



# The Trauma of Alienation in J. D. Salinger's, *The Catcher in the Rye*

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Alienation is a sense of isolation from people or society, which can occur for different reasons, especially among teenagers. These complexities affect them when they grow up. Adolescents alienate themselves from their surroundings to feel independency accompanied by the feeling that they are unfit for their world or they find it is difficult for them to explain what they want or feel. They think that their ideas are hard for others to understand, so they seek to alienate or isolate themselves from others. They have rebellious spirits against social conventions, politics, and religion, to the extent that this rebellious tendency, sometimes, may become violent. As a result, they will hunker down and construct their own world away from the world of being grown up. The paper portrays Salinger's novel, *The Catcher in the Rye*, where Holden Caulfield, the protagonist, is a teenager who perceives the world as a hostile place, where he has no connection or relation with society or even with his family. His actions and behaviours show that he is an adolescent who expresses his deepest apprehensions and cynicism in a world he feels he is a stranger and is unfit to live in. He tends to make critical decisions in certain situations, but he ponders over taking decisive actions and he feels powerless because of specific obstacles, including family, conventions, and traditions. Holden distances himself from others, and his relationships are limited to his sister, Phoebe, whom he adores and represents the only world where he feels secure. The motives of Holden's behaviour are numerous, but one of them is the sense of the child that lives in the depth of his psyche. He wants to be the defender of the child's innocence and childhood because he thinks that the world of children is pure and uncorrupted, and is removed from social fabricated norms and codes. In the end of the novel, part of Holden's cure is his realisation that maturity means to bear responsibility of indulging the world of the grown up and accept the shallowness of the disorganised world. Holden is not a superhero who can eliminate all ambiguities and deterioration in the world. However, he can share the world and be part of his community, which he refuses before this stage. The lesson he receives in the last part of the novel is that life is a kind of riddle,

which can be decoded and understood only when Holden is able to learn from his mistakes and accepts others with love.

**Key words:** *Trauma, Alienation, Loneliness, Corruption, Rye.*

## Introduction

There is no doubt that literature is the mirror of life, which reflects all human themes and topics. Literature, as with other sciences, develops and changes to cope with the fluctuations of time. The first step here is to introduce and define certain concepts that are borrowed from other sciences, especially psychology, to provide a broader understanding of the paper. The first is the term ‘trauma’. It has a Latin origin from the word ‘trauma’, which is taken from the Greek word ‘Traumatikos’. It means a wound of the body that is serious, but it is not limited to only physical wounds, as it can refer to any major emotional wound that leads to psychological harm or an incident, which in turn leads to observable pain or it is an emotional response to a terrible event that describes events that cause suffering, sorrow, and agony, and overcomes the ability of an individual to bear or to handle (Abubakar & Abubakar, 2017).

The other concept that is encompassed in this paper is ‘alienation’, which means the feelings of separation and distancing of the individual from people or the self. It is referred to in certain sciences, such as philosophy, the social sciences, and literature, that are the essential point of contemporary life. The prevalent reference of the concept is derived from the German philosopher, Hegel. Hegel posits that “alienation is the inevitable condition arising from the gap between human consciousness and the natural world, between the inner world and the outer world” (Edward Quinn, 2006).

J. D. Salinger’s (1919–2010), *The Catcher in the Rye* (1945–1946), is referred to as a psychological work that depends entirely upon the interpretation of Holden, who discloses incidents that are later explained by the hero. Moreover, the readers will grasp the results of these actions on Holden’s emotive and mental situation. The novel, which is told in a series of episodes, has taken flashbacks as a major means, in addition to an unlimited number of digressions that enrich the details of the work. The function of the digressions is to provide a profound understanding of the different events and characters who encounter Holden throughout the novel, and how he reacts to them. The author employs digressions to give detailed descriptions about the protagonist, and the way he perceives these details. The entire narration of the novel occurs within a period of four days. During this period, Holden has made his choice to quit school at Pencey Prep before the declaration of his official dismissal. After this incident, he decides to hang around for a few days in New York and begins his odyssey by himself. Subsequently, he must manage how to encounter his family with this disturbing news after finally returning home. Eventually, when he returns home, he suffers an



emotional and psychological breakdown, which leads him to settle in a psychiatric institution to rest and to be treated (Harold Bloom, 2007).

The sense of alienation and disaffection fills all aspects of Holden's life, especially his relations with his parents and sister, and his opinions towards feelings as love, and relations as marriage or towards systematised religious conviction. This sense of estrangement inflicts Holden from the beginning of the novel; he feels himself alienated from his parents, society, and the world. In the city, Holden's family is wealthy, so he is not suffering from the material, but he is distressed and ashamed by his school disappointments. Though he is detached from all his family members, he loves his younger sister, Phoebe, whom he appreciates greatly, and he considers her as a peaceful resort. As for his older brother D. B., he thinks that he is 'sold out' when he goes to Hollywood to present his movie scripts for producers, and he is indirectly significant to his family for moving him around from one "phony" school to another: "What I have to do, I have to catch everybody if they start to go over the cliff...That's all I'd do all day. I'd just be the catcher in the rye and all. I know it's crazy, but that's the only thing I'd really like to be" (Harold Bloom, 2009). Holden is fighting with all his power to reserve the innocence of childhood. He is unable to perceive or understand and he fails to accept that being mature means the loss of that innocence. He is on the path that leads to that world, where there is no friend or family to stop or hold him from falling (J. D. Salinger, 1991).

Holden's understanding of the deceptive and fruitless attempt that causes his personal life to become totally distinct, and the irrationality of attempting to thwart the loss or distortion of innocence, does not halt him to continue attempting to eliminate the vulgarities he encounters himself, as referred to by the critic, Ihab Hassan, who stated that:

"The Catcher in The Rye inevitably stands out as Salinger's only novel to date. As a 'Neo picaresque' the book shows itself to be concerned far less with the education or imitation of an adolescent than with a dramatic exposure of the manner in which ideals are denied accuse to our lives and of the modes which mendacity assumes in our urban culture. The moving, even stabbling qualities of the novel derive, even to some extent, from Salinger's refusal to adopt a satirical stance. The work, instead, confirms the saving grace of vulnerability, its protest, debunking and indictments presuppose a willing responsiveness on the part of its hero" (Sarah Graham, 2007).

The novel's readers may interpret Holden's feelings of "disappearing" and his dependence on the support of his deceased brother as an indication of developing irrationality rather than an imaginative protection of himself. Throughout the novel, several times Holden refers to himself and his conduct as "crazy" and "madman stuff". However, this madness is not only



the result of Holden's estrangement and alienation from his society, but it is also the essence of that dilemma of alienation:

"I'd start hitchhiking my way out West. . . . I'd be somewhere out West where it was very pretty and sunny and where nobody'd know me and I'd get a job. I figured 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 what I'd do was, I'd pretend I was one of those deaf-mutes. That way I wouldn't have to have any goddam stupid useless conversations with anybody" (*The Catcher in the Rye*, 106).

Holden's only foreseen alternative is to "reappear" and acquire popularity in the community, but in completely different conditions. He sees himself as part of society physically, but mentally he is outside it. This image highlights the passivity of contemporary institutes and the absence of meaning in the modern languages. Moreover, this situation is clearly identified through his continuous images of sketches and vulgarities scratched on the hard, external surfaces. The sense of loneliness and estrangement creates (Harold Bloom, 2008) "the whole trouble. You can't ever find a place that's nice and peaceful, because there isn't any" (*The Catcher in the Rye*, 110).

The trauma of Holden is not due to a physical or mental defect, but it is a consequence of the familial disintegration, the social structure, and the sense of estrangement in the battle of life. The clashing thinking of establishing himself as an independent entity, and his critical age, help to develop that agonised sense of trauma, which make him look at life as being absurd and meaningless. Holden is understanding death personally; his obsession with death is the key reason for his estrangement and alienation from the "phonies," which represents the first step towards his journey to discover his true self. He perceives the world around him as a source of menace for him and death is loitering in every place. Throughout the novel, Holden has seen the shallowness of man's values and ideals, and therefore he continued to be reproachful of them as hypocrites (Sarah Graham, 2007):

"As soon as I got my breath back I ran across Route 204. It was icy as hell and I damn near fell down. I don't even know what I was running for--I guess I just felt like it. After I got across the road, I felt like I was sort of disappearing. It was that kind of a crazy afternoon, terrifically cold, and no sun out or anything, and you felt like you were disappearing every time you crossed a road" (*The Catcher in the Rye*, 3).

To fill the gap between Holden and the community, he introduces his personal world as a sacrifice to attempt the world he dismisses. In the midst of this world of untrue morals, standards, false divinities, and "phonies," Holden, the eccentric protagonist, discovers that the sense of taste is not sufficient. He carries the spirit of a rebel, so he rises against the world



and life of adults that misfit his ambitions. However, that kind of uprising is enveloped in the form of escapism from this life. He himself totally rejects the idea of being an adult and thinks that it is better for him to maintain his innocence than be corrupted by the adult world (Zekkour Mohammed, 2016).

Holden thinks that he has a rebellious spirit and mind, but when we see his actions, we do not believe there is a match between actions and words. Most of time, he has that transparent observation of his surrounding, and he is able to pinpoint deceptive phonies and dishonesty everywhere. The arguments he makes about different mistaken aspects in society, might make him an ideal person who has the courage to fight the dishonesty of his world. However, at the same time he is not that man who has the guts to cope himself with his own ideals. Even the name of Holden is an important reference for the person he carries. The word 'caul' refers to the tissue that envelops the foetus body, especially the head when the woman gives birth. Therefore, the 'caul' part of his name could denote an inability to see clearly the childhood or the child's failure to comprehend the complication of the grown-up world. Another reading for his name could be viewed as 'Hold-on Caul-field', which means that he wants to grasp everything he observes in similar way to his innocence, and that is truly his inability to perceive the actual real world (R. Thiruvalluvan, 2007).

Holden makes use of his alienation in the sense that he employs it as his way of protecting himself. Sometimes, we judge him according to his conduct, such as wearing the red hat for hunting, which refers to his individuality and independence. He is convinced that isolating people would be an evidence for him and others that he has a privilege over others in the community (Sparknotes editors, 2020). Therefore, he secluded himself from conversing or communicating with them. The fact remains that communications with the community members typically causes confusion which devastates him, and the sceptical feeling of supremacy offers him a kind of self-protection. Hence, Holden's alienation becomes the cause of his fragile tranquillity in his turmoiled life. At the same time, we can deduce, as observers of Holden's conduct and reactions, that his alienation is also the reason of the greater part of his agony. He does not reveal his own passions in a direct way, or he tries to find out where his dilemmas come from or is even unable to identify why he encounters such troubles. His situation is not easy to analyse because we know that he is badly in need of interaction within society to acquire stability and love, but his superiority and the wall he has built, which is full of resentment, thwarts him from searching for such contact. The consequence of alienation is that it becomes his motivation to be strong, and at the same time, it also causes him difficulties and troubles. For instance, his solitude stimulates him to have a date with Sally Hayes, but also the same isolation motivates him to offend her and push her away. In the same vein, he yearns for a purposeful interaction when he meets Jane Gallagher. Nonetheless, he is very hesitant to take a real step further to interact with or at least, call her.



He believes in his alienation more than his belief in his religion, but it fails and disappoints him (Lingdi Chen, 2005).

Holden has manifested several times his despair, disbelief, and distrust in the world of adults. This experience is an outcome of his feelings of loss and rejection of all social conventions:

“Oh. . . well, about Life being a game and all. And how you should play it according to the rules. He was pretty nice about it. I mean he didn't hit the ceiling or anything. He just kept talking about Life being a game and all. You know.” “Life is a game, boy. Life is a game that one plays according to the rules.” “Yes, sir. I know it is. I know it.” “Game, my ass. Some game. If you get on the side where all the hot-shots are, then it's a game, all right—I'll admit that. But if you get on the other side, where there aren't any hot-shots, then what's a game about it? Nothing. No game” (*The Catcher in the Rye*, 5).

The conversation shows the fragile belief of Holden in everything around him. His former teacher is attempting to explain to him the importance of assuming everyone's role in life, reminding him about his failures at the school. This conversation concisely highlights the important traits of Holden's personality. Even if he does not speak, his silence speaks louder than his words, especially when we interpret his silence as hatred for grownups. This was manifested through his silence mocking and swearing at Spencer, which he conceals under his nodding, in a deep shout of agony. The feeling that the world is against him makes him evidently recognise that he is on one side and others are on the “other side” of the game. This kind of equation increases his sense of loneliness and victimisation. In this stage of the novel, the feeling of loss and bitterness that Holden carries, causes him to be queer and unidentifiable in certain conditions where he cannot find a reasonable justification for his conduct, especially when he remembers that he is a member of a reputed New York family. Yet, as the novel develops, the readers can observe that Holden has acquired and constructed some sort of sceptical psychological immunity around him to defend himself from the peculiarities of his surroundings (Kenneth Slawenski, 2010).

The protagonist fails to establish strong and healthy relationships with people surrounding him. The failure is because of his sense of superiority or being different from them. This false feeling expands the gap and constructs a veil between him and others. The seclusion he makes for himself helps to alienate him from the whole of social life. We can see throughout the novel that he interacts with many people, but at the same time, he likes isolation and being alone. Moreover, even in these relationships, for him, they are shallow and unauthentic. Holden's mind is empty of any purpose or destination, where he spends his last hours in the school roaming aimlessly (Harold Bloom, 2009).



Holden may find himself in a quest for an unknown thing, but it can be identified through different points. First, his search can be interpreted as a kind of a quest to reserve his innocence, which is about to disappear. That is, the childhood innocence, the unblemished one of a self-terrified at corruption in the normal and unavoidable associations of adult life. Second, the search is also a quest for the idealism of non-human love, which will be subject to the expectations in his mind. It is a kind of relationship that is so sensitive and fragile, and is adjusted with all channels of communication that will continue to be accessible to receive all forms of communication, and in any language. Holden's deepest search is in his quest for individuality and identity, more precisely for the self:

“. . . 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. That's all I'd do all day. I'd just be the catcher in the rye and all" (*The Catcher in the Rye*, 93).

It is a direct reference to the title of the novel, in which Holden talks with Phoebe, his sister, about his future ambitions in life. We have mentioned previously that Holden feels he is different, and this difference comes in the form of a wish, wherein is a defender of innocence. His response to his sister has a reference to our knowledge about him; he chooses to withdraw to his own imaginative sense of the world he has created, rather than facing the complications of his surroundings and the real world. He believes that other people are distrustful, and over-simplified to the extent of scepticism, where the larger part of the world of fantasy depended on the notion that children are pure and clear but grownups are shallow and duplicitous. He feels free to talk about his suffering to Phoebe, who is also a teenager that has a similar simplicity and innocence as Holden, so they can share the same views towards the world. He recognises this fact himself, to the extent that he admits that his view is "crazy", however, he is unable to create or think of something more practical and realistic; he has a one-angled view, which causes him trouble when attempting to see the world in another way. *The Catcher in the Rye's* imaginative arena indicates his purity and innocence, that his faith is a stainless, pure youth, and his wish is to defend that spirit. Moreover, it reveals his huge disassociation with the world, and his immature opinion of his environment (James E. Miller, 1965).

## **Conclusion**

This paper has attempted to show the influence of the trauma of alienation that has influenced many diverse parts of the maturity process of Holden. The trauma effect on this character comes as a result of the death of his brother, who was close to him. The incident stimulates his withdrawal personality, and alienation. Yet, the trauma generates other issues, according to the way he perceives the world, and also the way in which he perceives himself; which is



in a passive way. The passivity hovers over the novel, which reflects his paralysed understanding. It creates an impression that Holden is an unreliable narrator for the biased narrative view that he offers. Moreover, his understanding of the notion of love is similarly influenced by this trauma, so Holden rejects love for any reason, although he shows several indications in his conduct that refers to his real wish is to be accepted and to exchange love with others, but he also shows an inability to communicate with others. Holden appears to be a very sensitive character, where he has actual polarised feelings, which take one side of happiness or sadness. In order to balance his emotions, and given that he lacks a guide that will lead him in the jungle of life, he has a close girl who helps him to understand the world somewhat better by being reasonable. Phoebe, Holden's younger sister, plays this mother-like role, which helps to maintain his mental safety and better than he does. This does not indicate that the mother-like figure saves him from the conflicts of adulthood, as she only lowers his traumatic emotive anxiety, and somehow, keeps him stable. Moreover, Holden feels that he is overcome by the grown-up world that appears to be controlled by a dishonesty, and which he is not ready to accept. Holden attempts to step widely to rescue children from the inevitable collapse towards dishonesty and corruption. We observe that he emphasises his uncertainties on others who are innocent and pure.



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