The Praises and Criticisms of J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*

The book and the context in which it is presented, some argue, make Salinger's tale of the human condition resonate and engage, yet increasingly depressing. The psychological battles of the novel's main character, Holden Caulfield, serve as the basis for critical argument. Caulfield's self-destruction over a period of days forces one to contemplate society's attitude toward the human condition. Salinger's portrayal of Holden, which includes incidents of depression, nervous breakdown, impulsive spending, sexual exploration, vulgarity, and other erratic behavior, have all contributed to the controversial nature of the novel. Yet the novel is not without its sharp advocates, who argue that it is a critical look at the problems facing American youth during the 1950's. When developing a comprehensive opinion of the novel, it is important to consider the praises and criticisms of *The Catcher in the Rye*.

When studying a piece of literature, it is meaningful to note the historical background of the piece and the time at which it was written. Two J.D. Salinger short stories, "I'm Crazy" and "Sight Rebellion off Madison," were published in periodicals during the 1940's, and introduced Holden Caulfield, the main character of *The Catcher in the Rye*. Both short stories were revised for later inclusion in Salinger's novel. *The Catcher in the Rye* was written in a literary style similar to prose, which was enhanced by the teenage slang of the 1950's. It is a widespread belief that much of Holden Caulfield's candid outlook on life reflects issues relevant to the youth of today, and thus the novel continues to be used as an educational resource in high schools throughout the nation (Davis 317-18).

The first step in reviewing criticism of *The Catcher in the Rye* is to study the author himself. Before his novel, J.D. Salinger was of basic non-literary status, having written for years without notice from critics or the general public. *The Catcher in the Rye* was his first step onto the literary playing field. This initial status left Salinger, as a serious writer, almost unique as a sort of free agent, not bound to one or more schools of critics, like many of his contemporaries were. This ability to write freely, his status as a nobody in the literary world, was Salinger's greatest asset. Rather than to scope inside Salinger's mind and create a greatness for him, we are content instead to note for him what he is:

"a beautifully deft, professional performer who gives us a chance to catch quick, half-amused, half-frightened glimpses of ourselves and our contemporaries, as he confronts us with his brilliant mirror images" (Stevenson 217).

Much of Salinger's reputation, which he acquired after publication of *The Catcher in the Rye*, is derived from thoughtful and sympathetic insights into both adolescence and adulthood, his use of symbolism, and his idiomatic style, which helped to re-introduce the common idiom to American literature. While the young protagonists of Salinger's stories (such as Holden Caulfield) have made him a longtime favorite of high school and university audiences, establishing Salinger as "the spokesman for the goals and values for a generation of youth during the 1950's" (qtd. in Davis 317), *The Catcher in the Rye* has been banned continually from schools, libraries, and bookstores due to its profanity, sexual subject matter, and rejection of some traditional American ideals. Robert Coles reflected general critical opinion of the author when he called Salinger "an original and gifted writer, a marvelous entertainer, a man free of the slogans and cliches of the rest of us fall prey to" (qtd. in Davis 317).

Obviously, the bulk of praise and criticism regarding any novel or piece of literature will come from published critical reviews. When a novel or any piece of literature is published in the United States, critics from newspapers, magazines, and various other sources flock to interpret the book and critique its style. The same was true for Salinger's novel. Noted book reviewers from across America critiqued *The Catcher in the Rye*, bestowing both praise and criticism at different levels. Each reviewer commented on different parts of the novel, from Holden's cynicism to the apparently homosexual Mr. Antolini. The novel, like any other, was devoured and picked apart piece by piece. It is the role of the researcher, therefore, to analyze the various reviews and develop a clear understanding of the novel.

One of the most widespread criticisms of *The Catcher in the Rye* deals with the adolescence and repetitive nature of the main character, Holden Caulfield. Anne Goodman commented in the course of such a lengthy novel, the reader would weary of a character such as Holden. Goodman wrote "Holden was not quite so sensitive and perceptive as he, and his creator, thought he was" (20).

She also remarked that Holden was so completely self-centered that any other characters who wandered through the book, with the exception of Holden's sister, Phoebe, had no authenticity at all. She wrote of Salinger's novel: "The Catcher in the Rye is a brilliant tour-de-force, but in a writer of Salinger's undeniable talent one expects something more" (21).

Goodman did have a point in the fact that Holden was something of an over-developed character. He described himself early in the novel, and with the sureness of a "wire recording," (Goodman 20) he remained strictly in character throughout. Salinger failed in his novel to address other characters with as much detail as Holden. This is due in part to the fact that Holden tells his own story, and also to the idea that a story told by Holden Caulfield would never describe others, as he speaks only of himself.

Reviewer James Stern of the New York Times critiqued Salinger's novel by incorporating Holden's style of speech into his review. Stern tried to imitate Holden by using short, incomplete sentences with undeveloped ideas:

"That's the way it sounds to me, Hel said (a friend of the author), and away she went with this crazy book, *The Catcher in the Rye*. What did I tell ya, she said the next day. This Salinger, he's a short story writer. And he knows how to write about kids. This book, though, it's too long. Gets kinds of monotonous. And he should have cut out a lot about those jerks and all at that crumby school. They depress me. They really do. Salinger, he's best with real children. I mean the ones like Phoebe, his kid sister. She's a personality. Holden and little Phoebe. Hel said, they kill me. This last part about her and this Mr. Antolini, the only guy Holden ever thought he could trust, who ever took any interest in him, and who turned out queer -- that's terrific. I swear it is" (5).

Stern's goal in this review was to critique the novel for its length and its melancholy nature. He saw *The Catcher in the Rye* as being too depressive to be of any redeeming value to the reader. Stern did praise him, however, when he commented on Salinger's ability to write about children. Other short stories by Salinger, such as "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" and "Franny and Zooey," are also based around children and adolescents.

Some critics have argued that Holden's character is erratic and unreliable, as he possesses many of the middle-class values that he claims to reject. Later commentators, however, have praised the hyperbolic humor of the main character, his "technical virtuosity" (qtd. in Davis 318), and the skilled mockery of verbal speech by Salinger. These critics have commented that the structure of the novel personifies Holden's unstable state of mind. Alastair Best remarked: "There is a hard, almost classical structure underneath Holden's rambling narrative. The style, too, appears effortless. yet one wonders how much labour went into those artfully rough-hewn sentences" (qtd. in Davis 318).

A larger field of critics at the time of *The Catcher in the Rye* published in 1951 took a positive view of the novel. For example, Chicago Tribune reviewer Paul Engle commented that the story was "emotional without being sentimental, dramatic without being melodramatic, and honest without simply being obscene" (3).

Engle also wrote of the authenticity of Holden's character, the idea that his voice was typical of a teenager, never childish or written down to that age level. He praised the book in noting that it was not merely another account of adolescence, complete with general thoughts on youth and growing up. Engle wrote: "The effort has been made to make the text, told by the boy himself, as accurate and yet as imaginative as possible. In this, it largely succeeds" (3).

Engle's viewpoint is one that is echoed by many. *The Catcher in the Rye* is not simply a coming-of-age novel with usual twists and turns, but rather, the unique story of a unique child. It is rare to find a character, actual or fictitious, who is as dazzling and enticing as Holden Caulfield. As Engle wrote: "The story is engaging and believable . . . full of right observations and sharp insight, and a wonderful sort of grasp of how a boy can create his own world of fantasy and live forms" (3).

Generally, critics view the novel as Holden Caulfield's melodramatic struggle to survive in the adult world, a transition that he was supposed to make during his years at preparatory school. Some critics will point to the fact that Holden has flunked out of three Pennsylvania prep schools, and use it to symbolize the fact that he is not truly ready for adulthood (Davis 318). David Stevenson commented that the novel was written

"as the boy's comment, half-humorous, half agonizing, concerning his attempt to recapture his identity and his hopes for playing a man-about-town for a lost, partially tragic, certainly frenetic weekend" (216).
"quest for communicability with his fellow man, and the hero's first person after-the-fact narration indicates . . . he has been successful in his quest" (53).

Though considered by most to be a tragedy, The Catcher in the Rye is found by some critics to be humorous, witty, and clever. The use of Chaplin-like incidents serves to keep the story hovering in ambivalence between comedy and tragedy. Whenever a character is nearing the point of no return in a Salinger piece, it is usually done by route of the comic (pp. 216). One of the many merits of The Catcher in the Rye is coming from Holden's misconceptions about adulthood. An example is shown in Holden's relationship with an old schoolmate, Luce. Although the older man is more experienced than Holden, he is not as mature as Holden believes him to be. After an attempt at communication with Luce fails, Holden flees to Phoebe, the only person he completely trusts (Davis 318). S.N. Behrman also noted that the literalness and innocence of Holden's point of view in the face of complicated and deformed facts of life makes for the humor of the novel: haggles with unfriendly taxi-drivers, futile conversations with a prostitute, a hang over a hury, an intellectual discussion with a man a few years older than himself, and a completely hilarious date with Sally Hayes, an old girlfriend (74). The humor in his point of view, his hunger for stability and permanence, make him both a tragic, and touching character, capable of making dark activities on the surface seem hilarious and silly below.

One of the most popular means by which The Catcher in the Rye is critiqued is through the comparison of Holden Caulfield to other literary characters. The novel is often compared to traditional period literature, particularly Mark Twain's novel The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. Both works feature naïve, adolescent runaways as narrators, both commenting on the problems of their times, and both novels have been recurrently banned or restricted (Davis 318). John Aldridge remarked that both novels are "study in the spiritual picaresque, the joie that the young is for all one way, from holy innocence to such knowledge as the world offers, from the reality which illusion demands and thinks it sees to the illusion which reality insists, at the point of madness, we settle for" (129).

Harvey Breit of The Atlantic Bookshelf wrote of Holden Caulfield:

"(He) struck me as an urban, a transplanted Huck Finn. He has a colloquialism as marked as Huck's . . . Like Huck, Holden is neither comical or misanthrope. He is an observer. Unlike Huck, he makes judgments by the dozen, but these are not to be taken seriously, they are conceits. There is a drollery, too, that is common to both, and a quality of seeing that creates farce" (88).

It is possible, in theory, to do an entire character study comparing Holden and Huck. Both are adolescents, runaways from society, seeking independence, growth, and stability in their lives.

Another character that Holden Caulfield is compared to, though to a lesser degree than Huck Finn, is Hamlet. Like Hamlet, as Charles Kegel wrote, Holden is a "sad, screwed-up guy" (54), bothered by words which only seem true, but are really quite phony. The honesty and sincerity that Holden cannot seem to find in others he tries to maintain within himself. Holden often tries to find a person, a man a much of the humor in The Catcher in the Rye comes from Holden's misconceptions about adulthood. An example is shown in Holden's relationship with an old schoolmate, Luce. Although the older man is more experienced than Holden, he is not as mature as Holden believes him to be. After an attempt at communication with Luce fails, Holden flees to Phoebe, the only person he completely trusts (Davis 318). S.N. Behrman also noted that the literalness and innocence of Holden's point of view in the face of complicated and deformed facts of life makes for the humor of the novel: haggles with unfriendly taxi-drivers, futile conversations with a prostitute, a hang over a hury, an intellectual discussion with a man a few years older than himself, and a completely hilarious date with Sally Hayes, an old girlfriend (74). The humor in his point of view, his hunger for stability and permanence, make him both a tragic, and touching character, capable of making dark activities on the surface seem hilarious and silly below.

In her review of The Catcher in the Rye for the New York Herald Tribune, Virginia Peterson commented on Holden Caulfield's innocence. Peterson wrote that Holden was on the side of the angels, despite his contamination by vulgarity, lust, lies, temptations, recklessness, and cynicism. "But these are merely the devils that try him externally," she wrote, "inside, his spirit is intact" (3). Holden does not till against the entire adult world, for he knows that some decent citizens still remain, nor does he loathe his worst contemporaries, for he often hates to leave them. Peterson commented:

"For Holden Caulfield, despite all the realism for which he is supposedly depicted, is nevertheless a skinless perfectionist."

In addition, Peterson wrote that Salinger speaks for himself as well as his hero when he has Holden say to little Phoebe:

"I keep picturing all these little kids playing some game in this big field of rye and all. Thousands of little kids, and nobody's around- nobody big I mean- except me. And I'm standing on the edge of some crazy cliff. What I have to do, I have to catch everybody if they start to go over the cliff. I mean if they're running and they don't look where they're going I have to come out from somewhere and catch them . . . I'd just be the catcher in the rye and all [...]" (qtd. in 3, Salingar 173).

In essence, Holden Caulfield is a good guy stuck in a bad world. He is trying to make the best of his life, though ultimately losing that battle. Whereas he aims at stability and truth, the adult world cannot survive without suspense and lies. It is a testament to his innocence and decent spirit that Holden wouldplace the safety and well-being of children as a goal in his lifetime. This serves to only reiterate the fact that Holden is a sympathetic character, a person of high moral values who is too weak to pick himself up from a difficult situation.

S.N. Behrman, in his review for The New Yorker, also took a sharp look at Holden's personality. Behrman found Caulfield to be very self-critical, as he often refers to himself as a terrible liar, a madman, and a moron. Holden is driven crazy by phoniness, an idea under which he lumps insincerity, snobbery, injustice, callousness, and a lot more. He is a prodigious worrier, and someone who is moved to pity often. Behrman wrote:

"Grown men sometimes find the emblazoned obscenities of life too much for them, and leave this world inecordly, so the fact that a 16-year old boy is overwhelmed should not be surprising" (71).

Holden is also labeled as curious and compassionate, a true moral idealist whose attitude comes from an intense hatred of hypocrisy. The novel opens in a doctor's office, where Holden is recovering from physical illness and a mental breakdown. In Holden's fight with Stradlater, his roommate, he reveals his moral ideals: he fears his roommate's sexual arrogance, but the large majority of them find him utterly entertaining.

Another character that Holden Caulfield is compared to, though to a lesser degree than Huck Finn, is Hamlet. Like Hamlet, as Charles Kegel wrote, Holden is a "sad, screwed-up guy" (54), bothered by words which only seem true, but are really quite phony. The honesty and sincerity that Holden cannot seem to find in others he tries to maintain within himself. Holden often tries to find a person, a man a much of the humor in The Catcher in the Rye comes from Holden's misconceptions about adulthood. An example is shown in Holden's relationship with an old schoolmate, Luce. Although the older man is more experienced than Holden, he is not as mature as Holden believes him to be. After an attempt at communication with Luce fails, Holden flees to Phoebe, the only person he completely trusts (Davis 318). S.N. Behrman also noted that the literalness and innocence of Holden's point of view in the face of complicated and deformed facts of life makes for the humor of the novel: haggles with unfriendly taxi-drivers, futile conversations with a prostitute, a hang over a hury, an intellectual discussion with a man a few years older than himself, and a completely hilarious date with Sally Hayes, an old girlfriend (74). The humor in his point of view, his hunger for stability and permanence, make him both a tragic, and touching character, capable of making dark activities on the surface seem hilarious and silly below.

When asked for a final comment on the character of Holden Caulfield, John Aldridge stated that the innocence of the main character was a combination of urban intelligence, juvenile contempt, and New Yorker sentimentalism. The only challenge it has left, therefore, is that of the genuine, the truly human, in a world which has lost both the means of

A quote by Charles Kegel seems to adequately sum up the problems of Holden Caulfield:

"Like Stephen Dedalus of James Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, Caulfield is in search of the word. His problem is one of communication: as a teenager, he simply cannot get through to the adult world which surrounds him; as a sensitive teenager, he cannot get through others of his own age" (54).

When critics consider the character of Holden Caulfield, many point to the novel's climactic scene, when Holden watches as Phoebe rides the Central Park carousel in the rain and his illusion of protecting the innocence of children is symbolically shattered. Critics regard this episode as Holden's transition into adulthood, for although the future is uncertain, he has learned something of his life's dead past have enabled him to accept maturity. James Bryant observed:

"The richness in the spirit of this novel, especially of the vision, the compassion, and the humor of the narrator reveal a psyche far healthier than that of the boy who endured the events of the narrative. Through the telling of the story, Holden has given shape to, and thus achieved control of, his troubled past" (qtd. in Davis 318).

S.N. Behrman noted in his critique of The Catcher in the Rye that the hero and heroine of the novel, Holden's dead brother Allie and Jane Gallagher, never appear in it, but they are always in Holden's mind, together with his sister, Phoebe. These three people constitute Holden's emotional frame of reference -- the reader knows them better than the other characters Holden encounters, who are generally, except for Phoebe, nonessential (71).

When asked for a final comment on the character of Holden Caulfield, John Aldridge stated that the innocence of the main character was a combination of urban intelligence, juvenile contempt, and New Yorker sentimentalism. The only challenge it has left, therefore, is that of the genuine, the truly human, in a world which has lost both the means of adventure and the means of love (130).

One of the most intriguing points in Holden's character, related to his prolonged inability to communicate, is Holden's intention to become a deaf-mute. So repulsed is he by the phoniness around him that he wishes not to communicate with anyone, and in a passage filled with personal insight he contemplates a retreat within himself:

"I figured that I could get a job at a filling station somewhere, putting gas and oil in people's cars. I didn't care what kind of job it was, though. Just so people didn't know me and I didn't know anybody. I thought that would do. I'd pretend I was one of those deaf-mutes. That way I wouldn't have to have any goddamn stupid useless conversation with anybody. If anybody wanted to tell me something, they'd have to write it on a piece of paper and shove it over to me. They'd get bored as hell doing that after a while, and then I'd be through with having conversations for the rest of my life. Everybody'd think I was just a poor deaf-mute bastard and they'd leave me alone . . . I'd cook all my own food, and later on, if I wanted to get married or something, I'd meet this beautiful girl that was also a deaf-mute and we'd get married. She'd come and live in my cabin with me, and if she wanted to say anything to me, she'd have to write it on a piece of paper, like everybody else" (Salinger 198).

Caulfield's inability to communicate with others is represented symbolically in the uncompleted phone calls and undelivered messages which appear throughout the novel.
JD Salinger has consulted his lawyers over an unauthorised "sequel" to his classic novel The Catcher in the Rye. But 58 years after the story about a disaffected teenager was published, why is it still so powerful to so many people? Holden Caulfield does not like a lot of what he encounters. Much is doepy, corny, lousy, crummy, vomity but most of all, phoney. Holden is surrounded by phonies, almost wherever he goes. It's almost enough to make him puke. For and against. This work has also been the magnum opus of J.D Salinger as a writer. Narrated in the perspective of Holden Caulfield, around the late 1940s or early 1950s, this novel tackles profound things about the psychological and identity crisis young people, represented by Holden, experienced back then as they journey through the reality of life. Set in post-World War II New York, the environment of the story plays a big role on the psychological being of the teenager Holden Caulfield, the protagonist of the story.

Works Cited