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## "'To Tell You the Truth ... ,'"

**Critic:** Susan K. Mitchell

**Source:** *CLA Journal*, Vol. XXXVI, No. 2, December, 1992, pp. 145-56.

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

**Nationality:** American

[(essay date December 1992) *In the following essay, Mitchell examines the critical reception of The Catcher in the Rye and discusses Holden's problematic narrative perspective. "Holden's unreliability," writes Mitchell, "forces us to question everything about the subject: Holden's view, society's view, our own view as readers."*]

To the uncritical reader, J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* seems to be a deceptively predictable narrative. *Book Review Digest* does much to promote this idea as it condenses the plot into a few simple lines:

Just before Christmas young Holden Caulfield, knowing that he is to be dropped by his school, decides to leave early and not report home until he has to. He spends three days and nights in New York city [sic] and this is the story, in his own words, of what he did and saw and suffered.<sup>1</sup>

Some critics insist that *The Catcher in the Rye* is simply a *bildungsroman*, that is, a mere story of initiation. Readers of this type of story often assume that the world is ultimately stable: people must go through trials, and, as a result, emerge as more mature, sensible beings. In the past, traditional critics have approached the work based on the assumption that the book has a coherent, identifiable meaning. However, many of these critics have had distinct problems with *The Catcher in the Rye* since equally sensitive critics have read the book in two main ways: positively and negatively. For instance, David Leitch in "The Salinger Myth" decides that Holden is "somewhat near coming to terms with it all" by the end of the book when he misses everybody,<sup>2</sup> an interpretation that grants the reader positive feelings of joy and hope. Similarly, in "The Rare Quixotic Gesture," Ihab Hassan insists that the book "confirms the saving grace of vulnerability."<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, Maxwell Geismar, since he is perplexed about what *Catcher in the Rye* argues for, decides that it is certainly "against both the academic and social conformity of its period."<sup>4</sup> Also, Arthur Heiserman and James E. Miller, Jr., after discussing Holden's desire for "stability and love," conclude that he breaks down because he "loves the world more than the world can bear"; therefore, they claim that Holden has no place left to go.<sup>5</sup> But is the novel really so simple that it can be resolved by these two claims? Is Salinger only interested in condemning Western culture as phony or confirming it as genuine?

J. Hillis Miller maintains that in all texts there is a thread running throughout that, when pulled, unravels all stable theories. In this novel the thread appears to be Holden's unreliability. Wayne C. Booth defines an unreliable narrator as one who does not act according to the implied author's norms as revealed in the work.<sup>6</sup> Holden establishes these norms, showing over and over again that Western civilization is phony, but early on, he claims unequivocally that "I'm the most terrific liar you ever saw in your life."<sup>7</sup> If he is truly a liar, then he is not acting according to the norms-- he is flaunting them even by not practicing what he preaches. Maybe he is right that he is a liar. But does that make him right about everything else he says? Or if he is not a liar, then is he wrong about all of his assumptions and observations? Would this unreliability necessarily hinder him from upholding the author's norms? In other words, can Holden's perceptions covertly work for the implied author and against himself? Holden's claim of being a liar is an

example of Paul de Man's notion that

two entirely coherent but entirely incompatible readings can be made to hinge on one line, whose grammatical structure is devoid of ambiguity, but whose rhetorical mode turns the mood ... upside down. ... The two readings have to engage each other in direct confrontation, for the one reading is precisely the error denounced by the other and has to be undone by it. Nor can we in any way make a valid decision as to which of the readings can be given priority over the other; none can exist in the other's absence.<sup>8</sup>

Holden's declaration is simple and unambiguous. But it can have two equally valid meanings, each of which depends upon the other's flaw. Which is the truth? Is he a liar or is he sincere? Perhaps neither can be proven superior to the other.

In the work, Holden has analyzed his family as a representative slice of society and has concluded that adult society is phony and corrupt. But can we really trust his observations of his family after he has told us that he lies? Is he not, like the Cretan who declared that all Cretans were liars, a person declaring that all people are phony? If everyone is phony, then he is phony, too! Although Holden has claimed that he is a liar, he does not always realize whether he is lying or telling the truth. The distinctions between truth and falsehood become blurred as he often adds the phrase "to tell you the truth" onto whatever he is saying. But does this catch phrase ensure that his words are any more truthful? This unambiguous rhetorical statement is restated in an even more paradoxical way when Holden tells Sally that he loves her and then comments to the reader, "It was a lie, of course, but the thing is, I *meant* it when I said it." Again we are forced to read the work, as de Man suggests, in "two entirely coherent but entirely incompatible" ways.<sup>9</sup> Is he lying, or does he "mean" it? First we may claim that Holden is telling the truth: he is a liar, people are phony, society is corrupt. Or we may claim that Holden is lying: he is truthful, people are genuine, and society is untainted.

There are obvious problems with both sides of this paradox. Can Holden, people, and society be entirely unchanging--always lying, always corrupt, always phony? Or are there internal forces within each that cause them to change (un)willingly? Holden would argue that each is unchanging, labeled forever. In fact, this is how he presents his information to us. He may go out with Sally, but he does not harbor any hope that she will cast off her phoniness. He may loan Stradlater his coat, but he still believes Stradlater is a phony.

Because we view all of the events in the book through the eyes of one narrator, our observations are necessarily biased. Holden is an unreliable narrator not only because he is a self-proclaimed liar but also because he perceives reality in a simplistic way. In his work *S/Z*, Roland Barthes outlines two ways of perceiving reality: *readerly* and *writerly*. Barthes explains these ideas in terms of reading books. He claims that the only way to read a different story is to reread the same book. By rereading, a person can learn how this book differs from itself rather than how it differs from other books. When a reader rereads a work, he is perceiving writerly. When a reader refuses to reread, Barthes maintains that he is condemned to "read the same story everywhere."<sup>10</sup> Holden refuses to reread as he perceives reality readerly, seeing only the surface differences between people, not the underlying differences within each person. To perceive a person readerly would be to perceive in terms of overt, easily distinguishable differences.

Because Holden avoids investigating deeply, he sees the same story everywhere. Everyone is phony, he insists. But can we honestly believe him? Is he telling the truth? Even so, he is not passing on false or limited information since he has not gone to the trouble to read one story well. To approach accuracy, Holden would have to perceive a person writerly, to judge the fragmentation, the differences within the person, the covert, often contradictory intentions that war within and cause overt actions. We can draw conclusions only from the data which Holden perceives and selects to reveal to us (and he does select carefully as when he refuses to discuss his childhood or his parents); hence, we must be astute readers indeed lest we miss the multidimensionality of the characters that he develops. His readerly perception creates blinkers for the reader.

Throughout the novel, Holden tries to lull us into accepting his view of surrounding life as he makes statements that

seem to make sense, but which, upon closer inspection, do not bear up to a writerly view. This simplistic mode of perception is revealed particularly through his description of his family. First of all, the Caulfield parents are described in such a way as to cause the blinkered reader to view them uncompromisingly as irresponsible, alienated, skittish parents. For example, the parents are off at work away from their children, who are scattered throughout the country: D. B. in Hollywood, Allie dead, Phoebe at home, and Holden at Pencey Prep. Mr. and Mrs. Caulfield seem to be isolated characters. The reader never meets Mr. Caulfield and only hears Mrs. Caulfield when Holden is hiding in Phoebe's room. Holden will not tell much about his parents beyond his veiled opinion that they both are phony hypocrites. The reader is not even told their first names. From the beginning we are led to believe that they are hypersensitive about Holden's revealing their personal life because they want to protect their created image of conformed perfection. Because Mrs. Caulfield is a nervous woman who has smoked compulsively ever since Allie's death, Holden avoids confrontation about his being kicked out of Pencey Prep. He therefore hides from her as he stays in a hotel or in Mr. Antolini's apartment. Each of these examples appears to show that Mrs. Caulfield does not really communicate with her children. On the other hand, Mr. Caulfield is a lawyer. Holden makes no bones about his opinion of lawyers: they "make a lot of dough and play golf and play bridge and buy cars and drink Martinis and look like a hot-shot" and are phony but can't know it.

Holden's warped view of his parents denigrates them without even considering that the Caulfields may be blameless. Can we really trust Holden's view of his parents? Isn't he unethically stacking the deck so that we are prohibited from obtaining an objective view of them? We are given so few facts and scenes to describe them that we have trouble refuting Holden, except that we know he is holding something back from us. No couple could merit such a denunciation from a son. If what he has revealed about the Caulfields is true, carefully selected though the information may be, can we blame them for their anger, hysteria, and desire for privacy? These would be logical reactions if an offspring were so apathetic as to be kicked out of several reputable schools and then became anxious to write a book about his family while recovering from insanity. And what is wrong about working hard to support children, to enable them to have the best education possible? What exactly is phony about being a lawyer? Even though Holden's vagueness works well for him, making his parents appear base, mercenary, isolated, distant, and careless, it denies any redeeming qualities that would upset Holden's persuasive thesis that adult society is corrupt.

According to Holden, D. B. represents wholehearted acceptance of society's norms. In Holden's caustic terms, D. B. is a "prostitute" who lives in Hollywood, where he makes buckets of money producing popular movies, such as the Annapolis love story, which might prevent him from joining the family at Christmas. D. B. appears to symbolize the successful all-American man since he lives in Hollywood, one of the most prestigious areas of the country, displays a noticeable sign of wealth by owning a Jaguar, and has a "good-looking" albeit affected English girlfriend. However, D. B.'s own name is revealing of both society's worst qualities and his embracing of its values. Like many of the movies that he is writing, D. B.'s name is abbreviated, easy to remember, and void of significant meaning. The very fact that D. B.'s name is compressed into two initials makes one wonder what lies behind them. Just as his name used to mean something, he used to have something to say. But now as D. B. apparently bows to society's pressure and to his desire to pursue the American Dream, he loses the meaning in his life and therefore cannot communicate the message he once had, the message he once published in his short story, "The Secret Goldfish," one of Holden's favorites.

After being bombarded with these loaded examples of D. B.'s phoniness, we must ask certain questions to reveal whether Holden is right to condemn his brother. For instance, we should ask why it is wrong to display signs of wealth. Don't the signs reveal a truth about D. B.--that he is indeed wealthy? Also, does his meaningless name necessarily mean that he has no message of truth and beauty? D. B. is actually an unselfish, caring brother, as demonstrated by his numerous visits ("practically every week") with a recovering Holden. He does have other commitments, a girlfriend and work, that do keep him from devoting himself wholeheartedly to his immediate family; it is to his credit that he finds as much time as he does to visit his family. However, to prove his thesis, Holden holds fast, emphasizing that because D. B. has rejected an accepted art form and taken up the mass media that a technological society promotes, he has become visibly corrupt. But what is so corrupt about writing movies? Is it the medium that makes the difference? Can paper itself be any more artistic than celluloid? And is Holden really as against movies as he claims to be? If so, why does he volunteer to see so many? By seeing movies, Holden embraces that which he says he rejects. Although he distinguishes between "good" movies and "lousy" movies, he still claims

that they are all phony. But what is the difference between a good movie and a good book? Holden does not answer our question. He doesn't follow his proclaimed norms; he is phony.

In Holden's readerly view, Allie represents immunity from the dangers of society. Allie is dead, escaped from the clutches of a culture that ultimately requires that children give up their innocence and individuality. Fascinated with Allie's solution to the problem, Holden defies him, preserving him in his memory by carrying Allie's uniquely poem-laden baseball mitt, praying aloud to him, and remembering his good-natured innocence. At the beginning of the novel, Allie is Holden's ally, his closest friend and kin. Holden *wants* to ally himself with Allie, to lie down, subside, become extinct, to simply leave this corrupted Eden. Throughout the novel, Holden contemplates physical death in innumerable scenes, such as when he writes about Egyptian mummies in his history class, when he asks what the ducks do during winter, and when he remembers the suicide of James Castle.

However, does he want to unite himself with Allie because Allie truly is perfectly pure, or simply to assuage free-floating feelings of guilt associated with Allie's death? His guilt seems to arise primarily from an incident that occurred when Allie was alive. Holden and a friend decided to have a picnic and shoot their BB guns, and Allie wanted to go with them. However, Holden called him a child and would not let him come along. Now that Allie is dead, whenever Holden gets depressed, he does penance, telling Allie out loud, "Okay. Go home and get your bike and meet me in front of Bobby's house. Hurry up." Holden's recurring feelings of guilt distort his (and our) image of Allie. Did Holden refuse to allow Allie to join him on the expedition because Allie was not perfect? Looking back on the incident, Holden states, "[Allie] didn't get sore about it--he never got sore about anything--but I keep thinking about it anyway, when I get very depressed." Or was Holden the guilty party by refusing without a good reason to allow Allie to come along? In his guilt, Holden paints Allie larger than life.

Phoebus, the name of Apollo, means the genius of poetry. This association is not lost on Phoebe as she writes a synthesized gothic-detective thriller in which her protagonist, Hazle Weatherfield, is an orphan detective who has a father. Holden believes that Phoebe is also an orphan who has parents, but because they are alienated, they do not offer the example, guidance, and support that true parents should. Of course Holden proves this neglect as he chooses to tell us that although Phoebe is to play Benedict Arnold in "A Christmas Pageant for Americans," her father plans to fly to California on that day anyway. Also, her mother, instead of lecturing Phoebe when she admits to smoking, simply closes the subject with the irrelevant question "Do you want another blanket?" Because Phoebe is still young and alive, Holden transfers many of his guilt feelings about Allie to her, causing her to grow, in Holden's perception, more and more innocent and uncorrupted. She trusts Holden wholly as she gives him her Christmas money and packs a suitcase to run away with him. In spite of his guilt over Allie, he commits the same guilt-inducing act with Phoebe as he refuses to allow her to accompany him on the new expedition.

As pure as Holden makes Phoebe appear, she has a wisdom that belies her years. She shrewdly sees through Holden's facade of well-being, realizing that he doesn't like anything. When she tests him to prove her theory, he cannot name anything "really" that he likes. She is also a very literate young lady. She is able to identify Holden's song as belonging to Robert Burns' poem and to correct the miswording in it. She perceives reality writerly, as shown when she writes the same story over and over again. When her mother smells smoke and assumes that Phoebe has been smoking cigarettes, Phoebe is too quick--she, like Holden, lies about the truth, saying that she only took one puff of the cigarette when it was actually Holden who had been smoking. Again, when Mrs. Caulfield complains of a headache, Phoebe promptly supplies the remedy: "Take a few aspirins." Does Phoebe's covert wisdom support Holden's premise that society is corrupt? Does the thesis prove truer than he wants it to be? Holden wants to hold out for children, to proclaim their Edenic innocence. However, his flawed readerly perception blinds him to the writerly truth: not all is as easily categorizable as it appears.

Naturally, Holden is the only character shown to be heroically struggling with exactly how to relate to society. He is locked into a self that desires to be genuine but finds no way to return to the pastoral ideal. He believes that he is holed in, trapped by the games of phoniness that society requires its citizens to play. He tries to escape this trap by flunking out of school and by searching for a quiet retreat, only to discover that there is no pure retreat on earth--log cabins are distant and lonely, deserted museum rooms are corrupted with permanent obscenities, private hotel rooms

lure prostitutes and pimps. Frustrated by the readerly evidence which he has gathered to support his thesis, Holden is himself fragmented and ravaged by the warring forces within him. For instance, within Holden, the desire to reject others conflicts with the desire to be accepted by others; he doesn't want to lend Stradlater his coat, but his overt actions belie this covert, warring want; he despises Ackley, but he invites him to see a movie; he hates movies, believing them to foster phoniness in society, but during the three days of the book he sees or talks about several; he craves truth, but he tells blatant lies. Despite his own inherent writerliness or differences within, Holden still perceives only readerly. He views himself as a liar, but he refuses to acknowledge that this means that he is phony, too. In fact, Holden views writerliness as a kind of individual fragmentation or disorientation of the individual, a symbol, in his mind, of a corrupt society.

When Holden does become aware of his own writerliness, he goes over the brink into insanity. Throughout the work, he has become more and more frustrated in his awkward attempts to establish genuine friendships and to find quiet retreats. He even tries to restore purity in the schools by erasing obscenities so that children can be preserved from corruption for as long as possible. However, he is forced to confront his own writerly corruption when he is in the museum and sees an obscenity written in red beneath a glass plate. He is not the savior of children; he is not called to be the catcher in the rye. He is just a corrupt human being himself, a being who uses obscenities freely in his own casual conversation. Now that he has acknowledged his own writerliness, purged (symbolically through diarrhea) his traditional method of readerly perception, and symbolically fallen to show that he has accepted his writerly nature, he begins to see the world in a writerly manner. He is astonished and delighted to find that the carousel is the same after all these years:

... we kept getting closer and closer to the carousel and you could start to hear that nutty music it always plays. It was playing "Oh, Marie!" It played that same song about fifty years ago when I was a little kid. That's one nice thing about carousels, they always play the same songs.

However, now that his eyes are opened, he can see a new richness within the carousel that he has seen many times before. Now it teaches him that children will try to grab the gold ring and he must let them: "If they fall off, they fall off, but it's bad if you say anything to them."

Will Holden slip back into his readerliness? One indication that he will not is that he has decided to write about his own experiences, to analyze himself in terms of the world around him. He is seeking perhaps for the first time to reread his own story and understand it as different from all other stories.

What does this mean for us? What is Salinger trying to prove? Perhaps by making Holden unreliably readerly, he is saying that society is both phony and necessary. Holden's unreliability forces us to question everything about the subject: Holden's view, society's view, our own view as readers. The apparently stable themes are radically unstable; Holden does change, and society can, too, for society is neither entirely phony nor wholly pastoral. Instead, it is both one and the other. It cannot be placed in a fixed category since it is writerly.

Although each of the traditional critics introduced in the first paragraph believes that there is a coherent, knowable meaning of a work, they refuse to analyze why the meaning varies so radically from one critic to the next. Of course, some of them would rationalize that one critic may not be as intelligent or educated as another. This is possible but does not really answer the fundamental question satisfactorily. Therefore the meaning is ultimately undecidable. Since this is a writerly text, a text that splits down the middle into positive and negative factions, the ultimate meaning of it is undecidable. The reader's expectations of having an orderly, coherent world of meaning are unraveled by the thread that holds the work together. Salinger places his story *en abyme*, to use Miller's term,<sup>11</sup> so that it becomes undecidable. Society now appears genuine, now phony, now genuine again, and so on endlessly. There is an endless freeplay of meaning because the book lacks a genuine center--the apparent center of the book is actually phony. Therefore, the meaning of *The Catcher in the Rye* can never be totalized.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>*Book Review Digest*, 1951, p. 772.

<sup>2</sup>David Leitch, "The Salinger Myth," in *Salinger: A Critical and Personal Portrait*, ed. Henry Anatole Grunwald (New York: Harper, 1962), p. 75.

<sup>3</sup>Ihab Hassan, "The Rare Quixotic Gesture," in *Salinger: A Critical and Personal Portrait*, ed. Henry Anatole Grunwald (New York: Harper, 1962), pp. 148-49.

<sup>4</sup>Maxwell Geismar, "The Wise Child and the New Yorker School of Fiction," in *Salinger: A Critical and Personal Portrait*, ed. Henry Anatole Grunwald (New York: Harper, 1962), p. 90.

<sup>5</sup>Arthur Heiserman and James E. Miller, Jr., "J. D. Salinger: Some Crazy Cliff," in *Salinger: A Critical and Personal Portrait*, ed. Henry Anatole Grunwald (New York: Harper, 1962), pp. 198-99.

<sup>6</sup>Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), pp. 158-59.

<sup>7</sup>J. D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye* (Boston: Bantam, 1964), p. 16. Hereafter cited in the text by page number(s) only.

<sup>8</sup>Paul de Man, "Semiotics and Rhetoric," *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, ed. Robert Gen Davis (New York: Longman, 1986), p. 474.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup>Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), pp. 15-16.

<sup>11</sup>J. Hillis Miller, "Stevens' Rock and Criticism as Cure, II," *Georgia Review* 39 (1976), 337.

**Source:** Susan K. Mitchell, "'To Tell You the Truth ...,'" in *CLA Journal*, Vol. XXXVI, No. 2, December, 1992, pp. 145-56.

**Source Database:** Contemporary Literary Criticism