighting against. This brief outlook on Romania’s communist period will greatly help explain the decisions and choices made by the Romanian translators; they will also help analyze the text in relation to the socio-cultural context and better understand why the first Romanian translation was not a very successful one. The year 2009, more specifically on September 1, represented the moment when the entire world commemorated seven decades from the burst of the Second World War. In this context it is also very important to understand Romania’s position in the period before, during and after the Second World War in order to better understand the changes that took place in our country and that shaped its history for almost five decades before the revolution against Communism, in 1989, which represented a spiritual, cultural, economic, political and historical rebirth for our nation.

This brief outlook¹ will mostly summarize and emphasize the main political events that took place in Romania shortly before, during and after the Second World War. At the time when Salinger was starting his literary career and then, later on, when he was fighting in the war, in Romania there was a period of communist regime. The communist regime was installed in Romania under direct pressure of the Soviet occupation forces, against the will of the Romanian people, in the geopolitical conjunction appeared after the end of World War II. This process has known, in the period between 1945-1947, a troubled transition period, which ended by the act of forced abdication of King Michael, on December 30, 1947, and by adopting the new Constitution in April 1948, which annulled the political pluralism, consecrated the complete seizure of power by the communist forces and the instauration of the system of “popular democracy.”

After this harsh period there was a period of repression and institutionalization of ideological control, which was known as censorship. As it is known, in the context of the Soviet military occupation of the countries in Central and Southeastern Europe, after World War II, communist regimes were transplanted in these countries. These regimes, when they fully took over the power, they destroyed the intellectual elite, using violence in the repression and physical extermination, in prisons and camps, of a large number of members of the old political class.

In 1948, the ideological censorship was institutionalized, affecting all areas of creative or cultural activity. Lists of publications were established; and the same happened to works or authors who may see the light of print, and lists of publications and works that had to be prohibited, with authors to be removed from the public domain. The public libraries were purged of banned works, but they were invaded by translations from Russian literature, the Russian films flooded the screens, the publishers and newspapers were put under a strict ideological control. The works of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin were translated and disseminated to saturation. This situation can be slightly linked to the attempts to ban Salinger’s novel after its publication in 1951 or to censor certain parts, actually words (such as the case of the “F” word) from the book. This harsh political context from Romania affected all strata of life, especially the cultural one and this had a great impact on the first Romanian translation of The Catcher in the Rye.

The religious life was not an exception from all the political changes that were taking place in the above-mentioned period. Under the pressure from Moscow, in 1948 the Greek Catholic Church was disbanded and its leaders were imprisoned. The atheistic-scientific propaganda had the task of “emancipating” people of the religious faith. Consequently, in the early ‘50s, the Communist regime succeeded with the use of terror to suppress the opposition (except the armed resistance of some groups withdrawn in the mountains), important intellectuals were imprisoned or marginalized, education, publishers, publications, radio (and later television) were rigorously controlled and the whole culture was ideologically subordinated to the communist directives.

This was, broadly speaking, the socio-cultural and political context in Romania at the time when De Veghe în Lanul de Secară was translated for the first time, in 1964. This context can thus help us better understand the censorship present in the choices made by the two Romanian translators. One of the important advantages of this first translation is that it appeared in the so-called period of political liberalization and cultural openness, in 1964 and

¹ The main source for the information presented in this sub-chapter is an article entitled “Cultura română în perioada regimului comunist. Reconstrucția culturii române în perioada postcomunistă. Poziții actuale privind identitatea națională și procesul integrării europene” (“The Romanian culture during the communist regime. The reconstruction of the Romanian culture in the post-communist period. Present positions regarding the national identity and the European integration process”) found on <<http://www.preferatele.com/docs/romana/21/-cultura-romana-in-p5.php>>. All the quotations and paraphrasing from this article are my translation and adaptation into English unless otherwise stated.

this allowed our country to come into contact with a highly controversial book, banned especially because of its “inappropriate” language.

Catinca Ralea and Lucian Bratu were the first ones who translated Salinger’s novel into Romanian. She was a radio and television journalist and translator. Catinca Ralea was born in 1929 (the daughter of the philosopher and esthetician Mihail Ralea), she was translator of English, American and French literature; she made TV and transmissions, starting with 1953 she worked in the English department of the editorial broadcasting office for overseas transmissions of the Romanian National Radio Station (she was an announcer, an editor, then head of the department). Her literary translations included the series Cvartetul din Alexandria: Justine, written by Lawrence Durrell re-published by Polirom in 2002 and Cvartetul din Alexandria: Balthazar, by Lawrence Durrell and re-published by Polirom in 2003, besides the first Romanian translation, in 1964, of J. D. Salinger’s The Catcher in the Rye (De Veghe în Lanul de Secară, re-published by Polirom in 2001) in collaboration with Lucian Bratu.

Tudor Petruț¹ mentioned in an article called “Din Aduceri Aminte (2)” from 2008 that Catinca Ralea coordinated the English department from the Romanian National Radio Station for many years and she has made exceptional interviews with writers such as Saul Bellow, William Saroyan, Alvin Toffler, or Iris Murdoch, with musicians such as Yehudi Menuhin and Arthur Rubinstein, the sculptor Henry Moore, with Margaret Thatcher and politicians such as Edward Kennedy, with the famous Barbara Walters and Doctor Christiaan Barnard. Radio was her great love to which she gave creative energy with all her beneficial vitality and passion. Tudor Petruț mentions that Ilie Purcaru, the writer, confessed she had “a strong culture, both Romanian and Anglo-Saxon,” and that “in a time when Romanian communist dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu drastically reduced foreign exchange costs, we see good movies on TV, obtained for free, thanks to Tudor Vornicu and his relations with his Western counterparts, but also thanks to Catinca Ralea and her relations with the free world.”

Catinca Ralea was a well-known TV presenter who had access to the Western world and this had undoubtedly contributed to her better understanding of the novel and of what it represented both for the American and Romanian cultures, each from its specific point of view. Regardless how good or bad the translation may be ranked or how modern or old-fashioned the language of the novel may look like to different generations of readers, the work of the first two Romanian translators is of great value since it united the Romanian and American cultures, shedding light on the latter in the eyes of Romanian readers and awakening their interest in wanting to find out more about Holden Caulfield and his teenage dilemmas. From this point of view the translation can be considered a bridge between cultures and a good starting point for further analysis of different cultural and historical aspects and events that highly influence the writing, translating and decoding process of a literary work. These are some of the main reasons why I have focused on the socio-cultural and historical contexts related to the birth, and respectively to the translation of Salinger’s novel.

Conclusions

In this article I have tried to focus on presenting the most important data, facts and critics’ points of view on the social and cultural contexts of, firstly, Salinger’s creation and publication of his novel (America in the 1950s) and, secondly, on presenting the outline of the Romanian cultural and social context at the time of the publication of the first Romanian translation (Romania in the 1960s). The presentation of these contexts was advantageous for deeply understanding the influences and the period in which Salinger lived and created his fiction, which in turn greatly influence the translator's work and choices at the time of translation. This approach involved an interdisciplinary perspective, focusing on historical,

¹ Source: <<http://www.romanianvip.com/2008/10/13/din-aduceri-aminte-2/>>. This paragraph is my translation and adaptation into English.

political, economic, social and cultural aspects of the USA in the 1950s. Salinger started writing the novel in the 1940s, but the main reason for choosing to focus on the 1950s was its representing the period in which Salinger published his novel and the fact that during this period it has rapidly gained worldwide reputation. I have also tried to emphasize that without the very specific events of the post-war America the popularity of Salinger's novel would not have been possible. The focus was on the huge impact that the Second World War had on all levels and on all nations, but mainly on the USA and Romania and on how it affected life, developments and social evolutions in these two very different countries.

Another important aspect discussed was the social, political and cultural context of Romania in the 1960s. The reason for choosing this period is that the first Romanian translation of Salinger's novel appeared in 1964. Thus, the period discussed was that of the Communist regime (the much feared threat of the USA). The main aim of this outlook on Romania's political regime was to help explain the decisions and choices made by the two Romanian translators, also to deeply understand and be able to analyze the text in relation to the socio-cultural context and finally to offer some pertinent reasons for the partially not complete success of the first Romanian translation, especially concerning the colloquial language used by Holden Caulfield. All the events presented are important for understanding Romania's position in the pre- and post-war period, as well as for understanding the changes that took place in our country and shaped its history for almost five decades before the anti-communism revolution, which represented a spiritual, cultural, economic, political and historic rebirth of our country.

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