
Who Needs ‘Holden Caulfield’? From Reception to Legitimation

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ABSTRACT Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*, as one of the most influential and culturally relevant novels of the 20th century, has often been put behind the myth of its protagonist, who is frequently considered to be a universal symbol of the American post-war teenage era. The goal of this paper is to examine how “Holden Caulfield” was formed in regards to dominant cultural values of its matrix context, but also to dismantle this very myth because, as will be shown, its process of constitution has often excluded important factors such as the post-war identity politics or how the novel itself relates to the literary conventions of modernity, all in favor of a biased approach on the grounds of traditional moral or essentialist concepts of youth. The novel’s reception will thus be particularly emphasized in order to analyze the relationship between the Catcher and the myth of the Catcher, and to note potential discrepancies between them, which might offer a broader picture than the one painted in and through the cultural perception of Holden. Finally, the ambivalent position of the modern subject will be outlined in regard to one’s institutional and linguistic determination, which draws attention to the blurred borders between the two major cultural paradigms of the 20th century and underlines the symbolic power of the literary medium and its relation to the complexity of (post)modern cultural dynamics, as well as discursive mechanisms that take part in its establishment.

KEYWORDS *The Catcher in the Rye*, modernity, cultural studies, reception, identity politics

How and why has the red cap become a universal symbol of American teenagers in the post-WWII age might seem rather self-explanatory at first glance. It is difficult to approach Salinger's eponymous *Catcher* without having to break through discursive layers which shaped the way he has been perceived as, often plunged into categories attributed to the youth culture: hypersensibility, introversion, recklessness, rebellion. The goal of this paper is to examine not only how Holden is constructed in the very text of the novel, but also to, at least partially, expose what hides behind the myth of Holden, as well as how this myth was formed in the first place. Since the emphasis will be put on the protagonist, the novel will be viewed in light of the dominant genre tradition of the Bildungsroman, with particular attention given to the cultural state that took part in the text's creation, as well as its reception. Finally, in the crucial formative moments of the human rights movement and the democratization of society, it is important to evaluate the very idea of identity as presented in the text, a task for which Holden seems particularly suitable, seeing that he has been and still is the primary element of the novel that the critics constantly revisit when approaching *The Catcher in the Rye*.

As opposed to the typical epic hero, who is a man of age, modernity prefers another type of hero, one that is achieved by shifting the focus onto youth as a crucial formative age, as noted by Franco Moretti (1987). That is to say, modernity as a cultural paradigm finds its key values in the material sign of youth, such as its revolutionary impulses and its forward-looking attitude (Moretti 1987), as well as the fact that the very concept of youth achieves its legitimation in the capitalist system precisely because it does not last forever, i.e. in its temporal determination. Moretti thus stresses that the spirit of youth has to be tamed in a certain way before it becomes dangerous to the system which produces it as its own representation. That is to say, it has to be symbolically and metaphysically defined. This explains how the Bildungsroman became the dominant symbolic form of modernity – it narrates a portion of a young person's life, which ends in the moment in which mature life begins, and in this way youth is sealed as a mere phase of development.

This model of the Bildungsroman corresponds to what Moretti (1987) refers to as the principle of classification – led by a “teleological rhetoric” and formulaic endings that retroactively make sense of the rest of the text – as opposed to the principle of transformation, wherein the emphasis is on the narration itself, without particular privilege given to the ending, which remains open and seemingly even abrupt. In these examples “youth does not want to give way to maturity” (Moretti 1987, 8), since a formulaic conclusion would deprive youth of its significance. The two principles represent two contrary attitudes towards modernity: one of them caged by the principle of classification and the other “exasperated and made hypnotic by” (Moretti 1987, 8) the principle of transformation. They both, however, show that the very ideology of modernity cannot be thought of as monolithic and normative, since it encompasses various and numerous attempts at portraying the dynamics of the two determining principles for the subject of the modern age – the individual and the collective, socialization and self-actualization, deviation and normality.

The position of Holden Caulfield, that of a young man on the border between the two poles, seems thus rather symptomatic of the novel’s matrix cultural context. At the very beginning of 1945, the New York Times published *A Teen-Age Bill of Rights*, a “ten point charter framed to meet the problems of growing youth” (Savage 2007, 455) which symbolically ratified the Teen-Age, with the youth movement increasingly interrelating with the Jewish, African-Americans and immigrants’ rights movement (Savage 2007), seeing that all of them based their propositions on the democratic principles of the US constitution to which the aforementioned Bill of Rights implicitly points. It should also be taken into account that the very manner of rewriting a legal document through the prism of the teenager as an “American invention” (Savage 2007, 462) shows the moment of the breakthrough of popular culture into all pores of society. This opens up another important issue, namely, the fact that in the capitalist system, the teenager is reduced to an “adolescent consumer,” which becomes his primary determinant in the view of the dominant culture and shows why the very concept of the teenage cannot be separated from all of the constitutive elements of modernity, thereby further affirming Holden’s borderline position.

After taking into account the contextual and genre determinants of the novel, it remains unclear why Holden is seen as a typical rebellious oversensitive teenager. In order to understand this more precisely, it is important to examine the critical reception of the novel, because it played an important role in constructing the myth of Holden Caulfield, very often on the basis of superficial readings and provisional moralism. Gwynn and Blotner, two scholars who dealt with the novel not long after its publication, find that the most important thing in the novel is the fact that Holden “never does a wrong thing,” i.e. he is a “saintly Christian figure” who does not break any Commandments (1970, 29). They also find it crucial to emphasize Holden’s similarity to Jesus Christ, backing up their claim by noting that he “is kind to the repulsive Ackley” and “sympathizes with the ugly daughter of Pencey’s headmaster” (Gwynn and Blotner 1970, 30). Another critic, Warren French, makes a claim that the novel is fundamentally an account of a physical and psychological “breakdown of a sixteen-year-old boy” (1960, 108), and a particular emphasis is given to his physical attributes, i.e. the fact that the protagonist is “skinny” (French 1960, 108) and is going through “the most physically difficult period of adolescence when only the most sympathetic care can enable the body to cope with the changes it is undergoing” (French 1960, 110).

From these examples, it can be seen that the authors’ interpretations are taken from instances in which the protagonist does not note the motivation behind his acts. This is not to say that Holden is amoral or evil, but rather that nowhere in the text of the novel does he offer any kind of an ethical maxim, nor does he express a wish or tendency to do what is morally *right*. In this reading, the Catcher seems to be placed on a moral high ground without admitting his moral superiority, implicitly suggesting that his youth is the reason for this. Although Warren French seems to replace traditional moralism with somatic determinism, the structure is shared with that of Gwynn and Blotner (1970) – by focusing on the work from a radically mimetic point of view, the critics ended up reading certain dominant categories into the novel, rather than reading out of its world, thereby ignoring important stylistic properties of the text and reduced Holden to a hypersensitive typical adolescent, as Carol and Richard Ohmann (1976) note in their analysis of the novel’s initial reception.

As can be seen, the majority of the initial reviews and analyses were based on normative definitions of adolescence, which led to interpretations based on imposed categories such as hypersensitivity and normality, and the novel got reduced to an array of clichés such as “miseries and ecstasies of an adolescent rebel” and “reality that almost breaks Holden’s heart” (Ohmann and Ohmann 1976, 20–21), while Holden himself became a symbol of an essentialist concept of adolescence, its problems timeless and unchangeable, perhaps a little more normal or a little more deviant, but in all cases presupposing a metaphysically determinant definition of youth in relation to which any young person could be proclaimed as a deviant, and its symbolic power suppressed so that it does not become a threat to the dominant culture.

To see how youth in the text is actually represented, one should examine the novel’s formal aspects, and the first one I will discuss is the language of the text. The dialect of the narrator is formed by combining a typical teenage speech of the time with particular phrases such as “I really did”, “or something”, “if you want to know the truth,” which are in a way claimed through their repetition and through this combination Holden creates his own idiolect which mimics spoken language (Graham 2007). Swear words are the second most common phrases in Holden’s speech, and this is so because they have no fixed meaning and are contextually determined (Graham 2007, 43), which exposes the fact that the language points to a shifting reality which cannot be clearly semantically locked. Holden’s main reference therefore shifts to the reader, whose privileged position is underlined by the fact that they are never addressed with expletives (Graham 2007). I will return to the relationship between Holden and the reader later on, but first I’d like to define Holden’s position in the text in greater detail and this is where contemporary theory could assist this reading, not by offering political boxes into which we could place Holden, but rather by offering a plurality of critical views which had some of its crucial moments of articulation precisely as part of the cultural processes of the novel’s matrix cultural context.

Pia Livia Hekanaho (2007) offers one such interpretation, examining Holden from the queer theory point of view. That is not to say that Holden

could be defined as homo- or heterosexual, but to note that he assumes a paradoxical position of someone who oscillates between heteronormative cultural patterns and a fascination with “images of difference or deviancy” (Hekanaho 2007, 92), which can be noticed, for example, in the voyeuristic scene in the ninth chapter in which he sits next to a hotel window and secretly observes a male transvestite dressing up, as well as the kinky sexual games of a straight couple and saying, “You should’ve seen them” (Salinger 1951, 61–62). It is also worth mentioning that Holden, for some reason, does not engage in a sexual act with Sunny in the thirteenth chapter and this is where the narrative gets unusual – after Sunny’s exit, Holden claims he felt “depressed,” first speaking to his departed brother, and then contemplating religion and God, without verbally confronting what had just happened (Salinger 1951, 98–100). This is not the only instance of a digression appearing instead of an explanation, and Clive Baldwin (2007) claims that these mechanisms show the ambivalence towards the expectations that the society sets on men, since the digressive approach is culturally viewed as a more “feminine” principle of explication. This makes the episode with Sunny even more ambivalent – it is unclear whether it is to be interpreted as the aforementioned repressed homosexual desire, an inability to “establish an emotional connection” or shock which comes from facing a female body as an object of economic transaction (Baldwin 2007, 114). In any case, Holden’s claim that he does not “understand” sex and constantly breaks the “rules” he makes for himself (Salinger 1951, 62–63) certainly shows as valid on the level of the narrative, since his sometimes misogynistic responses to women (Baldwin 2007) appear parallel to the moments of identification with female characters, which again implies that there is no fixed point on which he could build their identity.

Masculinity in *The Catcher* is also dealt with by Sally Robinson, who introduces the notion of class into the analysis. The American tradition of masculinity based on “competitive individualism” was disrupted by the gender equality movement (Robinson 2007, 76) and took place at the same time as the homogenization of individuals according to their identity, so that classification could help establish a market for a specific social group. The segmentation of the market according to the categories of identity

certainly led to its commodification (Robinson 2007), whereby it becomes a mere discursive product which offers the subject nothing more than an unstable category. As seen in the above examples, Holden cannot constitute his subjectivity inside the framework of the dominant cultural practices and it is unclear whether he mourns the traditional ideas of masculinity or finds masculinity as such repulsive. It is clear, however, that he cannot find himself in the dominant cultural image of a typical man, which also points to the presence and persistence of not only gender trouble, but trouble with all other components of identity.

The notion of race is another element that requires examination because, as will be shown, it undermines the presupposed universality of Holden's character. Racial identity cannot be reduced to not having the dominant skin color, but also includes the dominant white identity and this makes it more difficult to recognize it as a race because it constitutes a tacit norm (Curry 2007). By labeling Holden a universal example of the American teenager, one ignores the fact that he is discursively formed as an upper middle class white adolescent and thus his experience cannot be compared to the experience of the ethnically marked characters of the text. That is to say, Holden is not white because of his skin color, but because he consciously or unconsciously takes up the propositions, patterns and practices of the culture he is subjected to. This can be seen in his exoticistic thoughts on "colored singer Estelle Fletcher" (Salinger 1951, 113) and, even though he may not be aware of whiteness as a specific determinant of his worldview, his social status, defined by his choice of the means of transport, his ability to make a hotel reservation and, more generally speaking, his management of a certain amount of both material and cultural capital, certainly points out to a position of privilege. At one point he claims to hate when someone has a cheap suitcase, but then he almost apologetically says that he knows that it's "not important" and that "it sounds awful when he says it" (Salinger 1951, 108). As can be seen, his self-perception is chaotic, to say the least – in each component of an identity, his position remains ambivalent and shifting. He acts differently to his claims, he is not completely subsumed in any category which forms his way of thinking, and at the same time he does not know what to think because all discursive forms he is given do not represent him properly, he cannot find anything not susceptible to the play of meaning, nothing static and unchangeable like the museum he is so

fascinated with (Salinger 1951). His obsession with stasis was caused by Allie's death, and this *event*¹ has a particularly important place in the novel because we get to know about it only through introspection – and in this way, it escapes the reader in its singularity and inability to be represented as a particular correspondent textual token. The event of Allie's death thus becomes symbolically dispersed into the motifs such as the baseball glove, the red cap or the broken windows – these symbols do not completely correspond to the event, but they are reminiscent of it, they try to establish a relationship with it. This is why Holden is so fascinated by the static space of the museum, and also by another space – that of the Central Park Lake – in the episode when he asks where ducks go in winter (Salinger 1951). This simple question seems even more important when we draw connections to Allie's death – it represents hope that the pattern of the way all events occur might be deciphered, and then predicted, and possibly even prevented. The ducks that come and go signalize a stable rhythm of the nature in opposition to the chaotic unpredictability of Holden's discursive existence.

The position of the subject on the edge between self-actualization and socialization is emphasized both at the beginning and the end of the novel, because it is discursively encircled by apostrophe, i.e. the role of the reader is crucial here. In the novel's opening sentence², Holden *sentences* the reader to the role of his discursive companion. In some instances, this connection is just a lateral consequence of the slang used, but in other cases, it could be interpreted as an attempt at establishing a relationship or identifying with the reader. When taking into account the aforementioned identity issues in the novel, it is interesting that Holden ends his account with an ascertainment and almost a warning: "Don't ever tell anybody anything. If you do, you start missing everybody" (Salinger 1951, 214). Paradoxically enough, it is precisely with the act of *telling* that Holden tries to engage in a relationship with the reader – the story is what opens the communication channel between the two. Holden's conclusion almost implies the inability to achieve true socialization, because no matter what he goes through and shares with anyone through the text, he will lose them at a certain point, which should not be seen as a metaphysical claim, but rather a consequence of the nature of language as such.

This is why the heavily emphasized transformation principle in *The Catcher in the Rye* corresponds to another face of modernity. In this light, Holden may not be a universal symbol of a teenager, but he holds in himself a paradoxical universalism of the modern subject – he tries to make sense of his reality with what he is given, with his own singular experience, all the time taking part in cultural processes and thereby engaging in the mutual process of change with his context. In order for his voice to be heard, Holden does not seek legitimacy (nor does he find it) in the space of the political, the judicial or the educational, but he chooses the democratic world of literature, in which there is no other demand than the story itself and in which every story is equally (de)legitimized because of the very nature of language as its shaping medium. Only in this world can his youth find a way to voice its singularity and in this way offer a story that transcends particular categories which tried to tame its constant deferral, and thus Holden is enabled to remain forever young, not because of a presupposed essence of youth, but because of the way his youth is structured in the institution that conveys all of its claims.

NOTES

- ¹ "Event" used in this text implies a singular product of external forces which is not susceptible to symbolization (see Derrida 1988, 17–19).
- ² "If *you* really want to hear about it, the first thing *you'll* probably want to know is where *I* was born, and what *my* lousy childhood was like, and how *my* parents were occupied and all before they had *me* [...]" (Salinger 1951, 1; emphasis added).

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