

OPEN ACCESS

RESEARCH ARTICLE**The Transition between Childhood and Adulthood in the Catcher in the Rye by Jerome David Salinger**Dr. Daouda LOUM^{1*} | Dr. Assane SARR²**Abstract**

The Catcher in the Rye is the poignant and humorous narrative of the adventure of a boy torn between childhood and adulthood. The autodiegetic narrator idealizes childhood as a symbol of authenticity, innocence, purity, sincerity, honesty, in sum, all the positive attributes diametrically opposed to the vices that corrupt the world of adults, including materialism, artificiality, moral degradation, hypocrisy, selfishness, lies, duplicity, violence, etc. Hence his fear to grow, that is, to be in captivity, therefore to lose his innocence. However, the protagonist finally understands that maturing is a natural process inherent in the human condition.

Key words: childhood, innocence, maturity, corruption, phobia about growing up, human condition..

1 | INTRODUCTION

Among the recurring motifs American literature abounds with, one can identify the conflicts between the individual and society, the individual and environment, the individual and himself, innocence and evil, childhood and adulthood. Works as diverse as Henry David Thoreau's *Walden; or Life in the Woods* (1854), Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), Henry James's *Daisy Miller* (1878), Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), Herman Melville's *Billy Budd, Sailor* (1948), Jerome David Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), and Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957) are all unified through their concern with those fundamental binary oppositions.

The Catcher in the Rye is a modern American novel of escape set against the backdrop of World War II, a catalytic event which proved to be a mixed blessing

for America. On the one hand, the war caused a financial boom, pulling America out of the financial consequences of the Great Depression in the 1930s; on the other hand, the young veterans who had experienced the atrocities of the war felt disillusioned and became subversive. They realized that America was a land of paradoxes, which caused them to lose their faith in the traditional values of the country and to yearn for a new existence. It was in that context that the "beats" emerged. Represented by Holden, they loathe affluence and conformism, and advocate individuality, jazz music, Zen Buddhism, and a controversial counterculture, as can also be seen in Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957).

As the autodiegetic narrator, Holden Caulfield, seventeen-year-old, tells his own story when he was sixteen-year-old from the hospital, sanitarium, or rest home where he is staying for a nervous collapse, using an interior monologue or stream-of-consciousness technique. The narrative revolves

¹ Maitre de Conférences de littérature américaine.

² Département d'Anglais, Université Cheikh Anta DIOP de Dakar, Sénégal.

Address correspondence to: Dr. Daouda LOUM, Maitre de Conférences de littérature américaine,

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around his inability to fit into society because he does not share its dominant conventions, beliefs, traditions, values, and rules as well as his urge to escape from modern society and civilization which he finds detrimental to man's innate innocence.

The purpose of this article is to demonstrate that in *The Catcher in the Rye*, the strong desire of the protagonist-narrator to escape from society is deeply rooted in his feelings of alienation. Holden thinks that the world of children is diametrically opposed to the modern world of adults in the sense that childhood symbolizes innocence, purity, spontaneity, and genuineness while adulthood stands for moral, social, and religious corruption as well as falseness, hypocrisy, materialism, selfishness, violence, etc. Holden's discomfort, concern about the future, and pressing quest for a new identity culminate in his fear to come of age, which reflects his idealism and immaturity because he cannot possibly help growing up and living in society.

2 | THE IDEALIZATION OF CHILDHOOD INNOCENCE:

Close reading of *The Catcher in the Rye* shows that the dominant and unifying theme is the protection of innocence which children are the embodiment of. As the title metaphorically suggests, Holden sets himself a Christlike mission: to protect children from any carelessness, misfortune, accident, suffering, injury, or death. The metaphor of "the catcher in the rye" indicates that as an adolescent totally lost between childhood and adulthood, Holden is fully aware of the fact that modern society is ruthless, corrupt, artificial, alienating, especially for immature and vulnerable children who know nothing of evil and wrong. His dream of catching kids to prevent them from falling from a dangerous cliff is an evidence of his natural innocence, pure conscience, and kind-heartedness. Holden's angelic character as a savior for the the powerless and the magnetic influence children exert on him are captured as follows:

Holden is sensitive, probably too sensitive for his own good, and he suffers from an almost uncontrollable urge to protect people he sees as vulnerable. He is attracted to the weak and the frail, and he "feels sorry" for losers of all kinds, even those

who cause him pain, discomfort, or trouble. But the main focus of Holden's protective instinct is children, whom he sees as symbols of goodness and innocence, and whom he would like to shield against corruption (Claro 1984: 7).

Figuratively, the steeply sloping cliff stands for modern society and civilization as the enemy of innocence. Holden's negative perception of the modern world of adults accounts for the abysmal gap between him and society and, consequently, his fear to grow up not to be contaminated by the social diseases he denounces. Holden thus faces an external conflict: he cannot live as he wishes because of determining antagonistic, repressive, iniquitous, and stifling forces.

Holden's fixation on childhood innocence is apparent in his relationships with society and with his immediate environment. It is noticeable that the only people whom he admires and respects are those who epitomize simplicity, authenticity, honesty, sincerity. The first person Holden feels closest to is Phoebe Caulfield, his ten-year-old younger sister, whom he represents as an ingénue, as the perfect personification of spotless childhood innocence. The autodiegetic narrator describes her as a pretty, good, innocent, intelligent, and articulate girl. He also figures her as someone who is wise and mature beyond her age, hence his calling her "Old" Phoebe and their being able to understand each other. Like Huck Finn, Twain's saintlike hero in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, who is both Jim's travelling companion and companion in misfortune, Phoebe is equally Holden's companion in confusion, distress, and suffering. Her moral and emotional support to him is extremely comforting and encouraging since he is a loner "constantly lonesome and in need of someone who will sympathize with his feelings of alienation" (Claro: 5).

The least one can assert is that Phoebe is of a sanguine disposition. Though she is younger than Holden, she stands towards him *inlocoparentis* as a mother, a friend, a confidante, an adviser, a role model, and a "catcher in the rye". She unselfishly and unconditionally provides Holden with love, light, relief, strength, and protection, which partly contributes to the refashioning of his mind, thoughts, behaviour, and worldview. Phoebe's emotional and psychological influence on her brother is all the more

powerful as they feel strong affection for each other. For instance, when Holden decides to head West where he hopes to live alone, she persuasively tries to make him understand that doing so, like Huck who “rekon[s] [he] got to light out for the Territory ahead of the rest because Aunt Sally she’s going to adopt [him] and civilize [him] and [he] can’t stand it” (Twain 1994: 220), is not a viable solution to his uneasiness and maladjustment. Obviously, Salinger lends his voice to his narrator because to escape from corruption, worries, and alienation, he withdrew from society to lead a happy life as a recluse, appropriating therefore poet Ovid’s motto: “Bene vixit, bene qui latuit” 2.

Having understood that going West or “on the road” on impulse does not offer any possibilities and neither is it a source of self-discovery, as with poet Walt Whitman, but is synonymous with wandering, confusion, lostness, aimlessness, hopelessness, homelessness, and danger, Phoebe resorts to a wide range of figures of speech, including irony, signifying, oblique communication, and to her powerful capacity of persuasion as well to homily beg Holden to go with him. The strategy turned out to be worth it because he finally agrees to change his mind and to stay. The story ends with his watching joyfully his sister riding a carousel in the rain with gay abandon, which symbolizes the innocence attached to childhood, contrary to the stress and worries adult life generates. Both the carousel scene and the rain represent beauty and innocence; they also suggest purification or catharsis in that they serve as an outlet for Holden to purge his impulses and to express his strongest emotions.

The atmosphere of stability, peace, sympathy, and carnival in Central Park, along with the zoo, the lake, the ducks, the merry-go-round, is quite different from the atmosphere in the changing, corroded, ugly, boring, insecure, rough, and unpredictable world of adults. It decisively contributes to reinforcing the affective relationships between Phoebe, Holden, and the other kids. A climate of total empathy prevails: children are relaxed, and fuse without any race or class prejudice, which bears evidence of their truthfulness, spontaneous purity, and dream-like behaviour. Here is how, through the use of repetition and hyperbole, the first-person narrator expresses his contentment while watching his sis-

ter playing as well as his dream to be “the catcher in the rye”: “I felt so damn happy all of a sudden, the way old Phoebe kept going around and around. I was damn near bawling, I felt so damn happy, if you want to know the truth” (*CR*, p. 213). The last fragment “if you want to know the truth” he rehearses all the narrative through reveals that contrary to adults, Holden attaches great value to frankness.

Another index of Phoebe’s innocence is the fact that she serves as a trustworthy link between Holden and their mother and father. She participates in her confused brother’s eventual homecoming by reducing the distance between him and their parents, reconciling them, and reconciling Holden with himself. Phoebe is not Holden’s sister only; she is too his supportive soulmate who strives to relieve him, help him recover his confidence, reconstruct himself, and have great ambitions. In addition to her wish to reconnect Holden to the family, she equally wishes to reconnect him to school for his success, social integration, and respectability. Such is the reason why, regarding highly her natural childhood innocence and her conformism, Phoebe invites Holden to behave as she does and as society expects all children to do.

For Holden, Phoebe and Allie really embody all the physical and moral qualities related to innocence. Associating the red hair of Phoebe and Allie with purity, he symbolically wears a red hunting hat to look like them and to be in sympathy with them. While attending a football match, Holden wears the hat to differentiate himself from the others he finds “phony”, that is, insincere, dishonest, superficial, fake, hypocritical, amoral, etc. When after his departure from home he meets his sister wearing the red hat he had left her with before leaving home, he becomes very nostalgic. His craving for the happy atmosphere at home with Phoebe and Allie becomes more intense. In fact, the red hat reminds him of the night when he sneaked in the house, danced a lot with Phoebe, and, going through a cathartic phase, cried for a long time before going to sleep at Mr Antolini’s. Holden’s innocence is particularly perceptible through his odd relationships with girls and women. Whenever the opportunity arises, he reveals his purity, immaturity, and lack of experience, through his avoiding to have sexual relationships. Out of a sense of decency, he even uses a meaningless word “crummy” instead of sexual. Holden has a high opin-

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ion of his ex-girlfriend, Jane Gallagher; he conceives of her as a new-born babe. He confesses that he liked to play with her and to kiss her, but not on the mouth, which is suggestive of their innocence. As “the catcher of the rye”, that is, a Messiah, Holden commits himself to protect Jane from the mischievousness of men. For example, he is not on good terms with Ward Stradlater, his roommate at Pencey, not fundamentally because he is jealous, but because he is aware of the fact that the latter is a talented seducer who is going to make Jane lose her immaculate innocence and, worse, make her fall into the perverse adult world. On this point, a parallel can be drawn between Holden and Huck, who has jeopardized his life, reputation, and identity to make Jim, a runaway slave, recover his freedom and dignity. For his inborn goodness and spirit of self-sacrifice, Huck is called the “American Adam”.

Holden may also be called so for the same human qualities.

Also noteworthy, Holden displays his pure innocence through his feelings toward people and animals. A case in point is his compassion towards the parents at Elkton Hills whose lack of smartness causes the headmaster to look them down. Holden even extends his Messianic empathy to animals, caring much about the ducks near the lagoon close to Central Park. The following existential questions he asks himself highlight his innocence, his humanism, and his beautiful though romantic dream of being a “catcher in the rye”. He is “wondering where the ducks went when the lagoon got all icy and frozen over” (*C R*, p. 13). He also “wondered if some guy came in a truck and took them away to a zoo or something”, or “if they just flew away (p. 13). Holden’s compassion and quest for agency are ironical since he cares much about other people and even animals but does not want others, specially his parents and teachers, to care about him. He wants to act upon people and his environment but does not want to be acted upon.

In the same vein, places have symbolic value: some of them can be associated with innocence, wholeness, merrymaking, and carefreeness. Central Park, for instance, is the place where Holden really feels happy the most because of the luxuriant greenery, the pure air, the liberty, the independence, the absence of stress and worries. Like Walden Pond in Henry

David Thoreau’s *Walden; or Life in the Woods* where the author has withdrawn and the “river god”, that is, the Mississippi in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Central Park is a microcosm of uncorrupted, untainted nature; it is innocent, not damaged, not soiled by civilized man: “In a way the park is a metaphor for the open spaces to which Holden dreams of running away” (Tooker 2003: 11).

In the same way, the museums stand for truth, innocence, purity, sincerity, authenticity, stability, eternity. They are evocative of the past which, in turn, is reminiscent of the moments life was happy at home before the death of Allie, whom the autodiegetic narrator thinks of as perfect like Phoebe. Holden wishes time, things, and childhood were as static, stagnant, and uncorrupted as museums for him to keep his innocence forever. Undeniably, his happy childhood memories have influenced him to return home.

On the whole, Holden’s representation of childhood innocence is no surprise since it corroborates critic Joseph Claro’s statement according to which “Salinger often said that children are the best people he knows” (Claro 1984: 3), because they “are examples of a certain wise innocence which [adults] seem to have lost” (Kellman 2007: 2248), as illustrated by Phoebe and Allie in *The Catcher in the Rye* as well as Sybil in “A Perfect Day for Bananafish” or Esmé in “For Esmé”. As Salinger’s narrative consciousness, Holden portrays society and civilization as a plague.

3 | THE DEMONIZATION OF ADULTHOOD:

The Catcher in the Rye is a novel about distinct but logically interwoven external and internal conflicts which reflect themselves through Holden’s instinctive reactions to the values of modern society, the latter term represented by oppressive adults, civilization, institutions, and environment. Imagining himself as a prey of society, he turns into a hunter ready to kill harmful people, hence the significance of the red hunting cap he calls a “people shooting hat”.

For the sake of mimesis or representation of reality, Salinger gets into the skin of his central character, and makes him tell the story in a way that only a child can. That is the reason why the novel is a devastating denunciation of the society in which both the author and the raconteur live. Also, the author

explores the split between the values the protagonist believes in and the established values of society, which sets its satirical tone. As a result of his uneasiness in the complex, erratic, unstable, inconsistent, fake, and corrupt modern society represented by adults and of his wish to preserve his liberty, independence, and self, the autodiegetic narrator drifts from one unfamiliar place to another and from one unfamiliar social milieu to another.

It is worth precisising that not only does adulthood designate the state of having grown to full size and strength but, more significantly, the state of being intellectually and emotionally mature. In legal terms, adulthood corresponds to the period when one is old enough to marry, to vote, and to be accountable for one's actions. By choosing as a narrator-agent a seventeen-year-old adolescent who is growing from childhood - the time of life he cherishes most - to maturity - the one he fears most - Salinger blatantly contrasts the two stages so as to make an objective evaluation of each. Torn between the two, Holden is going through a deciding period of transition. However, his propensity for childhood is no secret. That is the reason why he tells the story from the vantage point of a child, and often acts as a child. His premature immersion in the hateful adult life drives him to escape into the stable and inviolable past, to enjoy its flavor, hence his flashbacks, notably his "lost forever or the 'might have been'" (Markow-Totevy 1969: 104) happy childhood days with Allie. For instance, when Holden sees his sister wearing the red hat he has left her with, he becomes very nostalgic. His childhood memories cause him to feel deep in his heart that he would rather remain a child not to be corrupted by society and civilization.

Like Prometheus and Huck, both Salinger and Holden are archetypal figures of defiance against tyrannical modern society and civilisation. They strongly believe that they are not made for the values those institutions stand for. Their inability to comply with society and with its generally accepted conventions, standards, and usages can be explained by the fact that for them they are "phony". Clearly, Holden deplores the greed, jealousy, superficiality, hypocrisy, duplicity, and lies that corrupt society and imperil his innocence, liberty, and independence.

As a rebel who speaks in the vernacular of a teenager in the 1950s, the narrator uses loaded language, that

is, words with strong negative connotations with a view to capturing the rotten society he lives in, differentiating himself from adults, adding an emotional charge to persuasion, influencing attitudes, and shaping opinions. He also resorts to the technique of circular reasoning which consists in proving a statement by repeating it with different words. Such is the case when, talking about what he dislikes most, he uses his passe partout words like "phony", "lousy", "damn", "bastard", "moron", "goddam", "hell", "crumby", "corny", etc. Here is an insightful explanation of the significance of the slangy term "phony" and the narrator's inclination to overuse it:

"Phony" is Holden Caulfield's favorite epithet for any kind of behavior that strikes him as insincere (...), and phoniness appears to Holden as one of the chief evils of the world. Thus the attraction children have for Holden and other Salinger spokesmen: They are rarely, if ever, "phony". Sincerity, honesty, and innocence are the features of the ideal state to which Salinger's characters aspire and whose absence, scarcity, or remoteness causes them such pain (Kellman: 2248).

To satisfy a need for verisimilitude, Holden naturally uses coarse language to visualize the ugliness of the world around him, particularly the thirst for wealth, fame, and glory as well as the selfishness, perversion, constraints, futilities, violence, wickedness, shallowness, falsehood, etc. Eccentric language enables the autodiegetic narrator, in search of a self and a place to fit into life, to question and challenge the sociocultural order. Through his idiosyncratic and subversive attitude and language, he negatively describes, judges, and labels some people and places to express his dissatisfaction with society and its institutions. Giving his point of view about Pencey, for instance, he hammers out that "Pencey [is] full of crooks" (*CR*, p. 4). And talking about Edmont Hotel, he states with the same courage in his convictions: "I didn't know that the goddam hotel was full of perverts and morons" (p. 61). Also, carrying on his diatribe against everything around him, he confesses: "I like Jesus and all, but I don't care too much for most of the other stuff in the Bible. They annoy the hell out of me" (p. 99).

Equally true, Holden does not handle his acquaintances with gloves on because they have absorbed the fake values of adults that make him feel bad.

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Sally Hayes, for instance, his former girlfriend, is “phony”, shallow, and insensitive to his problems, and so is Ward Stradlater his roommate. The latter is particularly dangerous since he is a girl hunter. Contrary to Holden “the catcher in the rye, he lives by false values, and takes advantage of others, specially girls who are attracted to him by his handsomeness. As for Robert Ackley, his next-door roommate, he is constantly nasty and offensive too. In an acrimonious tone and with crude words Holden hurls abuses on them to denounce their phoniness. On many pages and sometimes on the same, he calls Stradlater names: “sonuvabitch” (*C R*, p. 23, 24) or “a dirty stupid sonuvabitch of a moron” (p. 44).

Holden’s aversion for the adult world leads him to be prejudiced. His opinions often consists of exaggerations, strongly worded assertions, and hasty conclusions. He instinctively establishes binary oppositions between childhood and adulthood, innocence and corruption, the individual and society, truth and artificiality, seeming to ignore that it takes all sorts to make a world. The narrator’s Manichean, reductive, simplistic, and childish view of the world justifies his scathing satire against everything around him. As Salinger’s spokesman, he maintains that adults are the symbol of corruption not only because of their obsession with material possessions, reputation, and respectability but also their aversion for the truth. Holden keeps repeating in an incantatory tone “If YOU REALLY want to hear the truth” to show that adults are neither sincere nor trustworthy.

The paradox is that Salinger and Holden are not materialistic: the former chose to live the life of a hermit not to be consumed by fame, and the latter has not fairly taken advantage of his parents’ privileged social status. Contrary to both, adults are obsessed with money since they believe that it is the measure of success, reputation, dignity, and well-being, as is the substance of the American Dream. The headmaster of Elkton School is a patent illustration: he selectively treats with particular care successful-looking parents while neglecting those who are not or do not look rich. Of course, such an attitude is frustrating and unacceptable coming from an educator and a manager supposed to be considerate towards everybody, give equal opportunities to all the learners, regardless of origin, race, social status, or belief. In other terms, the headmaster has failed his mission

because he is expected to be the real “catcher in the rye” who helps the needy realize their dreams.

Indignantly, Holden equally levels harsh accusations at the headmaster of the prestigious Pencey Prep school. He pictures him as the incarnation of a “phony slob” because he is an expert not at educating but at cheating, double dealing, and signifying: what he shows parents is different from what he is, thinks, and does. Holden’s relationships with other adults also reveal that he is anxious to preserve his innocence. He suspects Carl Luce of being a homosexual on the ground that he often holds discussions on sex with students. Better safe than sorry: Holden equally suspects Mr. Antoloni, who means him nothing but good of being a homosexual when he “woke up and found him patting him on the head and all” (*C R*, p. 194).

Still making an unaccommodating diagnosis of his society through the lens of a child, Holden labels D. B. as an abnormally money-minded person. He cannot possibly stand his brother, an artist, using his talent not to write beautiful short stories about children as he used to do but to work in Hollywood as a scriptwriter to make fortune. Like a caricaturist, Holden calls his brother a prostitute because of his inclination towards material possessions, good life, and fame: “Now he is in Hollywood, D. B., being a prostitute. If there’s one thing I hate, it’s the movies. Don’t even mention them to me” (*C R*, p. 2). The metaphor of the prostitute is heavily loaded with meaning as it suggests that his brother has no principles. Like the prostitute who offers herself/himself for sexual intercourses to earn money, D. B. has sold his soul, putting to unworthy uses his energies and abilities for wealth. Proof of Holden’s integrity is that he neither envy his successful brother nor profit by his money because he thinks that it is ill-gotten. Through D. B., Hollywood, and movies, Holden insightfully castigates his corrupt society, along with the damned capitalist system which is altogether the root of all the forms of debasing transformations in the modern world.

Serving as a foil to innocent, immature, and naïve children, Maurice, Carl Luce, and Sunny epitomize too some of the most spiteful aspects of adulthood, including sexual experience, falsehood, and moral degradation. One unfortunate occurrence: when Holden refuses to pay a prostitute the full amount of

money she has charged him for sexual intercourses he has not had with her indeed, Maurice, the pimp impetuously assaults him.

Holden's emotional reaction to his environment equally illustrates that he is at odds with older people and over everything around him. Unlike Central Park which is suggestive of childhood, innocence, happiness, and nostalgia, New York and New Yorkers symbolize all the vices he cannot stand: phoniness, artificiality, perversion, sex-addiction, corruption, selfishness, etc. Clubs, bars, streets are swarming with phonies, "jerks", and "bastards" (p. 85). As a teenager who is not familiar with the city, life in New York is awfully wild and frightening. There, Holden feels insecure, lonesome, confused, depressed, skeptical, and contemptuous.

The autodiegetic narrator's kneejerk reactions to life at Pencey also reveals that the school is a source of pressure, discomfort, and disillusionment. As a society in miniature and the embodiment of modern civilization, school in general and Pencey in particular, with its dormitories, strict rules, administration, teachers, and students impede his liberty and independence. At Pencey, Holden cannot see the values of innocence, purity, honesty, and sincerity which are the apple of his eye. Contrary to his expectations, he regretfully discovers that the school is full of phonies. There, Holden feels bored and insecure, which has precipitated his escape. In fact, after his expensive camel's hair coat and fur-lined gloves have been stolen, he overstates that Pencey is full of crooks. Then, he adds that "the more expensive a school is, the more crooks it has" (*CR*, p. 4). That generalization proves, on the one hand, that school has failed to meet its mission which is not only to provide knowledge and savoir-faire but also to endow learners with every virtue, particularly honesty and good manners; on the other hand it demonstrates that money cannot buy honesty and discipline because though their parents are blessed with riches, some children misbehave.

Holden's rebellion and ostracism are therefore nothing but the result of his bitter experiences during his immersion in the corrupt world of adults, hence his fear to come out of childhood and adolescence into adulthood.

4 | THE MORBID PHOBIA OF MATURITY:

In *The Catcher in the Rye*, the concern is the same: Salinger is actuated by the urge to remarkably contrast childhood innocence to the dissipation of adult life. The novel is rich in imagery reflecting the difficulties an innocent character with mixed feelings about childhood and adulthood encounters in a society in which he is an outsider. His total rejection of social values as well as his incapacity to communicate with people not only account for his longing for an idealistic, frozen, unchanging, and predictable world of his own but also for his fear to grow up. The nearness or possibility of danger the world of adults is associated with leads to his inclination to escape into the past, notably into the cosy realm of childhood. However, Salinger is no fool and the narratee either. It is not to give away a secret to affirm that the author makes his main character fantasize about childhood just to better magnify the perils inherent in life in a materialistic society. Euphemistically, both Salinger and Holden have no doubt that to be a human being implies the acceptance of the human condition.

Holden's breakdown stems from various external conflicts: his difficulties into building strong relationships with his schoolmates and with adults, including his parents and teachers; his negative perception of the values of society; his bad feelings about his environment, notably the city, the bars, the hotels, etc. In shorter terms, Holden's uncommunicability is the best expression of the opposition between childhood and adulthood. That situation gives birth to a complex psychological problem: his morbid phobia about growing up, which generates an internal conflict - his struggle with himself - and an external conflict - his struggle with human nature. Obviously, as an adolescent, Holden cannot refuse to submit to the process of maturing because it is part and parcel of human nature and of "the law of life", to allude to Jack London in *To Build a Fire and Other Stories* (1902). His struggle is therefore surrealist and vain; it denotes that he is not as mature as he pretends to be because he overlooks the fact that the inescapable cycle of life includes birth, growth, becoming old, and death.

Holden's ill-disposition to mature drives him to overidealize Allie. He sees him as an icon of perfection whom he talks to when he is overwhelmed

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by loneliness, stress, trouble, despair, weakness, and danger. The narrator's phobia about maturity is all the more ironical since he well realizes that to live is to grow up and to be influenced one way or another by society. Through Allie's death, the reader is given to understand that only death can prevent an individual from being determined by stronger forces. He, Phoebe, and all children are doomed to go through the "rite of passage" of growing up: "Unlike Phoebe, Allie's personality is frozen in memory, and he'll never face the corruption of growing up" (Claro, p. 8). But Holden prefers life to death, which marks his inevitable transition from childhood to adulthood, and establishes *The Catcher in the Rye* as a Bildungsroman.

The reference to the individual as a social being who cannot fully control his/her destiny validates Rousseau's opinion according to which man is neither good nor bad; everything is a question of experience. Clearly then, Holden's ill-disposition to mature is only rooted in his being conscious that to do so is to fall flat into the inhospitable world of adults, therefore to lose his innocence. To associate Holden, Phoebe, and Allie with purity and virginity is, metaphorically put, to consider their minds as blank pages or *tabula rasa* on which society, heredity, environment, and circumstances have not yet written whatever they like against their will.

Descartes learnedly provides an insightful explanation about why Holden is afraid of coming of age. In his *Discours de la méthode* (1637), he postulates that to grow older is to definitely break with childhood, along with its privileges as well as its ways of thinking and behaving. Holden's apprehensions are all the more grounded psychologically and emotionally since such a transformation involves a radical change which, in turn, suggests impermanence, uncertainty, disappearance, a new life, new constraints, etc. Descartes posits that it is not easy to grow up because to do so amounts to getting rid of most of the habitus one acquired during childhood, that is, the period when one is not mature yet to use one's reason. From that perspective, to grow up physically, to shoot up really quickly does not mean to grow up; to grow up indeed is to gain intellectual and emotional maturity, therefore to cease being childish, judgemental, and idealistic; to grow up also implies to stop finding refuge in a lost forever past

and in lost forever childhood. Many occurrences, allusions, and signs prove that despite his opposition to adult life, Holden, who has become more realistic, understands that he is maturing, and he is doomed to face life as it is, not as he would like it to be. Maturity teaches him that life is a difficult but inescapable odyssey.

Surely, Holden's phobia about maturity results from the fact that he does not want his life to be a lie, hence his vain struggle not to be conventional, not to resemble the people he has always criticized. He is disinclined to mature because to do so is to conform to the social order and to become more responsible, that is, to assume duties as a parent, a teacher, an educator, an adviser, in short, to occupy the place of the people he finds fault with. Holden is also of the opinion that to become mature is to espouse whether he likes it or not most the imperfections he has always disparaged.

Holden's transition from childhood to maturity is manifest through the carousel scene. He invests the merry-go-round with a double meaning: on the one hand, it symbolizes youth, beauty, and innocence, but the fact that he does not participate in the play like Phoebe shows that he no longer sees himself as a child but rather as an adult; on the other hand, the carousel represents danger because you can fall down and hurt yourself while trying to grab the gold ring. Yet, Holden thinks that children have to take the risk because it is part of their process of gaining maturity. For him, children cannot keep being protected, looked at fondly, and mollycoddled. His realizing that rushing into adulthood is as dangerous as embracing childhood for quite a long time signals that he accepts the need and inevitability for humans to grow up. In the last but one chapter of the novel, he states that "the thing with kids is, if they want to grab for the gold ring, you have to let them do it, and not say anything. If they fall off, they fall off, but it's bad if you say anything to them" (p. 211). The narrator's concession means that he is "taking an initial step toward maturity" (Baldwin 2000: 74), admitting that "in life, too, it is natural for young people to take a risk and try for something beyond what they have" (p. 74).

Significantly enough, Holden recognizes that he is no longer a child despite his childish and childlike manners. He ironically confesses early in the open-

ing chapter that at sixteen he acted like a child and keeps acting so though he is seventeen. One can infer thus that he is signifying; he refuses to grow up by going backwards and wishing time were stuck, frozen, and unchanging for him to keep his natural innocence.

Quite certainly, Holden's phobia about growing older stems from his realizing that adults are insensitive, careless. The scene he has witnessed, and which has given the novel its title is meaningful: observing a family returning home from church, a six-year-old boy walking dangerously next to the curb while cars are zooming along and brakes screeching all over the place, Holden is surprised that neither his father nor his mother pay attention to him, being may be lost in thought or worried with anxiety, family problems, financial troubles, etc. The odd attitude of the parents demonstrate that when you grow up you gradually lose your innocence. That is the reason why Holden compares the world of adults to a dangerous "crazy cliff" which children should be protected from. It is significant that the only adults Holden has regard for are the two nuns he has met on their way to teach school because they are spiritually equipped to preserve their innocence, to remain uncorrupted and unstained. In fact, through the references to the religious women, Salinger takes it for granted that adults can only find salvation in transcendence, namely in Zen Buddhism "which takes us to an absolute realm wherein there are no antitheses of any sort" (Yasuhiro 2002: 320).

5 | CONCLUSION:

The catcher in the Rye is a compendium of different forms of struggle: childhood or innocence versus adulthood or evil, the individual versus society, the individual versus the environment, the individual versus human nature, and the individual versus himself. All those conflicts coalesce and cause the first-person narrator to rebel against the conventional values and the social order he finds fake, worn-out, and complacent. Rejecting all the values concomitant to adulthood and glorifying childhood, he moves from one place to another, from one social milieu to another in an attempt to survive the harsh realities of life as well as to preserve his personality and world-

view.

Through his idealization of childhood, Salinger's autodiegetic narrator, whose innocence is injured, yearns for such lost values as honesty, sincerity, purity, love, enlightenment, and understanding in a modern world teeming with execrable social and moral diseases like falseness, superficiality, estrangement, repression, loneliness, alienation, anxiety, evil, and pain. As a consequence, he tries to escape in his childhood memories while being inhabited by the morbid fear of growing up.

However, the novel ends with a tinge of realism and optimism. Holden, who has grown in wisdom, realizes that maturing is a process inherent in human nature and in the law and cycle of life. He fully understands that nothing lasts forever, and that growing up is a natural phenomenon implying the unconditional acceptance of the human condition and of life in society, no matter how corrupt the latter may be, which does not discard the possibility to build one's self and to struggle to bring reforms. Holden's new state of mind justifies his revision of his worldview and disposition to fully embrace adulthood life in the closing chapter.

Notes:

[noitemsep,nolistsep,topsep=5pt]Salinger J. D. Salinger. 1951. *The Catcher in the Rye*. New York: Little, Brown and Company.

In-text quotations from the novel will be followed by *CR* and page numbers between parentheses.

2. "bene vixit, bene qui latuit" : " il a bien vécu, celui qui a vécu caché" .

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