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## The Psychological Structure of *The Catcher in the Rye*

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**S**TANDING BY the “crazy cannon” on Thomsen Hill one sunless afternoon, listening to the cheers from a football game below, “the two teams bashing each other all over the place,” Holden Caulfield tries to “feel some kind of a good-by” to the prep school he has just flunked out of:

I was lucky. All of a sudden I thought of something that helped make me know I was getting the hell out. I suddenly remembered this time, in around October, that I and Robert Tichener and Paul Campbell were chucking a football around, in front of the academic building. They were nice guys, especially Tichener. It was just before dinner and it was getting pretty dark out, but we kept chucking the ball around anyway. It kept getting darker and darker, and we could hardly see the ball any more, but we didn't want to stop doing what we were doing. Finally we had to. This teacher that taught biology, Mr. Zambesi, stuck his head out of this window in the academic building and told us to go back to the dorm and get ready for dinner. If I get a chance to remember that kind of stuff, I can get a good-by when I need one.<sup>1</sup>

A careful look at this first scene in the novel provides clues for interpretation, by no means crucial in themselves, but illustrative of a pattern of scene construction and suggestive imagery which does yield meaning. Appropriate is this adolescent's sense of his “darkling plain” where, if an extravagant metaphor be allowed, “ignorant football teams clash by afternoon.” In a pattern repeated throughout the novel, he thinks back to a time when he and two “nice guys” passed a football around, shared rather than fought over it, though even then the idyllic state seemed doomed. Holden is poised between two worlds, one he cannot return to and the other he fears to enter, while the image of a football conflict is probably an ironic commentary on Holden's adolescence, football's being a civilized ritualization of human aggression.

What is forcing Holden's crisis? Everything in the idyllic scene points to the encroachment of

time—the season, the time of day, even such verbal echoes from his friends' names as “ticking,” “bell,” and “pall.” Accrual of this sort of evidence will justify what may seem overinterpretation here, especially of the significance of a biology teacher's ending the boys' innocent pleasures—their idyll already sentenced by time, darkness. More than anything else Holden fears the biological imperatives of adulthood—sex, senescence, and death—which are delicately foreshadowed in the innocent October scene by the unwelcome call to dinner.

Much of the *Catcher* criticism has testified to Holden's acute moral and esthetic perceptions—his eye for beauty as well as “phoniness”—but the significance of his immaturity in intensifying these perceptions has not been sufficiently stressed nor explained. Precisely because this sixteen-year-old acts “like I'm about thirteen” and even “like I was only about twelve,” he is hypersensitive to the exploitations and insensitivity of the postpubescent world and to the fragile innocence of children. A central rhythm of the narrative has Holden confronting adult callousness and retreating reflexively into thoughts and fantasies about children, child-like Jane Gallaghers, and especially his ten-year-old sister, Phoebe. These juxtapositions render both worlds more intensely and at the same time qualify Holden's judgments by showing that they are emotionally—or, as we shall see, neurotically—induced.

While a fair number of critics have referred to Holden's “neurosis,” none has accepted Salinger's invitation—proffered in the form of several key references to psychoanalysis—to participate in a full-fledged psychoanalytical reading. The narrative, after all, was written in a mental hospital with Holden under the care of a “psychoanalyst guy.” One problem is that Holden tells us very little about “what my lousy childhood was like” or the event that may have brought on the trauma behind all of his problems: the death of a younger brother when Holden was thirteen. We know little more than that the family has been generally disrupted

since and that Holden has not come to grips with life as he should have. Allie's death takes place outside the province of the narrative, but a valuable psychological study might still be made of the progression of Holden's breakdown—how he provokes fights in which he will be beaten, makes sexual advances he cannot carry through, and unconsciously alienates himself from many of the people he encounters. As a step toward psychological understanding, I shall consider certain manifestations of Holden's disturbances. An examination of the structure, scene construction, and suggestive imagery reveals a pattern of aggression and regression, largely sexual, which is suggested in the Pencey Prep section, acted out in the central part of the novel, and brought to a curious climax in the Phoebe chapters.

## I

One implication of the novel's main motif, that which polarizes childlike and adult responses, concerns the dilemma of impossible alternatives. Here characters suggest human conditions that Holden either cannot or must not make his own. In the novel's first paragraph Holden tells us that his brother D. B. has "prostituted" his writing talents by going to Hollywood—a failure implicitly contrasted throughout with the purity of Allie, the brother who died before the temptations of adulthood. Holden's first encounter is with Spencer, the old teacher who fills his mind with thoughts of age and death, while his last is with Phoebe, his emblem of unattainable childhood beauty. Stradlater and Ackley are antithetically placed to represent what Holden fears he may become if he is either sexually appropriative or repressed. Because the novel is built around these impossible alternatives, because Holden's world provides no one he can truly emulate, the many critics who read *Catcher* as a sweeping indictment of society have virtually drowned out those who attack Holden's immaturity. One feels the justice of this, yet the novel's resolution, like all of Salinger's mature fiction, transcends sociological indictment in affirming individual responsibility. When Holden answers for his own life as he verges toward some rather dreadful appropriation of his own, he begins to come to terms at once with himself and society.

At the outset of traditional quest narratives, the hero often receives sage advice from a wise old

man or crone. The best old Spencer can do is to wish Holden a depressing "good luck," just as another agent of education, a woman "around a hundred years old," will do in the penultimate chapter. Spencer's plaintive "I'm trying to help you, if I can" and the old woman's irrelevant chatter near the end bracket the bulk of the narrative in which Holden seeks answers from without. And in both scenes the human resources that do see him through are dramatized in his compassion for the two old people.

Though the Spencer chapter serves notice that Holden has flunked the administrative requirements of education, we learn immediately that he draws sustenance from art. He returns to his room to reread in Isak Dinesen's *Out of Africa* that chronicle of sensitivity surrounded by primitive id forces. At this point he is interrupted by eighteen-year-old Robert Ackley, a grotesque possibility of what Holden may become if his manhood is similarly thwarted. Unleavened sensitivity will not be enough as we see Holden vacillating through five chapters between Ackley and Ward Stradlater, the equally unacceptable model of male aggressiveness. Stradlater's vitality is dramatized in his "Year Book" handsomeness, "damn good build," and superior strength, while Ackley's impotence is reflected in acned, unsightly looks, general enervation, and repulsive habits. Stradlater is slovenly too—Holden calls him a "secret slob"—but he elicits some admiration where Ackley is only pathetic.

Stradlater's date for the evening is Jane Gallagher, a girl with whom Holden has had a summer romance. That relationship was characterized by Jane's habit of keeping her kings in the back row when they played checkers—later on, Holden says specifically that their lovemaking never went beyond the handholding stage. In Holden's request that Stradlater ask Jane if she still keeps her kings in the back row, one critic sees Holden signaling warnings about her "sexy" date.<sup>2</sup> Holden tells us in another chapter that Jane was the kind of girl you never wanted to "kid too much." "I think I really like it best," he goes on to say,

when you can kid the pants off a girl when the opportunity arises, but it's a funny thing. The girls I like best are the ones I never feel much like kidding. Sometimes I think they'd like it if you kidded them—in fact, I know they would—but it's hard to get started, once

you've known them a pretty long time and never kidded them. (p. 101)

On an action level, of course, Jane did keep her checker kings in the back row and Holden is indeed talking about kidding. But such double entendres as "kidding the pants off a girl" reveal not only Holden's sexual preoccupations but the elaborate coding his mind has set up against recognizing such preoccupations for what they are. In the early parts of the novel, Salinger may be training the reader to see through Holden's words in these rather apparent ways, thus to prepare for the most subtle and crucial coding of all in the Phoebe section.

Stradlater's strength and sexuality cause Holden to discountenance his own. This night, for example, Stradlater uses Holden's "Vitalis" hair tonic and borrows his "hound's-tooth" jacket, leaving Holden "so nervous I nearly went crazy" as he thinks of this "sexy bastard" with Jane. Conversely, Holden this same night endures Ackley's droning narrative of his sexual exploits with a final comment, "He was a virgin if I ever saw one. I doubt if he ever even gave anybody a feel." Not until Holden faces the Ackley and Stradlater in himself will he be able to do the purgative writing that is of course the form of the novel itself. They are almost like doppelgangers; one will interrupt him when he reads to escape while the other rejects the composition he ghostwrites because it is escapist. Even when he attacks the cocksure Stradlater after the latter's date with Jane, Holden's brief blood initiation is, as we shall see, a needful battle against himself. Right after the fight, getting no consolation from that other polar figure, Ackley, Holden leaves Pencey Prep.

The five Stradlater and Ackley chapters make for closely woven, dramatized exposition of Holden's psychological quandary which prepares for the loose, episodic middle section of the novel where Holden goes questing after experience and wisdom. Rejecting the alternatives implicit in Stradlater and Ackley, Holden wants his life to be vital without appropriation, innocent without retrogression. In the Phoebe section where the novel tightens up again, we shall see that Holden nearly becomes *both* appropriative and retrogressive and that it is precisely Holden's awareness of this that points the way to maturity.

Immediately after arriving in New York and

checking into a hotel room, Holden is treated to a fresh installment of the Ackley-Stradlater antithesis. Through one window across an airshaft he sees a transvestite dress himself and mince before a mirror, while in the window above a couple squirt water "out of their mouths at each other." Holden confesses at this point that "In my *mind*, I'm probably the biggest sex maniac you ever saw" and that he might enjoy such "crumby stuff" as squirting water in a girl's face. Characteristically, he decides to call his chaste Jane, thinks better of it, and phones Faith Cavendish, a stripper recommended to Holden as one who "didn't mind doing it once in a while." Her ritual objections to the late-hour call dispensed with, she suggests a meeting the next day. Holden declines, however, and "damn near" gives his "kid sister Phoebe a buzz," justifying the switch by describing Phoebe's charms at length. Later in a bar he is flanked on his left by "this funny-looking guy" nervously reciting to his date "every single goddam play" of a football game he had seen, and on the other side by a suave young man giving a beautiful girl "a feel under the table," over her embarrassed objections, "at the same time telling her all about some guy in his dorm that had . . . nearly committed suicide." All around him Holden sees distorted reflections of his own spasmodic aggression and withdrawal. And in the last instance cited we get an early hint of one of the most dangerous manifestations of his neurosis: his association of sex with death.

When he retreats in a panic to Grand Central Station, for example, he begins to read a discarded magazine to "make me stop thinking" about Antolini's apparent homosexual advances. One article convinces him that his hormones are "lousy" and another that he would "be dead in a couple of months" from cancer. What seems burlesque here ("That magazine was some little cheerer upper") becomes urgent in Holden's response to an obscene legend he sees shortly after in Phoebe's school:

Somebody'd written "Fuck you" on the wall. It drove me damn near crazy. I thought how Phoebe and all the other little kids would see it, and how they'd wonder what the hell it meant, and then finally some dirty kid would tell them—all cockeyed, naturally—what it meant. . . . I figured it was some perverted bum that'd sneaked in the school late at night to take a leak or something and then wrote it on the wall. I kept

picturing myself catching him at it, and how I'd smash his head on the stone steps till he was good and goddam dead and bloody. But I knew, too, I wouldn't have the guts to do it. I knew that. That made me even more depressed. I hardly even had the guts to rub it off the wall with my *hand*, if you want to know the truth. I was afraid some teacher would catch me rubbing it off and would think *I'd* written it. But I rubbed it out anyway, finally. (pp. 260-61)

As we shall see, Holden is more repelled by the "obscenity" of the sexual act itself than by the obscene word. And his fear of being identified with the sort of "pervert" who planted it in Phoebe's school is reiterated when, in one more withdrawal, he goes to the mummy tomb in the museum and again finds the legend. At this point he decides,

You can't ever find a place that's nice and peaceful, because there isn't any. You may *think* there is, but once you get there, when you're not looking, somebody'll sneak up and write "Fuck you" right under your nose. Try it sometime. I think, even, if I ever die, and they stick me in a cemetery, and I have a tombstone and all, it'll say "Holden Caulfield" on it, and then what year I was born and what year I died, and right under that it'll say "Fuck you." I'm positive, in fact. (p. 264)

It is not enough to leave it that Holden's sickness has brought about this odd commingling of love-making and dying in his mind. Looking back at Holden's ostensibly random comments on various fascinations and aversions, one sees a subtle but coherent psychological pattern taking shape. Early in the novel we learn of his interest in Egyptian mummification and his particular fascination—mentioned again in the tomb scene—that the process ensured that "their faces wouldn't rot or anything." After watching the "perverts" squirt water in each other's faces, Holden reflects that

if you don't really like a girl, you shouldn't horse around with her at all, and if you *do* like her, then you're supposed to like her face, and if you like her face, you ought to be careful about doing crumbly stuff to it, like squirting water all over it. (p. 81)

If there are sexual inhibitions reflected in Holden's curious concern with the "preservation of faces," they must also be implicit in his general and constant longing for a state of changelessness. He laments, for instance, that though his beloved museum never changed, he did:

The best thing, though, in that museum was that everything always stayed right where it was. Nobody'd move. You could go there a hundred thousand times, and that Eskimo would still be just finished catching those two fish, the birds would still be on their way south. . . . Nobody'd be different. The only thing that would be different would be *you*. Not that you'd be so much older or anything. It wouldn't be that, exactly. You'd just be different, that's all. You'd have an overcoat on this time. . . . Or you'd heard your mother and father having a terrific fight in the bathroom. . . . I can't explain what I mean. And even if I could, I'm not sure I'd feel like it. (pp. 157-58)

Readers experienced in the strategies of unreliable narration will suspect that Holden probably does somehow "explain" and that there must be a reason why he's not sure he'd "feel like it" if he could. One notices, as a possible clue, that the museum is associated here and elsewhere with Phoebe.

I kept thinking about old Phoebe going to that museum on Saturdays the way I used to. I thought how she'd see the same stuff I used to see, and how *she'd* be different every time she saw it. It didn't exactly depress me to think about it, but it didn't make me feel gay as hell, either. Certain things they should stay the way they are. . . . I know that's impossible, but it's too bad anyway. (p. 158)

Indeed, Holden's feelings about Phoebe may explain much that is puzzling in his narrative.

## II

The expository sections of the novel dramatize Holden's problems as essentially sexual and moral. Yet most critical readings of the novel's ending either ignore these things or imply their absence by declaring that the resolution is "blunted" or else "humanly satisfying" while "artistically weak." Those critics who attest to a harmonious resolution generally do so on philosophical grounds, the effect being a divorce of theme from Holden's human situation. To deny a fused sexual and moral resolution of some sort in the closing emotional crescendo of the Phoebe section would, it seems to me, impugn the integrity of the novel.

I am suggesting that the urgency of Holden's compulsions, his messianic desire to guard innocence against adult corruption, for example, comes of a frantic need to save his sister from himself. It may be Phoebe's face that Holden unconsciously fears may be desecrated; hence the desire to pro-

tect Phoebe's face that compels his fascination with mummification. And it may be Phoebe who provokes his longing for stasis because he fears that she may be changed—perhaps at his own hand. Holden's association of sex with death surely points to some sexual guilt—possibly the fear that he or Phoebe or both may “die” if repressed desires are acted out.

I do not mean to imply that Holden's desires, if they are what I suggest, drive him inexorably to Phoebe's bed. The psychoanalytical axiom may here apply that a sister is often the first replacement of the mother as love object, and that normal maturation guides the boy from sister to other women. At this point in his life, Holden's sexuality is swaying precariously between reversion and maturation—a condition structurally dramatized throughout and alluded to in this early description:

I was sixteen then, and I'm seventeen now, and sometimes I act like I'm about thirteen. It's really ironical, because I'm six foot two and a half and I have gray hair. I really do. The one side of my head—the right side—is full of millions of gray hairs. I've had them ever since I was a kid. And yet I still act sometimes like I was only about twelve. Everybody says that, especially my father. It's partly true, too, but it isn't *all* true. . . . Sometimes I act a lot older than I am—I really do—but people never notice it. (p. 13)

The narrator's overall perspective is thus mapped out: his present age representing some measure of maturity, and thirteen and twelve the vacillation that normally comes at puberty and that is so much more painful when it occurs as late as sixteen. This vacillation is somehow resolved in a climax beginning in Phoebe's bedroom (or rather the bedroom of D. B., the corrupt brother, where she sleeps) and ending at the carousel after Holden has refused to let her run away with him. However one interprets the ending, it comes as a surprise which is dramatically appropriate precisely because it shocks Holden. Hence, also, the aptness of providing only scattered hints of things to come through the quest section, hints which, in my presentation, will necessarily seem tentative.

One notes in passing, for example, Holden's sudden infatuation with Bernice, one of the prosaic Seattle girls, while they are dancing. “You really can dance,” he tells her. “I have a kid sister that's only in the goddam fourth grade. You're about as good as she is, and she can dance better than anybody living or dead.” A possible associa-

tion might be made of the name of the young prostitute, “Sunny,” with “Phoebe.”<sup>3</sup> Certainly Sunny's childlike aspects are emphasized throughout the episode:

She was a pretty spooky kid. Even with that little bitty voice she had, she could sort of scare you a little bit. If she'd been a big old prostitute, with a lot of makeup on her face and all, she wouldn't have been half as spooky. (p. 127)

Holden has to beg off with the excuse that “I was a little premature in my calculations.” His beating at the hands of Maurice, her pimp, suggests psychic punishment as well, particularly when Holden imagines that he's dying and pretends “I had a bullet in my gut.”

More can be made of an assertion Holden is constrained to repeat that Phoebe is “too affectionate.” After retreating from making the date with Faith, he describes Phoebe at length and tells the reader,

She's all right. You'd like her. The only trouble is, she's a little too affectionate sometimes. She's very emotional, for a child. She really is. (p. 89)

Later, when Holden awakens Phoebe and “She put her arms around my neck and all,” he blurts out:

She's very affectionate. I mean she's quite affectionate, for a child. Sometimes she's even *too* affectionate. I sort of gave her a kiss. (p. 209)

One begins to recognize the brilliant stratagem of imprecise adolescent qualifiers such as “sort of,” “I mean,” “and all,” and the nervous repetition of “affectionate” which dramatize Holden's confusion of restraint and desire. This confusion develops in the first passage as language moves from firm declaration to qualification; in the second, Phoebe's presence provokes even more qualified language.

Then, there is the curious matter of “Little Shirley Beans,” the record Holden buys for Phoebe:

It was about a little kid that wouldn't go out of the house because two of her front teeth were out and she was ashamed to. . . . I knew it would knock old Phoebe out. . . . It was a very old, terrific record that this colored girl singer, Estelle Fletcher, made about twenty years ago. She sings it very Dixieland and whorehouse, and it doesn't sound at all mushy. If a white girl was singing it, she'd make it sound *cute* as hell, but old Estelle Fletcher knew what the hell she

was doing, and it was one of the best records I ever heard. (p. 149)

The significance of the record is underscored by Holden's anxiousness to give it to Phoebe and his inordinate dismay when he breaks it:

Then something terrible happened just as I got in the park. I dropped old Phoebe's record. It broke into about fifty pieces. . . . I damn near cried, it made me feel so terrible, but all I did was, I took the pieces out of the envelope and put them in my coat pocket. (p. 199)

One wonders if the accident wasn't psychically determined. If the Shirley Beans affair were a subject of dream analysis, the missing teeth, the shame, and the translation through "whorehouse" jazz by a singer who "knew what the hell she was doing" would conventionally suggest the loss of virginity. Hence, Holden's unconscious forces would dictate the destruction of this "record" as well as its purchase. In the same vein is the information Holden passes on, as he sneaks into the apartment to see Phoebe, that the maid wouldn't hear "because she had only one eardrum. She had this brother that stuck a straw down her ear when she was a kid, she once told me."

At one point Holden hears a child singing the song that becomes the anthem of his savior fantasies: "If a body catch a body coming through the rye." Yet in the next paragraph he buys the "Little Shirley Beans" record—the pairing symbolically dramatizes his conflict of protecting and of violating. His thoughts turn to the Olivier *Hamlet* he and Phoebe had watched and he singles out this highly suggestive scene:

The best part in the whole picture was when old Ophelia's brother—the one that gets in the duel with Hamlet at the very end—was going away and his father was giving him a lot of advice. While the father kept giving him a lot of advice, old Ophelia was sort of horsing around with her brother, taking his dagger out of the holster, and teasing him and all while he was trying to look interested in the bull his father was shooting. That was nice. I got a big bang out of that. But you don't see that kind of stuff much. The only thing old Phoebe liked was when Hamlet patted this dog on the head. (pp. 152–53)

In all of these early clues, one notices that the nearer Holden's desires come to surfacing, the more hesitant his language and behavior become. When the dreadful suggestions have the protective

coloration of, say, the art of "Little Shirley Beans" or *Hamlet*, he is not so uneasy: "That was nice. I got a big bang out of that."

After a series of abortive adventures with women, Holden rather desperately seeks the counsel of a former classmate who was regarded as the dormitory's resident expert on sexual matters. Luce is too pompous to help, but his cutting assessments are probably accurate. He tells Holden that his "mind is immature" and recommends psychoanalysis, as he had done the last time they had talked. Holden's self-diagnosis at this point—that his "trouble" is an inability to get "sexy—I mean really sexy—with a girl I don't like a lot"—raises questions when one recalls his fraternal affection for Jane Gallagher and the relatively sexy episodes with the likes of Sally Hayes and "a terrible phony named Anne Louise Sherman." A probable answer, as we shall see, lies in his confused feelings about Phoebe.

All chances for normal sexual expression or even sexual understanding now depleted, Holden gets drunk and goes to Central Park to find "where the ducks go in winter." One critic reads this episode, filled as it is with thoughts of death, as Holden's "dark night of the soul," after which the boy begins to gain in psychic strength (Strauch, p. 109). It ought to be pointed out that Holden's breakdown occurs after the events of the narrative. His desperation in the park is certainly one extreme of his vacillation, the withdrawing extreme which is imaged by coldness and thoughts of death. Finally, he decides to see Phoebe, "in case I died and all," more explicitly associating Phoebe with death.

Holden makes his way into the apartment furiously—ostensibly to keep his parents from learning that he had flunked out of school. Yet his guilt seems obsessive. "I really should've been a crook," he says after telling the elevator operator that he was visiting the "Dicksteins" who live next door, that he has to wait for them in their hallway because he has a "bad leg," causing him to limp "like a bastard." Though his mother "has ears like a goddam bloodhound," his parents are out and he enters Phoebe's room undetected.

Phoebe is asleep:

She had her mouth way open. It's funny. You take adults, they look lousy when they're asleep and they have their mouths way open, but kids don't. Kids look all right. They can even have spit all over the pillow and they still look all right. (p. 207)

Suddenly Holden feels “swell” as he notices such things as Phoebe’s discarded clothing arranged neatly on a chair. Throughout the Phoebe section, double entendres and sexually suggestive images and gestures multiply, most flowing naturally from Holden’s mind while others, once the coding is perceived, become mechanical pointers to the psychological plot.

When Holden awakens Phoebe and is embarrassed by her overaffection, she eagerly tells him about the play in which she is “Benedict Arnold”:

“It starts out when I’m dying. This ghost comes in on Christmas Eve and asks me if I’m ashamed and everything. . . . Are you coming to it?” (p. 210)

When the Benedict Arnold image recurs at the end, we shall see that the role of “traitor” is precisely the one she must play if her brother is to weather his crisis. Phoebe then tells him about *The Doctor*, a movie she has seen “at the Lister Foundation” about

“this doctor . . . that sticks a blanket over this child’s face that’s a cripple and can’t walk. . . . and makes her suffocate. Then they make him go to jail for life imprisonment, but this child that he stuck the blanket over its head comes to visit him all the time and thanks him for what he did. He was a mercy killer.” (p. 211)

This suggestive plot points to a horrible psychological possibility for Holden. He may “kill” Phoebe, pay his penalty agreeably, and even receive the gratitude of his victim. If interpretation here seems hard to justify, especially the implications of *Phoebe’s* having suggested all this to Holden, consider the climax of the chapter in which Phoebe puts “the goddam pillow over her head” and refuses to come out. “She does that quite frequently,” Holden reassures us—and then takes it all back: “She’s a true madman sometimes.” However innocent, Phoebe’s responses to Holden’s secret needs become the catalyst for both his breakdown and recovery.

Through the next chapter Phoebe hears Holden out on his “categorical aversions,” in Salinger’s phrase, to all the “phoniness” that has soured his world. The conversation begins in a curious manner:

Then, just for the hell of it, I gave her a pinch on the behind. It was sticking way out in the breeze, the way she was laying on her side. She has hardly any behind. I didn’t do it hard, but she tried to hit my hand anyway, but she missed.

Then all of a sudden, she said, “Oh, why did you do it?” She meant why did I get the ax again. It made me sort of sad, the way she said it. (p. 217)

Holden spells out his dissatisfactions at length—and indeed he cites valid and depressing instances of human failings—until Phoebe challenges him several times, “You don’t like *anything* that’s happening.” “Name one thing,” she demands. “One thing? One thing I like?” Holden replies. “Okay.” At this point he finds he can’t “concentrate too hot.”

She was in a cockeyed position way the hell over the other side of the bed. She was about a thousand miles away. (p. 220)

He can’t concentrate, I suggest, because the truth is too close.

About all I could think of were those two nuns that went around collecting dough in those beat-up old straw baskets. Especially the one with the glasses with those iron rims. And this boy I knew at Elkton Hills. (p. 220)

Repression has transferred the true thing he “likes a lot” to a nun, an inviolable “sister,” who, we remember, had embarrassed Holden by talking about *Romeo and Juliet*, “that play [that] gets pretty sexy in parts.” It may also be significant that *Romeo and Juliet* involves forbidden love that ends tragically—especially significant in connection with the other “thing” Holden thinks about, James Castle, the boy who had killed himself wearing Holden’s turtleneck sweater.

None of this will do for Phoebe and she repeats the challenge:

“I like Allie,” I said. “And I like doing what I’m doing right now. Sitting here with you, and talking, and thinking about stuff, and—” (p. 222)

When she objects that “Allie’s dead,” Holden tries to explain but gives up:

“Anyway, I like it now,” I said. “I mean right now. Sitting here with you and just chewing the fat and horsing—” (p. 223)

Her insistence drives him to the loveliest—and most sinister—fantasy in the novel:

“You know that song ‘If a body catch a body comin’ through the rye’? I’d like—”

“It’s ‘If a body *meet* a body coming through the rye!’” old Phoebe said. (p. 224)

Holden proceeds to conjure up the daydream of himself as catcher in the rye, the protector of

childhood innocence. As Phoebe implies, however, the song is about romance, not romanticism. Because he has to, Holden has substituted a messianic motive for the true, erotic one.

In the next chapter Holden and Phoebe seem to be acting out a mock romance, much the way Seymour Glass does with the little girl in "A Perfect Day for Bananafish." The episode is at once movingly tender and ominous. Holden finds Phoebe "sitting smack in the middle of the bed, outside the covers, with her legs folded like one of those Yogi guys"—an image one critic interprets as making her an emblem of "the still, contemplative center of life" (Strauch, p. 43). This may be valid for one level of Holden's mind. When he immediately asks her to dance, however, and "She practically jumped off the bed, and then waited while I took my shoes off," his excessive justifications point to guilt:

I don't like people that dance with little kids. . . . Usually they keep yanking the kid's dress up in the back by mistake, and the kid can't dance worth a damn *anyway*, and it looks terrible, but I don't do it out in public with Phoebe or anything. We just horse around in the house. It's different with her anyway, because she can *dance*. She can follow anything you do. I mean if you hold her in close as hell so that it doesn't matter that your legs are so much longer. She stays right with you. (p. 227)

After the dance, Phoebe "jumped back in bed and got under the covers" and Holden "sat down next to her on the bed again . . . sort of out of breath." "'Feel my forehead,' she said all of a sudden." Phoebe claims she has learned to induce fever psychosomatically so that

"your whole forehead gets so hot you can burn somebody's hand."

That killed me. I pulled my hand away from her forehead, like I was in terrific danger. "Thanks for *telling me*," I said.

"Oh, I wouldn't've burned *your* hand. I'd've stopped before it got too—*Shhh!*" Then, quick as hell, she sat way the hell up in bed. (p. 229)

The parents have returned and the scene that follows, Holden gathering up his shoes and hiding in the closet as the mother interrogates Phoebe about the (cigarette) "smoke" in the bedroom and asks "were you warm enough?" is reminiscent of nothing so much as that mainstay of French farce, the lover hiding in the closet or under the bed as the girl ironically "explains" to husband or parent.

More important are the implications of Phoebe's "heat." Though she cannot really induce it, her innocent compliance in the whole sexual charade does place Holden "in terrific danger."

When the mother leaves, Holden emerges from his hiding place and borrows money from Phoebe. Phoebe insists that he take all of her money and Holden "all of a sudden" begins to cry:

I couldn't help it. I did it so nobody could hear me, but I did it. It scared hell out of old Phoebe when I started doing it, and she came over and tried to make me stop, but once you get started, you can't just stop on a goddam *dime*. I was still sitting on the edge of the bed when I did it, and she put her old arm around my neck, and I put my arm around her, too, but I still couldn't stop for a long time. I thought I was going to choke to death or something. Boy, I scared hell out of poor old Phoebe. The damn window was open and everything, and I could feel her shivering and all, because all she had on was her pajamas. I tried to make her get back in bed, but she wouldn't go. (p. 233)

Holden's breakdown, his visiting of his own suffering on the child, the chill air, and the innocence of their intimacy in this moving scene signal his growing, frightening awareness of the other sort of intimacy. From now until he sees Phoebe again, Holden is in full flight. Nonetheless, their parting is filled with suggestions of a sort one might expect after a casual, normal sexual encounter. (The emphases in the following passage are my own.)

Then I *finished buttoning* my coat and all. I told her I'd *keep in touch with her*. She told me I *could sleep with her* if I wanted to, but I said no, that I'd better beat it. . . . Then I took my hunting hat out of my coat pocket and *gave it to her*. She likes those kind of crazy hats. She didn't want to take it, but I *made her*. I'll bet she *slept with it* on. She really likes those kinds of hats. Then I told her again I'd *give her a buzz* if I got a chance, and then I left. (p. 233)

It is almost as if Holden is acknowledging the real content of the sexual charade and escaping while he can. It would also seem that realization, however vague, is equated with deed as Holden immediately indicates that he wanted to be punished:

It was a helluva lot easier getting out of the house than it was getting in, for some reason. For one thing, I didn't give much of a damn any more if they caught me. I really didn't. I figured if they caught me, they caught me. I almost wished they did, in a way.

(pp. 233–34)

Holden leaves Phoebe to spend the night with Mr. Antolini, a former teacher who during the

course of the evening offers sound if stilted assessments of Holden's future which become particularly relevant in the epilogue. Antolini has been drinking, however, and disrupts the peace he has provided (Holden feels sleepy for the first time) by awakening the boy with tentative homosexual advances. Certainly Holden is victimized ("I was shaking like a madman. . . . I think I was more depressed than I ever was in my life"), but the encounter may torment him most for its parallels to his own unconscious designs on a child. Now one begins to see the significance of Holden's unfounded suspicions about Jane Gallagher's stepfather and his murderous rage at the "pervy bum" who wrote the obscenity on Phoebe's school wall—inordinate reactions pointing to fears about himself.

At this point Holden's neurosis verges on madness. Each time he crosses a street, he imagines he will "disappear" and "never get to the other side of the street." I do not take this so much as a symbolic manifestation of "identity crisis" and of his fear that he "may never reach maturity"—although both are implicit—but rather as a literal, psychologically valid description of the boy's breakdown. He retreats into wild fantasies of running away forever, living in a cabin near, but not in, the woods ("I'd want it to be sunny as hell all the time"), and feigning deaf-muteness, all to escape the confusion about to engulf him. Phoebe betrays these plans—the first ironic level of the Benedict Arnold motif—by joining in his escape. When she appears, bag in hand and the hunting cap on her head, Holden reacts wildly:

"I'm going with you. Can I? Okay?"

"What?" I said. I almost fell over when she said that. I swear to God I did. I got sort of dizzy and I thought I was going to pass out or something again.

. . . . .  
I thought I was going to pass out cold. I mean I didn't mean to tell her to shut up and all, but I thought I was going to pass out again.

. . . . .  
I was almost all set to hit her. I thought I was going to smack her for a second. I really did. . . .

"I thought you were supposed to be Benedict Arnold in that play and all," I said. I said it very nasty. "Wuddaya want to do? Not be in the play, for God's sake?" That made her cry even harder. I was glad. All of a sudden I wanted her to cry till her eyes practically dropped out. I almost hated her. I think I hated her most because she wouldn't be in that play any more if she went away with me. (pp. 267–68)

These near-hysterical responses can be understood, it seems to me, only in the context that Phoebe is the very thing he is fleeing. He somehow realizes that she *must* be his "Benedict Arnold."

Holden's fury at Phoebe having set the climax in motion, Salinger now employs a delicate spatial strategy. Phoebe returns the hat, turns her back on Holden, announces that she has no intention of running away with him, and runs "right the hell across the street, without even looking to see if any cars were coming." Positioning here signifies the end of their relation as possible lovers, but love remains. Holden does not go after her, knowing she'll follow him "on the *other* goddam side of the street. She wouldn't look over at me at all, but I could tell she was probably watching me out of the corner of her crazy eye to see where I was going and all. Anyway, we kept walking that way all the way to the zoo." They are still apart as they watch the sea lions being fed, Holden standing "right behind her."

I didn't put my hands on her shoulders again or anything because if I had she *really* would've beat it on me. Kids are funny. You have to watch what you're doing.

She wouldn't walk right next to me when we left the sea lions, but she didn't walk too far away. She sort of walked on one side of the sidewalk and I walked on the other side.

. . . . .  
Old Phoebe still wouldn't talk to me or anything, but she was sort of walking next to me now. I took a hold of the belt at the back of her coat, just for the hell of it, but she wouldn't let me. She said, "Keep your hands to yourself, if you don't mind." (pp. 271–72)

Holden promises not to run away and they rejoin as brother and sister in the presence of the carousel—miraculously open in winter. Phoebe wants to ride and Holden finds a mature, new perspective:

All the kids kept trying to grab for the gold ring, and so was old Phoebe, and I was sort of afraid she'd fall off the goddam horse, but I didn't say anything or do anything. 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. (pp. 273–74)

The substitution of a gold ring for the traditional brass one may point to Phoebe's future as a woman. In any event, Holden has renounced his designs on Phoebe and thus abrogated his messianic role. Another Salinger story has young

de Daumier-Smith relinquish his sexual designs on a nun with the announcement, "I am giving Sister Irma her freedom to follow her destiny. Everyone is a nun." One need not search for literary sources to recognize that the carrousel finally represents everyone's sacred, inviolable human destiny.

### III

Readers now dubious about this paper's clinical approach ("aesthetic pathology," Salinger has called it) may wonder why I have thus far neglected to make a masculine symbol of Holden's long-peaked hunting cap—which he purchased, one recalls, after losing the fencing team's foils in a sub-way. This rather mechanical symbol does partake of the boy's masculinity or sexuality. But more than that, it becomes the most reliable symbolic designation of Holden's psychic condition through the novel. Ackley points out that it is a deer hunter's hat while Holden maintains that "This is a people shooting hat. . . . I shoot people in this hat." When one remembers that hunters wear red hats to keep from being shot and that Holden usually wears his backwards in the manner of a baseball catcher, the symbol embraces Holden's aggressive and withdrawing tendencies as well as the outlandish daydreams of becoming the messiah in the rye.

Holden's masculinity is plainly involved in such instances as when he has to retrieve the hat from under a bed after the fight with Stradlater and when it is entrusted to Phoebe's bed, but the symbol becomes more encompassing when she "restores" the hat in the climactic carrousel scene.

Then all of a sudden she gave me a kiss. Then she held her hand out, and said, "It's raining. It's starting to rain."

"I know."

Then what she did—it damn near killed me—she reached in my coat pocket and took out my red hunting hat and put it on my head.

My hunting hat really gave me quite a lot of protec-

tion, in a way, but I got soaked anyway. I didn't care, though. 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. I don't know why. It was just that she looked so damn *nice*, the way she kept going around and around, in her blue coat and all. God, I wish you could have been there. (pp. 274-75)

At its deepest level, the hat symbolizes something like Holden's basic human resources—his birth-right, that lucky caul of protective courage, humor, compassion, honesty, and love—all of which are the real subject matter of the novel.

As the symbolic hat gives Holden "quite a lot of protection, in a way" and he gets "soaked anyway," those human resources do not prevent emotional collapse. In the epilogue we learn that Holden went West—"after I went home, and . . . got sick and all"—not for the traditional opportunity there but for psychotherapy. This would be a bleak ending were it not for the fact that Holden has authored this structured narrative, just as Antolini predicted he might:

"you'll find that you're not the first person who was ever confused and frightened and even sickened by human behavior. You're by no means alone on that score, you'll be excited and *stimulated* to know. Many, many men have been just as troubled morally and spiritually as you are right now. Happily, some of them kept records of their troubles. You'll learn from them—if you want to. Just as someday, if you have something to offer, someone will learn something from you. It's a beautiful reciprocal arrangement. And it isn't education. It's history. It's poetry." (p. 246)

The richness of spirit in 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 his story, Holden has given shape to, and thus achieved control of, his troubled past.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> J. D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye* (Boston: Little, 1951), pp. 7-8. Page numbers from this edition will be cited in the text.

<sup>2</sup> Carl F. Strauch, "Kings in the Back Row: Meaning through Structure—A Reading of Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*," in *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature*, 2 (Winter 1961), 5-30; rpt. in *If You Really Want to Know:*

*A Catcher Casebook* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1962), p. 104.

<sup>3</sup> Salinger may be echoing Phoebus rather than Phoebe, the personification of the moon; but he also may have in mind an antithesis between "Sunny" and Phoebe, the cool and chaste.