

## **IN AND OUT OF THE INFERNO OF LIFE: HOLDEN CAULFIELD**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Development of self is one of the basic themes in *The Catcher in the Rye* novel. The developmental process is best present in the adolescent stage. Adolescence being a transitional phase Holden struggles to find stability and identity. Identity formation is an important aspect and at the same time difficult aspect in adolescence. Most psychologists maintain that identity development is the result of interaction between biology, psychology and social world. Self and identity can be constructed only through interaction with others in events and experiences. The concept of self-identity is linked to character development. The novel selected for study does illustrate how essential self and environment are in making sense of life.

**Key words :** self, identity, adolescence, environment.

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### INTRODUCTION

J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, (1951) is considered one of the most popular novels of the twentieth century. On its publication the novel received mixed reviews. But since then it has been steadily accepted as an important novel. In fact, it is invariably referred to as a cult novel. There has been a near unanimity that *The Catcher in the Rye* is one of the most significant books in American Literature to appear since the Second World War. Initially there were reviews carrying negative critical comments but the novel's inherent worth earned it the reputation of being an educative novel.

Growing up is an unavoidable and a gradual process during which the individual faces many difficulties that are either overcome or allowed to form memories that may become later case studies for realization of self. Early experiences in one's life are formative and childhood experiences are often a strength for adults to fall back upon. A common problem faced by adolescents is that of having to cope with their environment. Their worldview is invariably in

contradiction with the reality they have to face. In such a case the individual either moves away or initiates a struggle with the environment. Erikson observes in his *Childhood and Society*:

The adolescent mind is essentially a mind of the moratorium, a psycho-social stage between childhood and adulthood, and between the morality learned by the child, and the ethics developed by the adult. It is an ideological mind – and indeed it is the ideological outlook of a society that speaks most clearly to the adolescent who is eager to be confirmed by his peers and is ready to be confirmed by the rituals, creeds and programs which at the same time define what is evil, uncanny and inimical. (76)

The contradiction described by Erikson is applicable to the situation Holden Caulfield finds himself in. He is caught in a series of ambivalent situations where the options are acceptance and rejection. He resists maturity and wishes to protect childhood innocence.

Holden does not want phoniness to enter the world he has created for himself. In the sense suggested by Erikson, Holden as a resisting adolescent lands himself in conflictual relationships. Since adolescence is the intermediary stage the individual has to learn about the adult world and build the capacity to adapt to it. The novel is about teenage angst, desperation and the inability to connect. It is about a sixteen year old adolescent facing psychological crisis.

He fails his exams and so has to leave school. But instead of going home, Holden spends three days wandering around New York City, drinks, smokes, swears, and hires a prostitute all part of a descent into the real world and ends up in a psychiatric facility. He encounters complications in maintaining relationships. Throughout the novel he searches for his identity, his place in the adult world and goodness in the world. He is presented as a discouraged teen suffering from detrimental emotional unrest.

Ihab Hassan sees a double conflict at the heart of Salinger's writing – the struggle between what Leslie Fiedler calls the — “dream of innocence and the fact of guilt” and the tension between — “the Assertive Vulgarian and the responsiveness in a strange quixotic gesture.”

The *Catcher in the Rye* has been considered a story of initiation. It traces how Holden, an adolescent who enters the adult world finds it ridden with contradictions and phoniness and how finally he comes to accept them. His story is an odyssey, a quest which includes a search, series of escapes, a flight and a return. It may be said that Holden's is a quest for innocence. It has a dual aspect – Holden needs to leave home as well as to get back. He must grow and mature and at the same time retain innocence. Hoping to find goodness and innocence Holden is frustrated at the world's phoniness. The story involves only three days of Holden's life (Saturday afternoon to Monday afternoon) dealing with the conflict between innocence and experience. Some critics see only the negative side of Holden but a deep analysis of his character shows that apart from adolescent cynicism he is sensitive, perceptive, creative and intelligent in certain situations.

Salinger has employed neurotic deterioration, symbolical death, spiritual awakening and psychological self cure in the novel. Passing through all this, Holden is in search of truth, wisdom and personal integrity. Holden proves himself to be capable of self-awareness. He is keenly perceptive of phoniness in others but definitely not averse to admitting the same in himself. Holden puts up a struggle to understand the world around him and is disturbed by the many contradictions in it. Adolescence being a transitional phase Holden struggles to find stability and identity. Identity formation is an important at the same time difficult aspect in adolescence and most psychologists maintain that identity development is the result of interaction between biology, psychology and social world. In his article “Identity processing styles, self-construction, and personal epistemic assumptions: A social cognitive perspective,” Berzonsky defines identity as

... a self-theory, a cognitive structure that \_directs and governs the processes and resources adolescents use to cope and adapt in everyday life’. Its development involves \_an ongoing, dialectical interchange between assimilative processes governed by the identity structure and accommodative processes directed by the social and physical contexts within which adolescents live and develop’. (qtd. in Koops 283)

Assimilation and accommodation are considered important factors in the cognitive development of an individual. The same idea is put forth by the cognitive psychologist Jean Piaget. He posits that development occurs only when there is a balance between the assimilative and accommodative processes. In the novel, Holden learns to adapt to the existing social world which marks his psychological development. Holden experiences the change in his attitude at a point when he consciously understands that change is inevitable in life. Change is one of the crucial factors that leads to development.

The novel begins in a predicament at the Pencey Prep school. Holden has been sent out of Pencey because of his poor academic performance. That he has failed in four subjects does not affect Holden as in his opinion the phoniness at the Pencey devalues its credentials. Holden wants to find innocence which is lacking at the Pencey and hence his moving out in search of it. In the so called maturity Holden can only see phoniness. The novel begins with Holden's last day at the Pencey Prep school. His perception of the external world is different as he keeps resisting a balanced view of it. He wants the world to measure up to his expectations. This attitude in Holden can be better explained by simulation theory in psychology where the individual uses his self knowledge to understand the mind of others. Holden lacks objective knowledge initially but learns to see later the world with an objective eye which marks his development. Holden's experiences on the final day at the Pencey Prep School suffice to form a proper understanding of the nature of Holden. There can be seen a significant transformation in Holden at the end of the novel. The external world has given him lessons in the practicalities of life.

Holden feels uncomfortable with the persisting phoniness he meets with and would prefer to have a world devoid of it. But his experiences in New York during his descent into reality, teach him the necessity to accept life. Theories in empirical psychology focus on the importance of the role of the external world in acquiring knowledge by an individual. Sensations are considered the contents of cognition and Holden seems to be visually strong and his learning is mostly through his observation of things in the external world. The objects of the external world create a mental topography in him through which an improvement of his cognitive skills can be witnessed. Holden's inner mind is revealed through various objects of interest to him like ducks, glass and people around him.

The hunting hat is another recurring feature that accompanies changes in Holden's character. The hat is a complex symbol and invites many interpretations. Based on Gibson (1979), Glenberg suggested that perception of relevant objects trigger affordances for actions stored in memory (Glenberg et al 651). In *The Catcher in the Rye* the hat activates Holden's memory of his dead brother Allie. The hunting hat is closely associated with Holden's quest for truth and innocence. When alone, Holden is in fact in the company of the hat. Besides, the hunting hat also serves as a symbol of Allie, his dead brother. The red colour of the hat relates to the red hair of Allie. Holden sees Allie's innocence and purity in the hat and feels secure on wearing it.

One can realize oneself only in relationship with people and this lesson seems to have been well learnt by Holden. The book *Adolescence: A Developmental Transition* (Kimmel and

Weiner 1985) places identity development as the final phase of adolescent personality development‘ and emphasizes making commitments as a key aspect of the developmental process:

Achieving a clear sense of one’s identity is usually the last step in the several-year transition from childhood to adulthood. . . . A sense of identity consists of being reasonably sure of what kind of person you are, what you believe in, and what you want to do with your life. (386)

Self and identity can be constructed only through interaction with others in events and experiences. As long as one stays away from fellow beings identity is not possible.

Holden realizes his identity and role in the world after learning and understanding his responsibility as a brother to Phoebe.

The last chapter of the novel is considered a triumph of technical virtuosity. Salinger does imply that society is not so important in curing an affected person and proposes that the resources of personality are sufficient for discovery and self-recovery. The individual’s perception of himself, others and also objects provide Holden enough knowledge to understand and construct ideas about reality and also his identity. James Miller says, “Perhaps in its profoundest sense Holden's quest is a quest for identity, a search for the self. . . . The self he is led to discover is Holden's and



none other. And that self he discovers is a human self and an involved self that cannot, finally, break with what Hawthorne once called the 'magnetic chain of humanity' ' (qtd. in Ohmann and Ohmann 32) Ohmann and Ohmann state that Miller treats the self as if it were innate, genetically coded, yet somehow repressed. Holden has developed, learned and constructed his self from his subjective experience.

## CONCLUSION

Holden's personality is self-driven and not other-driven. To succeed in the former mode the person needs to be cognitively resilient. Holden's forte is cognitive resilience as evident from his insistence on making sense of things through his keen perception. Holden reveals qualities of observational learning, self-efficacy, emotional coping and self-regulatory capability in his journey towards understanding, acceptance and affirmation of life. Reality is considered not as a philosophical abstraction but as an existentialist datum of physical and emotional experience. The sensitive, innocent, and childlike side of Holden makes him a complex and endearing character in spite of his vulgarity and immaturity.

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