

## A Research on J.D.Salinger's Disillusionment of Self-Salvation

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### Abstract

J.D.Salinger, in his masterpiece *The Catcher in the Rye*, depicts Holden Caulfield's disillusionment of searching a savior against the background of spiritual wasteland of the 20th century. This thesis compares J.D. Salinger with Caulfield, and discover many similarities between them. Salinger expresses his feeling towards society through the portrayal of Caulfield. As a member of a restless society, Salinger hopes to find a solution to society's spiritual crisis. But as he suffers a series of disillusionment, he chooses to live like a recluse, away from the public, pondering the problem of spiritual crisis.

### Keywords

J.D.Salinger, Disillusionment, Spiritual Crisis.

### 1. Introduction

*The Catcher in the Rye* is the most famous book written by J. D. Salinger, whose protagonist, Caulfield, is the center of people's attention after its publication in 1951. Some critics used Archetypal Criticism to analyze Caulfield, regarding him as the Huckleberry Finn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, as Edgar Branch discussed in his essay "Mark Twain and J. D. Salinger: A study in Literary Continuity" in *American Quarterly*[1]. Furthermore, Gwynn and Blotner regarded Caulfield as a new Jesus Christ, "Jesus and Caulfield truly love their neighbors, especially the poor in goods, appearance, and spirit" [2].

Actually, Caulfield's nonconformist attitudes and skepticism of the whole society represented the spiritual complexity experienced not only by the youth in the 1950s, but also by most westerners during that period. As the deeply-rooted belief in God in collapsed, the emptiness in people's hearts made them in spiritual wasteland. As a member of this society, Caulfield was definitely influenced by this spiritual complexity, hoping to find a way out of this spiritual crisis. Like Caulfield, Salinger is also keenly aware of the spiritual trap in his society, and by writing he is hoping to find way out. This thesis compares J.D. Salinger with Caulfield, and discover many similarities between them.

### 2. J.D. Salinger's Reflection on Spiritual Crisis

#### 2.1 The Influence of Spiritual Crisis on J.D. Salinger

The way Salinger portrayed Caulfield's confusion towards his society, the hero in his great work *The Catcher in the Rye*, actually represents his own question on the meaning of life. This has also been questioned by authors like Melville, Fitzgerald, Faulkner, and Hemingway, which are perfectly illustrated by the characters in their novels.

Obviously, Salinger is the successor of this great tradition. Growing up in times full of spiritual restlessness, Salinger had much to say about the spiritual crisis prevailing in western countries. This inevitably left a mark on Caulfield, the main character in *The Catcher in the Rye*. Salinger, like Caulfield, showed his dissatisfaction for what David Riesman in *The Lonely Crowd* calls the "other-directed" life--the dominant competitive, egocentric, materialistic craziness of twentieth century America [3]. *The Catcher in the Rye* recorded Caulfield's reflection on that period, which make countless young readers identified themselves with Caulfield. Granville Hick put forth with one contention in the "Saturday View" that "millions of young Americans feel closer to Salinger than to

any other writer”[4].Salinger could win the favor of millions of readers, especially young readers, just because he really understood the minds of those readers which had never been done by others.

Just have another look at the social background. The development of modern science made westerners suspect the existence of God. Especially after the appearance of Darwin’s Evolution Theory, many westerners got lost. In addition, the devastating effort of the two world wars made words like passion, liberty and the like meaningless, which hollowed the westerners’ spiritual life further. Afterwards, they lived in a world with nothing to believe in, nothing noble to fight for. Meanwhile, they enjoyed a convenient daily life for the development of modern economy, which made them turn to material for spiritual comfort, thus making material life overweight spiritual life. Gradually, the gap between spiritual life and material life became wider and wider, and westerners found themselves in a state of restlessness and uncertainty. They felt that their strong inner thirst for inner fulfillment was doomed at that time.

During the 1950s, things got even worse. The desire to acquire wealth and status formed the main part of westerners’ lives, which troubled Salinger a lot as it had done to many westerners of that society. The great disparity between affluent material life and poor spiritual life even pushed many of them to the edge of insanity. Caulfield,as a teenager, was more keenly aware of the problems existing in his society, got totally disorientated in such a social environment. Salinger’s early fictions recorded his protest against the way of living in American cities which were full of people who had lost their innocence and had turned into phonies. Caulfield’s two days’ wanderings in New York City were the best footnote of Salinger’s feeling towards his society.

## 2.2 The Similarity of Their Growing Process

Just after its publication, *The Catcher in the Rye* became the bestseller, and teenagers were the largest among its readership.This novel was so popular among teenagers who even identified themselves with Caulfield for their somewhat similar growing experience.

Then how could Salinger portray Caulfield so vividly that he caught the hearts of many ordinary readers? We cannot help wondering there must be some similarities between them. Born in a rich family with a father busy with his business and a mother immersed into her own world, Caulfield has a lack of parental guidance. Consistently being expelled by four schools, Caulfield is full confusion and anxiety towards his society. Wandering in New York City, Caulfield is eager to find his savior which turns out to be a beautiful dream never come true. Frustrated by the adult world, Caulfield becomes a rebel who fights against all the accepted social values, which makes him stands for the disaffected youth, because Caulfield has done the things they want to but cannot.

Like Caulfield, Jerome David Salinger was born in a wealthy family in Manhattan, New York. His father, Sol Salinger, achieved great success in business. Sol Salinger embraced the social values, consequently, he used his value and preference to educate J.D. Salinger. At the very beginning of his school education, Salinger was educated in a public school where he did not perform well in his studies. With the success of his father in business, Salinger was transferred into the private McBurney School for ninth and tenth grade. McBurney was a school with high tuition for the elite of upper-eastern New York. Sol Salinger hoped one day his son could completely immerse in the society he devoted all his energy into. Motivated by this thought, he provided the best education he could for Salinger. But just like Caulfield, though enjoying affluent material life, Salinger did not really want to live in the way his father had hoped. Salinger was not interested in study, and showed great talent in drama, however, his father was opposed to his dream of being an actor. During his stay in the McBurney School, Salinger spent a lot time on drama-playing and writing, but was not interested in study which resulted in his bad performance in exams. As a result, he was forced to leave that school in 1934 . But his father did not try to figure out what was in Salinger’s mind,and just arranged another school, the Manhasset School, for him. Then it was no wonder that Salinger still performed very badly in this new school and had to leave again. One sentence given by school authorities was just like the one Caulfield got from Pencey Prep, “Not applying himself at all” [5].Just after suffering another blow, Salinger was sent to another school--Valley Forge Military Academy for it strict discipline. In

this school, he tried to explore his likes, and began to write stories under the covers at night with the aid of a flashlight. At the same time, he was the editor of the school magazine. He only focused on his likes, and ignored those things he hated at school. Later, he was admitted into New York University in 1936, but left in the following spring. That fall, his father forced him to learn about the meat-importing business and he was sent to work at a company in Vienna, Austria.

From Salinger's living experience, it is obvious that Caulfield and him shared many things in common. Both of them were always forced by their fathers to do many things which were alien from their desires, and we barely see any inner communication between them and their fathers. Caulfield becomes a boy who escapes to the past and refuses to grow up, while Salinger indulged into the things he liked for refuge (writing), and attended a Columbia University evening writing class taught by Whit Burnet to perfect his writing skills. This in fact laid a solid foundation for his vivid description of the spiritual suffering of Caulfield.

### **3. Experiencing Similar Disillusionment in the Search of a Savior**

#### **3.1 Writing as Means to Cope with the Problems in His Society**

Living in an "other-directed" society described by David Reisman in *The Lonely Crowd*, people, especially the younger generation, were exposed to the influence of modern media from which they formed worldviews, such as movies, TV and so on. That's why in Salinger's eyes, the modern art and mass media were combined together to reinforce the influence on people's lives in a wrong way by using an inauthentic mode of expression, which Salinger tried to correct in his works.

Bearing this noble mission in mind, Salinger chose writing as his weapon to fight against the "phoniness" of his society, following his ancestors Melville, Fitzgerald, Faulkner, and Ernest Hemingway. Dedicated to be a writer, he took many writing classes to perfect his skill. The writing practice at Valley Forge Military Academy and at Ursinus College laid a foundation for his ambition to be a good writer. Later he enrolled in Whit Burnett's short-story writing class at Columbia University, which guided him into the way of being a real writer.

Gradually, Salinger published many works in *New York Stories* with the maturity of his writing skills. These works chastised the modern film industry which propagandized the inauthentic mode of life to modern people[3]. Through Caulfield, Salinger spoke out his disgust of the films by Hollywood: "The goddam movies. They can ruin you. I'm not kidding"[5]. Caulfield also showed his contempt to his brother D. B. for his choice of being the film writer for Hollywood, "If there's one thing I hate, it's the movies. Don't even mention them to me"[5].

#### **3.2 Suffering the Disillusionment in the Search of His Savior**

Strongly disappointed with the society, Salinger wanted to find a way out in his own way. However, Salinger's efforts of using the words to look for a way out turned out to not be as effectual as he thought. Although *The Catcher in the Rye* appeared on the best-seller list, the authorities just regarded it as a book which would pollute the younger generation because of Caulfield's effusive, colloquial narrative and his challenge on adult authority and accepted social values. As a result, it was banned from high school reading lists, advocated by many a nervous parent or school administrator. In one of the earliest reviews of *Catcher*, T. Morris Longstreth, writing in "The Christian Science Monitor" for July 19, 1951, offered a view that continues to haunt Salinger's novel: "that is not fit for children to read, for although Caulfield is alive and human, he is also 'preposterous, profane, and pathetic beyond belief'"[6]. They feared such a book with wide circulation would duplicate many Caulfield-like teenagers. It took a long time until the hall of academy tried to embrace Salinger and his books. Nearly ten years after its first publication, colleges and universities began to adopt this book. Thinking about this phenomenon in another way, it was not hard to know the reason why suddenly the critics took attention to the hero. Because there were so many adolescents and college students finding value and interest in Caulfield as a sensitive outsider, as Caulfield was their hero and role mode. In other words, they were forced to embrace this hero in order to discipline those students better.

Meanwhile, it is obvious that Salinger's disillusionment of trying to search for one way out of spiritual frustration is represented by Caulfield's disillusionment of looking for his savior. Caulfield, as an ordinary teenager living in the 1950s, gets lost on the threshold of adulthood, what's more, he has suffered the disillusionment of finding his savior. He suffers a heavy nervous breakdown and is sent to the nursing home. Salinger offers no answer to whether or not Caulfield could recover from his nervous breakdown, which indicates Salinger's uncertainty of finding a way to deal with the spiritual trap. In this novel, it is Phoebe, Caulfield's younger sister, who gives Caulfield comfort and love. Only in children can he find innocence, beauty and goodness in reality, which unfolds Salinger's strong belief that children are the catchers of the whole world. Coincidentally, Antoine de Saint-Exupery also expresses the same idea in his work "Little Prince", who is also strongly aware of the problems in his society. The modern men are completely indulged in material life and have no time to pay attention to spiritual needs. In order to warn the numb modern men, he creates one prince from the alien world to wake up them from their sweat dream of modern technology. He hopes that his people could get rid of their fetters to enjoy the real life with the help of the little prince.

No matter how badly Salinger or Antoine de Saint-Exupery want to use children's innocence to save human beings from their spiritual dilemma, they realize that children are always on the way into the adult world, while the adults cannot go back again, and neither can the whole of human beings. Then at that time who can be their Catcher again? This is also felt by Caulfield, the hero in Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, who refuses to talk about the future, indicating his lacking of courage to face the real world. As Caulfield thinks of how to deal with his life in the nursing home, Salinger is inevitably continuing to meditate on the way to get human beings out of their spiritual crisis.

#### **4. Searching for a New Way to Cope with the Real Life**

##### **4.1 Caulfield's reflection in Nursing Home**

While staying in the nursing home, Caulfield tells his story, especially his wandering in New York City to other. Although Caulfield gets his rebirth from Phoebe's love, he seems still not courageous enough to accept the reality, or in other way, accept the real world from his heart.

Though Caulfield talks much while narrating his experience, his refusal to open his heart to others can still be sensed, like his seldom mention of his current situation in the novel. At the same time, he uses many excuses to avoid telling others his current situation in detail, and even refuses to think about his next plan: "I mean how do you know what you're going to do till you do it? The answer is, you don't. I think I am, but how do I know? I swear it's a stupid question" [5]. Although Caulfield has realized that he himself should be responsible for his current situation, he still hides many of the key details in his narration of his experience, such as his ignorance of the moments of particular trauma or painful moments. As a result, what he tells is just part of the story, which only represents the uncertainty in his deep heart, or the loss of how to deal with the life ahead.

As the author have mentioned before, the worldview Caulfield depends on is oversimplified, which leads his interpretation in a harsh and unpromising way. Meanwhile, he cannot tolerate anything ambiguous, but actually the world is complicated and multidimensional. Although he gains some growth at last, he is still not mature enough to cope with the real world, which is clearly presented by the discrepancies between what he says about himself and the truth of his situation. During Caulfield's narration of his past experience, there is a sharp contrast between Caulfield's simple description of his actions and the real desperation of the actions themselves. When describing his walk to the Central Park duck pond late at night, he casually mentions that he has icicles in his hair and worries about catching pneumonia. But he does not seem to consider it strange to walk outdoors with wet hair in freezing weather. Caulfield's apparent obliviousness to it actually indicates his mental imbalance. Meanwhile, other characters' responses to Caulfield's behavior can be seemed as guidelines to see his inner conflict. For example, when Caulfield tries to persuade Sally to flee society and live with him in a cabin, she repeatedly asks him to stop shouting. In Caulfield's account of the scene, he claims



he isn't shouting, but Sally's account is more reliable. Salinger uses her angry, fearful response to signal to the reader that Caulfield's mental state is worse than he admits or acknowledges.

From the analysis above, the inner conflict Caulfield is suffering when staying in nursing home can be clearly felt by readers, and the ingrained terror in his mind causes him to tell his story in order to get out of the feeling of loneliness while still trying very hard to hide his true feelings from others. So in one sense, Caulfield is still on the way of searching for a way to make himself part of the society which he cannot escape from.

#### 4.2 J. D. Salinger's Silence and His Efforts of Searching a Suitable Lifestyle

Salinger hasn't published any fiction since 1966, and he refuses to talk or write about his life under any occasions. He chose to live just like a recluse in his private space which forbade the reach of others. His deliberate choice of shunning from the public and media became an enigma that many people wanted to figure out. Ian Hamilton articulated the confusion in many people's hearts:

American intellectual look with compassion on those eastern bloc writers who have been silenced by the state, but here, in their own culture, a greatly loved author had elected to silence himself. He had freedom of speech but what he had ended up wanting more than anything else, it seemed, was the freedom to be silent. And the power of silence—to silence anyone who wanted to find out why he had stopped speaking [7].

In Fact, Salinger's recluse-like life attracted several critics to interpret it in different ways. Warren French attributed his seclusion to "an inability to make the social adjustment expected of mature members of society" [8]. Hassan made a more rigorous analysis of Salinger's seclusion in his article "Almost the Voice of Silence", in which he sought to look for a place for Salinger in the literary tradition of silence that included de Sade, the Dadaists, the surrealists and authors like Hemingway, Kafks, Camus and Beckett:

The writer behind Buddy, Salinger himself, gradually becomes as silent as an ideal reader. At first the silence is metaphoric, twisted and loving locutious digressions, language shattered in its efforts to free itself of kitsch and sentimentality. In the end Salinger ceases to publish. Is this some form of holy refusal? [9].

From the above analysis, in the critics' eyes Salinger's silence is not a simple action, but shows Salinger's conscious intellectual and spiritual thinking worthy of others' serious criticism.

As the author have discussed before, Salinger is unsatisfied with the things pervading in his society. His experience in the American army during World War II made him disillusioned with his native culture and society further, which can be seen in Caulfield's remarks about his brother D. B.: "My brother D.B. was in the Army for four goddam years. He was in the war, too--he landed on D-Days and all--but I really think he hates the Army worse than the War... He said the Army was practically as full of bastards as the Nazis were"[5]. But his search of one way to cope with the problems of society by writing turned out to be not as useful as he hoped, and then he decided to withdraw from the society and kept silent to the public. To Salinger, silence occupies a very important position in his spiritual world which can separate him from the modern material life, and meanwhile made his spiritual quest in this world possible.

## 5. Conclusion

J.D.Salinger shares a lot of similarities with Caulfield, such as their similar living experience, their same disillusionment in the search of a way to live in a world full of many problems. Finally, Caulfield stayed in a nursing home, meditating the serious problem as in which way can he adopt to live in or even embrace a world which he detests from the bottom of his heart, and it is the question that Salinger hopes to figure out.

Caulfield ends up recovering from his nervous breakdown in a nursing home, and Salinger chooses to live like a recluse away from the public, where he could turn to other cultures to keep on looking

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for a suitable way to live in this only but imperfect world, together with the hope of finding a suitable living style that could bring the whole human race out of their spiritual crisis.

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