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## "Love and Death in *The Catcher in the Rye*"

**Critic:** Peter Shaw

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**Criticism about:** J. D. Salinger (1919-), **also known as:** J(erome) D(avid) Salinger, Jerome David Salinger

**Nationality:** American

[(essay date 1991) *In the following essay, Shaw offers a psychoanalytic interpretation of Holden's social observations and mental state in The Catcher in the Rye, placing his actions and emotions in the context of "the peculiar patterns of adolescent crisis."*]

By the time *The Catcher in the Rye* appeared in 1951, the theme of the sensitive youth beleaguered by society was well established in the American novel. Reviewing Truman Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms* in 1948, Diana Trilling complained about the tendency of contemporary novelists to employ a "deterministic principle" in which the youth was repeatedly presented as a "passive victim." Also well established by 1951 was the link between neurosis, self-destructive behavior, and social maladaptation on the one hand, and artistic sensibility and special insight on the other. Not surprisingly, Holden Caulfield was regarded as yet another fictional example of the sensitive, outcast character vouchsafed a superior insight by a touch of mental disturbance.

Holden's disturbance was taken to be both his unique, personal gift and the fault of a hypocritical, uncaring society, one particularly indifferent to its more sensitive souls. Holden's insight into the adult world's hypocrisies, moreover, appeared to derive precisely from his being its casualty. Given the deplorable world in which he lived, if by the end of his adventures Holden seemed ready to effect some kind of accommodation with society, this struck readers as inevitable, if regrettable.

It is certainly true that like other of Salinger's youths, Holden properly belongs to the contemporary American novel's procession of sensitive, psychologically crippled but superior characters. Nevertheless, he is not simply a product of the deterministic principle observed by Trilling and endorsed by the commentators of the fifties. If Holden is a casualty of society, he is also a psychological case in his own right. Moreover, he is presented in a somewhat different manner than are the sentimentalized young people in other novels of his period. In the first place his critique of society is by no means entirely endorsed, and in the second his eventual accommodation to society is by no means presented as a capitulation.

It has not gone unnoticed that Holden is virtually a case study. He writes his account from a mental institution, has a morbid preoccupation with death, and comes perilously close to a nervous breakdown while walking up Fifth Avenue. In the intellectual climate of the 1950s, these circumstances hardly told against a fictional character. As Mrs. Trilling had put it a few years earlier, "a considerable section of our literary culture" held the view that "madness is a normal, even a better than normal, way of life."<sup>1</sup> In the same spirit, the first full-scale and still probably the most widely accepted academic essay on *The Catcher in the Rye*, written in the mid-1950s, concluded:

It is not Holden who should be examined for a sickness of the mind, but the world in which he has sojourned and found himself an alien. To "cure" Holden, he must be given the contagious, almost universal disease of phony adulthood.<sup>2</sup>

The word *cure* in quotation marks expresses the view that mental health and illness are misleading terms that should, if anything, be reversed. On the other hand, the expression "phony adulthood" indicates that rather than being an endorsement of true madness, this typical fifties defense of Holden amounts to little more than a way of stigmatizing American society for its stuffiness and insensitivity to exceptional spirits. Not until the 1960s, with R. D. Laing's elevation of the clinical

schizophrenic to prophetic status, would actual madness come to be endorsed as superior to normality.

Not surprisingly, one early review of *The Catcher in the Rye* characterized Holden's alienation and obsessions as examples of the routine and familiar difficulties of adolescence: they added up to "a case history of all of us."<sup>3</sup> The implication was that as adolescents "all of us," disturbed by the insensitivities and vulgarities of contemporary life, have felt that we were going crazy. Other critics soon went so far as to endorse Holden in whatever degree of mental disturbance he might be said to suffer. Yet in the cultural atmosphere of the 1950s, the feeling that Holden was ultimately normal coexisted comfortably with the idea of his being psychologically disturbed.

It was not until the 1970s and 1980s, in two essays, that any attempt was made to account for Holden in primarily psychological terms. E. H. Miller wrote in 1982 that "most critics have tended to accept Holden's evaluation of the world as phony, when in fact his attitudes are symptomatic of a serious psychological problem." Miller, "instead of treating the novel as a commentary by an innocent young man rebelling against an insensitive world or as a study of a youth's moral growth," tries to show that Holden's "rebelliousness is his only means of dealing with his inability to come to terms with the death of his brother." In contrast, the other psychoanalytic critic, James Bryan--who theorizes that Holden is ruled by a suppressed incest wish directed toward his ten-year-old sister, Phoebe--does not conclude that Holden's insights are undermined by his having psychological difficulties.<sup>4</sup>

The psychological approach, then, though it insists on a fairly serious diagnosis of Holden, does not definitively establish the grounds either for dismissal or endorsement of his social critique. What it does establish is that Holden's observations and his mental state are manifestly related to one another. The question is, how?

Holden's psychologically disturbed state has been advanced as the source both of his insight and of his lack of insight. The lines have been sharply drawn between Holden as an insightful social critic and as a mistaken projector of his own frailties onto society. Since evidence can be found to support each of these analyses, it might follow that Holden is an inconsistently drawn character. Yet he has never struck readers this way. How, then, can the opposite impressions of consistency and inconsistency in his character be reconciled?

The answer to this question, I wish to argue, lies in the peculiar dynamics of adolescent psychology. The teenage years stand out as life's most complicated and tortured period. It has been said that teenage behavior, with its swings into and out of rationality, actually resembles schizophrenia. Certainly, this is the one period of life in which abnormal behavior is common rather than exceptional. It is no wonder, then, that young readers and professional critics alike have been able to regard Holden as normal despite his own conviction that he is not--or that other readers have been able to regard him primarily as a disturbed youth even though he often talks sense.<sup>5</sup>

Failing to take into account the normality of abnormality in adolescence, the psychoanalytic critics in particular have taken a too purely clinical approach to Holden. E. H. Miller's positing of a life crisis dominated by mourning and guilt over the death of Allie, for example, seems too comprehensive and too definitive. For although Allie's death might be cited to account for much of Holden's behavior, no single act or expression of his stands out as inexplicable without reference to Allie. His brother's death exacerbates rather than constitutes Holden's adolescent crisis.

The psychoanalytic essays rest narrowly on single explanations, and disagree with one another. Nevertheless, their notation of classical symptoms in Holden should make it impossible for critics any longer to ignore the importance of psychological processes in both Holden's behavior and his ideas. Miller, for example, is able to call attention to at least fifty mentions by Holden of being depressed, repeated references on his part to himself and others as "crazy," and "his repeated use of variations on the phrase 'that killed me.'" One can add that Holden's disturbed condition is also evoked by a pattern of verbal slips, double entendres, errors, forgetting, accidents, and fallings down. The most striking of his double entendres, redolent both of guilt over Allie's death and an attempt to fob off that guilt on someone else, is a remark about his sister Phoebe containing the words, "she killed Allie, too." Of course he means by "killed" that she amused Allie. But his unconscious understanding is that Phoebe (like himself) is somehow responsible for Allie's death. Holden reveals that this actual death lies behind his casual use of the word "killed" when he goes on to mention next, apparently irrelevantly, that Phoebe is ten years old. For this is the age at which Allie died.

It can also be added that Holden uses the word "crazy" and its variants *mad*, *madman*, and *insane* over fifty times--and

pretends that he is suffering from a brain tumor. (He actually uses his famous term "phony" less often--approximately forty times.) Such signals of mental distress, it is worth noticing, were even more prominent in a version of the book's opening scene, a story entitled "**I'm Crazy**," published by Salinger in *Collier's* magazine in 1945. There Holden explains his being out in the cold without coat or gloves: "Only a crazy guy would have stood there. That's me. Crazy. No kidding, I have a screw loose."<sup>6</sup>

As with the rest of his behavior, Holden's self-punishments have some reference to guilt over Allie's death, as well as having a source in adolescent psychology. "The adolescent," writes Peter Blos in *On Adolescence: A Psychoanalytic Interpretation*, "incurs a real loss in the renunciation of his oedipal parents, and he experiences the inner emptiness, grief, and sadness which is part of all mourning." The adolescent also mourns for his own earlier childhood. If *The Catcher in the Rye* is, as E. H. Miller argues, about Holden's need "to bury Allie before he can make the transition to adulthood," it is also about Holden's need to bury and mourn other elements of his past. The elements link up with memories of Allie, pushing Holden toward breakdown yet always rendering his experience recognizable.

But mourning is only one of the two main psychological experiences typical of Holden's stage of adolescence. The other is "being in love." If Holden is unable to move on from mourning, he is equally unable to commence the being-in-love portion of his maturation process. He is suffering through what Erik Erikson calls "the prime danger of this age": an excessively prolonged "moratorium" on growing up. (such prolongation can also be referred to as a "moratorium of illness.")<sup>7</sup>

Holden expresses his need for moratoriums on both death and love in his two museum visits. The first visit is to the Museum of Natural History, whose dioramas of American Indian life convey an image of time suspended. The Indian who is fishing and the squaw who is weaving will never change, he muses, and he goes on to fantasize returning to the dioramas, without growing older, and finding the figures always exactly the same. Their perfection stands against the disturbing implications of a different couple--Holden's parents. He imagines himself making one of his trips to view the museum figures after hearing his "mother and father having a terrific fight in the bathroom." The mature life of couples, in other words, presents a threatening prospect relieved by contemplating the Indian mother and father in the museum. Their serene sameness evokes an imagined, permanent moratorium on love and its consequences.

At the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Holden leads two little boys to the reconstructed pharaonic tomb and its collection of mummies. When the boys run away in fright at his account of mummification (characteristically the only information about Ancient Egypt he could recall for his history examination), he finds that he "liked it" in the tomb: "it was so nice and peaceful." Here is a place in which he can finally rest in untroubled communion with eternal death: he is alongside mummies preserved as he wishes Allie could be preserved, and symbolizing his own wish to be preserved from change. Very soon, though, like his other moments of suspension, this one is rudely interrupted. He is driven from the tomb when a scrawled "Fuck you" graffito catches his eye. Not for the first time the insistent reminder of sex drives him reluctantly back into life--this time to the bathroom where he faints in a purgative ritual that marks his first emergence from his moratorium.<sup>8</sup>

Holden's clinging to the part of his moratorium that concerns sex is expressed in his curious fondness for his friend Jane Gallagher's keeping her kings in the back row when playing checkers. Jane is the girl he has kissed on only one occasion, but whose date with his roommate makes him frantic, and whom he cannot quite bring himself to phone after he runs away from school. Critics have interpreted Holden's repeated mentions of the kings in the back row as expressions of his own "fear," or as representing "a holding back of one's aggressive powers and an unwillingness to enter the competitive game and use them against other people," or else as an attempt on Holden's part to warn Jane against the sexual intentions of his roommate, Stradlater.<sup>9</sup>

All of these speculations are compatible with the psychology of the moratorium. But at a still deeper level, Jane's withholding her kings may be said to symbolize the suspension of maturation typical of this adolescent period--even as it typifies the static, sexually unthreatening relationship Holden has had with her. For, like young people, the pieces on a checkerboard must keep moving forward. Or, as the game's technical term has it, they must keep "developing." On reaching the back row they have in effect achieved maturity, and are accordingly "kinged." By not moving her kings out of the back row, Jane solves the problem presented by this unavoidable process of maturation. She has made it one of *arrested development*. Understandably, this is particularly attractive to Holden.

Holden's catcher in the rye fantasy is usually understood to contain a kind of moratorium idea. The children falling off the cliff are said to symbolize a fall into adulthood, from which Holden imagines himself sparing them even as he would spare himself. But it is possible to be more specific: in psychological terms the "catcher" passage combines the elements both of falling in love and of mourning. To see how this is so, it is important to notice the source of the fantasy--Holden's watching a couple and their child--in order to track the unconscious allusive trail leading to love and death. Holden recalls walking along Fifth Avenue one day and observing with pleasure and empathy a couple and their playful child. To begin with, the family is not well off, Holden observes. This connects its members to the series of underdogs Holden has been attracted to, starting with fellow students at Pencey Prep, and extending to characters in movies and books. Furthermore, the child, at the moment he is observed, is a kind of outcast in the family itself--"walking alone" while the parents "were just walking along, talking, not paying any attention to their kid."

The child is also in danger. He is walking in the roadway, albeit "right next to the curb." Perilously, "cars zoomed by, brakes screeched all over the place, his parents paid no attention to him, and he kept on walking next to the curb." Clearly, the child's danger prompts the fantasy of rescue in the rye that soon comes into Holden's thoughts. "If a body catch a body coming through the rye," he hears the boy singing, and he begins to imagine himself catching the bodies of children in another kind of danger.

Viewing the catcher fantasy psychologically, E. H. Miller puts it that "Holden has the 'crazy' idea that he should have saved Allie." But psychoanalytically speaking, the process leading to the fantasy of rescue would have to be described as somewhat more complicated. The child whose sibling dies commonly suffers not so much the guilt of having failed to effect a rescue as that of having at some time harbored the wish that the sibling might die. (When Allie died, Holden's immediate reaction had been to punish himself by slamming his fist through the garage windows, prompting his parents to think of having him psychoanalyzed.) The actual death, no matter what its cause (Allie had died of leukemia), can lead to a reaction formation, that is, to the creation of an opposite wish. The wish to kill, for example, can be replaced by a wish to rescue. Allie is the source of the rescue fantasy, then, but not its object.

In Holden's case the reaction formation manifested in the catcher fantasy is combined with another kind of guilt that may follow the death of a sibling, that felt by virtue of being a survivor. Such guilt often leads to an avoidance of success--as when Holden repeatedly fails out of schools--or else to imagining oneself incapable of success at an ordinary vocation. Being a catcher in the rye, no ordinary vocation, provides a bridge from guilty failure to success of a psychologically acceptable kind.

The being-in-love aspect of the catcher passage emerges from the prominent but neglected circumstance of its connection with the series of errors and slips revealing of Holden's unconscious. As Phoebe points out to him just before he recounts the fantasy, he has misheard the little boy sing "if a body *catch* a body":

"It's 'If a body *meet* a body coming through the rye!' " old Phoebe said. "It's a poem. By Robert *Burns*."

Holden answers: "I *know* it's a poem by Robert Burns." He knows the words, as would anyone his age at the time *The Catcher in the Rye* takes place. The song and its words were a standard tune of the day--of the sort sung around the piano at home. One understands that its words would come easily, and correctly, to the lips even of the little boy whom Holden mishears.

What, then, is the significance of Holden's error? The phrase "meet a body" conjures up not only a meeting between a lad and a lass, but because of the suggestiveness of "body" when detached from its Scottish meaning of "person," the phrase implies the coming together of male and female bodies. The next line of the song--"If a body kiss a body, need a body cry"--makes explicit the romantic/sexual context of the first. This is why Holden catches only the one line, and that one imperfectly. Unconsciously suppressing the word "meet," he avoids the very matter of his relations with girls, which he has been unable to resolve. "Meet" acts as another reminder, like the "Fuck you" graffiti that keep confronting him, of the disturbing sexual basis of love. Each time, Holden experiences a need to "erase" the reminder. And each time his need has reference to young people. The first graffiti, after all, appears on a wall at his sister's school, and it is to protect youngsters that he is moved to erase it. His fantasy of rescue in the rye comes out of the same impulse to protect youngsters (and the youngster in himself) from vulgarized sexual knowledge.

Earlier, Holden has confronted the vulgarized kind of knowledge in his roommate Stradlater, who seems to have kissed a body: Jane Gallagher. To the question "if a body kiss a body need a body cry?" the answer, one may say, is "yes." For when Holden imagines not just a kiss but Stradlater and Jane having sex, he does end up "practically bawling" (after maneuvering Stradlater into beating him up). Once again he himself, having had a relationship with Jane that only once reached the stage of (chaste) kissing, is frozen at a painful stage of development. In contrast, Stradlater has, to Holden's dismay, broken through this stage. Accordingly, when Stradlater hints at having had sex with Jane, Holden takes a swing at him: "I told him he didn't even care if a girl kept all her kings in the back row or not."

Holden has idealized Jane in a typical adolescent way, for "to adolescence proper belongs that unique experience, tender love," writes Peter Blos. But the adolescent boy must progress from an early "state of infatuation toward the fusion of tender and sexual love."<sup>10</sup> Having participated in Stradlater's splitting off of tender love from his sexual intentions toward Jane, Holden has maneuvered Stradlater into hitting him in order to be punished for this violation of Jane. The fusion of tender and sexual love remains difficult for Holden. It represents a vertiginous, dangerous kind of falling for him: the extreme of the suggestion contained in the words "falling in love."

The theme of falling extends from the catcher fantasy, to being knocked down by Stradlater, to the threat of falling off the curb while walking up Fifth Avenue (with the related threat of falling out of sanity and consciousness), to a series of trippings and pratfalls suffered by Holden in the course of his adventures. These falls convey adolescent sexual awkwardness--almost explicitly so when Holden trips over his suitcase on the way to letting a prostitute into his hotel room. Among 1940s romantic movie comedies, *The Lady Eve* makes explicit the pratfall's association with sexual awkwardness and excitement. In this movie, as Henry Fonda keeps falling in the presence of Barbara Stanwyck, it grows evident that his pratfalls anticipate his falling in love. That consummation is perhaps always a fall out of experience and control, and so always carries with it some of the fear of falling that troubles Holden.

Holden not only falls inadvertently in minor ways; he is repeatedly drawn toward catastrophic forms of falling. Each time, he is searching out self-punishment for his unconscious guilt over Allie's death. The wish to be punished by death accounts for his apparently illogical response to Phoebe's accusation that he doesn't like "anything that's happening." "I do!" he insists. But she challenges him to "name one thing." He has trouble "concentrating" on an answer, but then James Castle pops into his mind: this is a fellow student who leaped to his death. Clearly, Holden is half in love with easeful death.

At the same time, of course, he half hopes to be saved. On sneaking out of his parents' apartment after talking to Phoebe, he admits that "for some reason," at this point "I didn't give a damn any more if they caught me." Then, fixing on the word he has uttered, he adds: "I figured if they caught me, they caught me. I almost wished they did, in a way." As much as he needs to fall, in other words, Holden needs to be caught. (Horsing around at school, he has expressed the same need. Pulling his cap down over his eyes, "I started groping around in front of me, like a blind guy. ... I kept saying, 'Mother darling, why won't you give me your *hand*?'"")

Besides rescuing children from maturation, Holden may be said to be rescuing others in one further sense deriving from young love. "The sensitive adolescent who cannot yet fall in love with a specific person on a realistic basis," writes Theodore Lidz,

... can experience a more diffuse love of nature or of mankind in which there is a vague seeking for expression and fulfillment of the feelings that are surging within him. He feels that he must lose himself in nature or find ways of giving himself in the service of mankind.<sup>11</sup>

The desire to serve mankind can lead to messianism, perhaps in the form of joining a cult or fringe political organization, or else it can eventuate in fantasies of service. In its negative form the same displacement of love leads to delinquency or running away from school. Holden moves in each of the negative directions, both running away and fantasizing himself a rescuer.

The phenomenon of adolescent messianism stands out as the single analytical conception actually referred to in *The Catcher in the Rye*. It is, in fact, the centerpiece of the one, serious, considered evaluation of Holden by another character--his former teacher, Antolini. In the course of an analysis of Holden that includes an emphasis on the imminence of his suffering some kind of "fall" (a usage that alerts the reader to a wide-ranging play on the meanings of this word), Antolini

writes out for him some words "written by a psychoanalyst named Wilhelm Stekel": "The mark of the immature man is that he wants to die nobly for a cause, while the mark of the mature man is that he wants to live humbly for one." The words capture the perfectionist urge in Holden, yet misrepresent him as leaning toward a messianism of action when actually his tendency is toward fantasies of rescue quite divorced from any social idea or cause.

The same distinction between action and fantasy applies to Holden's critique of society, which is sometimes taken to represent a reformist impulse, a wish for a better world. A careful scrutiny of Holden's dislikes, complaints, observations, and especially his generalizations about the world, however, reveals many of them to be personal. This is another way of saying that Holden is a first-person narrator of a particular kind. In novels with first-person narrators the common disparity is between the narrator's reports of what he observes (which are dependable) and his opinions (which are undependable). With Holden, there is additionally a range of reliability among his opinions depending on who and what he is evaluating.

Some of Holden's opinions prove to be merely selfish. Salinger exposes them by having Holden contradict himself through his own behavior. For example, he complains about his roommates and others only to repeat their annoying habits, like standing in the light.<sup>12</sup> Some of his complaints and generalizations--"people never give your message to anybody"--betray a failure to notice that he is being patronized on account of his erratic behavior. Others are those of a spoiled prep school kid:

I always get those vomity kind of cabs if I go anywhere late at night.

I hate living in New York and all. Taxicabs, and Madison Avenue buses, with the drivers and all always yelling at you to get out at the rear door, and being introduced to phony guys that call the Lunts angels, and going up and down in elevators when you just want to go outside, and guys fitting your pants all the time at Brooks, and people always ...

It is difficult to be sympathetic toward the frustrations of a youth who is privileged to ride in cabs and go to the theater. The act of exiting from the rear door of the bus to accommodate others hardly qualifies as a discontent of civilization. And if Holden expresses a boy's understandable uneasiness at being touched during a fitting, the fact that he is getting his clothes at Brooks Brothers undercuts sympathy with his complaint. In such passages even Holden's justly famous instinct for exposing phoniness appears personal and self-involved rather than socially oriented.

On the other hand, his observation of a woman who weeps over the sentimentalities of a movie while irritably refusing to take her child to the bathroom sharply exposes the contradiction in her behavior. This is the kind of feeling insight Holden is justly famous for. Projecting his own anxieties onto the child, as with the boy who inspired the catcher fantasy, his sensitivity to parental indifference here affords a sharp insight into the behavior of the mother.

Holden is insightful, it seems, where children are concerned, but less so with adults, especially parents (except when they are with their children). Similarly, he feels sympathy for the outcasts of life and literature--Hamlet, for example--but lacks sympathy for anyone who does not display a psychological disturbance--Romeo, for example. Thus Holden's own grappling with death gives him a certain insight into *Romeo and Juliet*. He speaks for many of those who have experienced the play, especially younger readers, when he picks Mercutio as his favorite character and expresses both disappointment and resentment at his being removed from the action so early.

Premature death has been Allie's fate as well, of course, and Holden understandably reacts with special urgency to any situation in which life goes on despite death. But Holden is less reliable when, again projecting his own guilt, he searches for scapegoats, as when he concludes that "it was Romeo's fault" that Mercutio died. He takes back the accusation, but then, yet again using the word "crazy," accounts for his response to the play in a passage that is really about Allie:

The trouble is, it drives me crazy if somebody gets killed--especially somebody very smart and entertaining and all--and it's somebody else's fault.

Like Romeo, Holden is guilty because he has gone on living after Allie's death, and like Romeo he cannot really be accused of being at fault.

An examination of Holden's critique of society, then, shows him to be by turns merely irritable and positively insightful. Just as with the question of his sanity, there is evidence both for those who find him an admirable social critic and for those who do not. And once again the variability in question turns out to involve adolescent psychology--if not exclusively the realm of the adolescent moratorium. Taken as a whole, Holden's critique can be seen to relate to the sexually repressive component of his extended moratorium. His repression is manifested not only in his chaste relationship with Jane but also in his wish to become a monk, his preference for the two (nonsexual) nuns he meets over the other women, and his dismissal of the prostitute sent to his hotel room. As it happens, adolescent repression of sexuality, especially when tinged with an attraction to the ascetic, often produces exactly what Holden is known for: a tendency to deliver "negative judgments" on the world.<sup>13</sup>

If it has to be said that Holden's vision is often linked to personal and psychological sources, the feeling of most readers that he is somehow right about things in general cannot altogether be dismissed. Salinger himself has conveyed an impression of Holden's being right, possibly because he shifted in the course of writing from a noncommittal authorial distance to a perilously close identification with his protagonist. This shift can be observed when Holden's former teacher, Antolini, after somewhat inappropriately applying Wilhelm Stekel on messianism to Holden, goes on to employ a more persuasive formula: "You'll find," he tells him, "that you're not the first person who was ever confused and frightened and even sickened by human behavior." The presumption expressed here that Holden is suffering from a kind of angst coincides with the attitude toward society usually taken by the critics who endorse Holden's vision.

Yet as his use of Stekel reveals, Antolini has only a general idea of what ails Holden. He has had a talk with Holden's father, but there is nothing to suggest that he has learned from it any more than that Holden has been flunking courses and seems disturbed. In the interview Antolini limits himself to discussing Holden's schoolwork. Inasmuch as he therefore has no way of knowing how the world impinges on Holden's consciousness, his explanations of Holden's behavior take on the aspect of authorial interpolations.

Salinger's attitude toward Antolini has always troubled readers. Antolini himself is eventually discredited. But his speech of analysis and advice--unlike that of the history teacher, Spencer, who also admonishes Holden to apply himself to his schoolwork--apparently is not discredited. On the other hand, his pronouncing Holden to have been "sickened by human behavior" and to be carrying an urge to reform society is certainly not accurate, however well it may describe the psychology of those readers who think they see in reflection of themselves, or their former selves, in *The Catcher in the Rye*. It seems, therefore, that as Salinger approached the end of his novel he began to draw uncritically close to his protagonist, and to betray that process through Antolini's philosophizing.

Salinger's slippage away from authorial distance starts at the beginning of the Antolini visit. Early in the conversation with his former teacher Holden gives a typically sensitive account of another outcast: the misfit fellow student who has been rebuked for repeatedly digressing when he delivers talks in Oral Expression. Holden likes digression, though, and regrets Mr. Vinson's giving the boy an *F* for his talk about the farm his father bought in Vermont--"because he hadn't told what kind of animals and vegetables and stuff grew on the farm and all." Holden is attracted to the idea that someone could "start out telling you about their father's farm and then all of a sudden get more interested in their uncle." He is always attracted to defiance of fathers. But this is the once time when his critique, though spurred by personal identification, is in no way colored by its psychological source. His defense of digression has to be pronounced artistically sound. And the teacher who give the *F*, unlike the other teachers in the book, is not technically right while being emotionally obtuse, but rather both wrong and obtuse. In contrast with everything that has gone before, then, Holden on digression is wholly justified in his rejection of the dogma of authority.

In the course of the Antolini scene, then, Salinger slides into becoming Holden advocate and justifier, and a sentimentalized light is temporarily cast over Holden. One may speculate that the flaws join this much-analyzed scene are precisely the source of critical readings that lose *their* objectivity toward Holden. One may further speculate that Salinger sensed something wrong with the scene, and tried to correct it by later undercutting Antolini. But evidently because he was patching things up rather than writing out of a more purely creative impulse, he did so rather crudely by discrediting Antolini as a homosexual.

Except for this lapse, *The Catcher in the Rye* presents society and its figures of authority as both right and wrong. They are right that Holden extended adolescent moratorium must come to an end, but surely wrong to dismiss him as a merely

confused adolescent. For he is undergoing a special combination of kinds of mourning--for his brother Allie, for his own earlier childhood self, and for his parents as the revered figures of his youth--and his mourning has acted on his sensibility in strikingly creative ways. Such creativity, too, is a normal--if rare--accompaniment of adolescence.

As for Holden himself, he too is both right and wrong. He sometimes has exceptional insight into his world, and he sometimes suffers from skewed judgment. In turn, critics of *The Catcher in the Rye*, very much like the teachers and other figures of authority in the book, have also been both right and wrong. They have tended to overvalue Holden's insights, but have perhaps been right, after all, to treat his psychological disturbance as more normal than abnormal. The extreme verge of adolescent disturbance, after all, can be said both to approximate what would have to be diagnosed as psychosis in an adult, and to be a phase that can end in normalcy. Holden represents an extreme, but readers have sensed that he nevertheless connects with common experience.

Critics, common readers, the author of *The Catcher in the Rye* himself--all have found themselves drawn toward Holden. Some have reasoned that their attraction could be accounted for by the universality of his case, which they have taken to be essentially that of a normal teenager. Others have reasoned that, on the contrary, he is a special case: attractive precisely to the extent that his experience is not normal. But whether one is assessing Holden's sanity or his status as a social critic, the foregoing sketch of his psychology suggests that whoever wishes to hold an informed view of Holden Caulfield needs to take into account the peculiar patterns of adolescent crisis.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Diana Trilling, *Reviewing the Forties* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), pp. 232, 218. See also "Growing Up in America: the 1940s and After, : in Frederick R. Karl, *American Fictions 1940/1980* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983). On the weighing of critical opinion toward sympathy with Holden see James Bryan, "The Psychological Structure of *The Catcher in the Rye*" *PMLA* 89 (1974): p. 1066.

<sup>2</sup>Arthur Heiseman and James E. Miller, Jr., "J. D. Salinger: Some Crazy Cliff," *Western Humanities Review* (1956), reprinted in *If You Really Want to Know: A "Catcher" Casebook*, ed. Malcolm M. Marsden (Chicago: Scott, Foresman, 1963), p. 22.

<sup>3</sup>Ernest Jones, review in *The Nation*, September 1, 1951, reprinted in *"Catcher" Casebook*, p. 9. An exception is a 1959 study in which Holden is flatly pronounced "sick": Robert G. Jacobs, "J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*: Holden Caulfield's 'Goddam Autobiography'," *"Catcher" Casebook*, p. 62. See June Edwards, "Censorship in the Schools: What's Moral about *The Catcher in the Rye*?" *English Journal* 72 (April 1983): 39-42, for how Holden is still represented as a normally mixed-up teenager in high school classrooms.

<sup>4</sup>E. H. Miller, "In Memoriam: Allie Cau[l]field in *The Catcher in the Rye*," *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 15 (Winter 1989): 129. See also Bryan, "The Psychological Structure."

<sup>5</sup>This account of adolescence follows Anna Freud, as well as others cited below. More recent studies, without denying their account, "emphasize adaptive strengths and coping skills," and argue that the turmoil is less often the norm than is usually supposed. See Mark J. Blotcky and John G. Looney, "Normal Female and Male Adolescent Psychological Development: An Overview of Theory and Research," *Adolescent Psychiatry* 8 (1980): 196.

<sup>6</sup>Holden also remarks that his grandmother "doesn't have all her marbles any more," and fixes on the song "It was Just One of Those Things," the next line of which is "just one of those crazy things." On the forty uses of "phony" see Robert A. Draffan, "Novel Approaches: Teaching *The Catcher in the Rye*," *The Use of English* 24 (Spring 1973): 203. The quotation from "I'm Crazy" is from *Collier's* (December 22, 1949): 36. The quotation from the novel ("she killed Allie, too") is from J. D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye* (New York: New American Library, Signet ed., 1963), p. 64. All subsequent page references, appearing in parentheses in text, are to this edition.

<sup>7</sup>Peter Blos, *On Adolescence: A Psychoanalytic Interpretation* (New York: The Free Press, 1962), p. 100; E. H. Miller, "In Memoriam," p. 129; Erik Erikson, "Youth: Fidelity and Diversity," in *The Challenge of Youth*, ed. Erik Erikson



(Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday Anchor, 1965 [rpt. of vol. of 1963], pp. 13, 18.

<sup>8</sup>On the tomb passage and purgation see Miller, "In Memoriam," 183-4. The range of ritual interpretations that have been proposed may be sampled in Gerald Rosen, "A Retrospective Look at *The Catcher in the Rye*," *American Quarterly* 29 (Winter 1977): 562, which concentrates on Holden in the rain after Phoebe's carousel ride; and in Carl F. Strauch, "Kings in the Back Row: Meaning through Structure--A Reading of Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*," *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature* 2 (Winter 1961), in "*Catcher*" *Casebook*, p. 109, where "Central Park represents Holden's Dark Tower, Dark Night of the Soul, and Wasteland."

<sup>9</sup>See Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner, *The Fiction of J. D. Salinger* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1962), p. 30, cited by Bernard S. Oldsey, "The Movies in the Rye" (1961), in "*Catcher*" *Casebook*, p. 126; Rosen, "A Retrospective Look," p. 556; Strauch, "Kings in the Back Row," "*Catcher*" *Casebook*, p. 104. By getting Stradlater to mention the Kings, it is suggested, Holden is sending Jane a warning to beware of Stradlater.

<sup>10</sup>Blos, *Adolescence*, p. 101, 102.

<sup>11</sup>Theodore Lidz, *The Person: His Development Throughout the Life Cycle* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), p. 340.

<sup>12</sup>Peter J. Seng, "The Fallen Idol: The Immature World of Holden Caulfield" (1961), in "*Catcher*" *Casebook*, p. 76.

<sup>13</sup>Blos, *Adolescence*, p. 111.

**Source:** Peter Shaw, "Love and Death in *The Catcher in the Rye*," in *New Essays on The Catcher in the Rye*, Cambridge University Press, 1991, pp. 97-114.

**Source Database:** Contemporary Literary Criticism