

## Holden Caulfield—Alive and Well

Editors' Note: *The ALAN editorial team would like to join the many voices throughout the world who lament the passing of J. D. Salinger. Whether or not it was his intention to write a young adult novel, he certainly did.*

In June 2009, a venerable work of 20th-century American fiction became the focal point of a legal squabble and, in so doing, rekindled an argument about the place and value of J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* in American culture. First, the controversy: on June 16th, 2009, the *New York Times* reported that once again, Salinger was suing "to protect his privacy and the sanctity of his work" (Schuessler). The suit involved the publication of *60 Years Later: Coming through the Rye*, by J. D. California—the nom de plume of a 33-year-old humor writer from Sweden—and portrays characters that can only be Salinger and his fictional protagonist Holden Caulfield. In fact, the copyright page includes the description, "An Unauthorized Fictional Examination of the Relationship between J. D. Salinger and His Most Famous Character."

Four days later, the *Times* reported that a judge had granted a temporary restraining order against publication of the book in the US, thus sparing readers a reunion in which Caulfield is "a lonely old codger who escapes from a retirement home and his beloved younger sister, Phoebe, [who is] a drug addict sinking into dementia" (Schuessler). The article didn't stop with the facts of the issue. It went on to raise the question of whether or not this once highly popular, critically esteemed, and oft-censored novel was losing its appeal for the young people of this new century. Teachers interviewed about this phenomenon confirmed that most students now find Caulfield passive, immature, even "whiny." In fact, the once-daring language was described by some as "grating and dated."

One teacher from Illinois summed it up this way: "Holden's passivity is especially galling and perplexing to many present-day students. . . . In general, they do not have much sympathy for alienated antiheroes; they are more focused on distinguishing themselves in society as it is presently constituted than in trying to change it" (Schuessler).

The contention that *Catcher* is passé brought a few fighting rejoinders from the *Times* readers, who chose to overlook the dated language and attitudes and focus instead on the book's universal themes—grief after the loss of a loved one, the search for meaning after tragedy. To no one's surprise, many of the Letters to the Editor were written by teachers.

As an English teacher/teacher educator who entered the teaching profession in 1957 and who was a late teenager during that late 1940s–early 1950s time-frame, I discern that the question of Holden's continuing relevance touched a nerve. For the record, I taught this novel to 11th and 12th graders in Minnesota and Florida for eight years. Later on, I used it as an example of the theme "Initiation into Adulthood" in teacher education classes. Do I believe it still has value in the early years of the 21st century? You betcha!

A frequent claim that the language Holden uses in describing himself and his world is obsolete and irritating to today's young people demands consideration. Of course the kid's patois is not that of today's teenager. We need to keep in mind that (a) the novel was published in 1951 and (b) its author was trying to imitate the linguistic habits of the young people of *that era*. In that sense, Salinger "failed," in that any author trying to depict the environment of *his/her* time will attempt to recreate the language of that time. And for those who haven't noticed, those linguistic patterns and styles *change*. With kids, they change rapidly. Authors who deal with the world of the imagination

make a vital choice: they must attempt to create the world from the contemporary view, or they must choose to create one from another epoch, either earlier or futuristic. Authors who choose the latter make a pact with their audience: you must take on faith (since neither the writer nor the reader was there) that they are recreating the speech patterns, dress, and other habits of those who lived at that time. Thus, Arthur Miller, in writing *The Crucible* in 1953, would have us believe that his characters used the argot of early 17th-century residents of Salem, Massachusetts. Salinger chose the former route.<sup>1</sup>

Of particular concern is the widespread use of profanity in the novel—by Holden and just about all of the supporting cast of characters. Once again—and I am speaking as a young person of that era—the frequent use of “goddams,” “fart,” “asshole,” “Chris-sake,” and “bastard” was part of the discourse. It’s up to teachers of literature to put those aspects of youthful discourse in perspective; avoiding or condemning them won’t make them go away and will actually distort the realistic portraits they paint. The use of such language in recreating characters in post-war fiction is part of the styles developed by John Updike, Saul Bellow, Sloan Wilson, Philip Roth, Nathaniel West, John Cheever, and other prominent writers of the time.

One final reflection on the language issue in *Catcher*: it is Salinger’s choice of profane/obscene utterances that has made his novel one of the most frequent targets of censorship complaints and challenges over the past 55+ years. In summarizing the most censored books of the period from 1982–1986, the authors of *Attacks on the Freedom to Learn*, compiled by People for the American Way, identify this novel as the second-most attacked (behind John Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*) during that quarter century (Simmons & Dresang, 2002, p. 72). To “merit” this attention, Salinger added a real no-no—the F-word—no fewer than six times in the text. Those readers/critics who were somewhat more forgiving cite the *context* of the word use: Holden’s reading of “F-you” expressions

on the walls of his sister Phoebe’s grade school, and his anger at its very appearance, was of redeeming importance; to some parents, however, its presence on the pages was enough to raise objections.

So the language in *Catcher* has resulted, over the years, in a double-barreled attack from its readers. I would maintain, however, that if literature is truly to reflect life as real people of another era live it, then the language those people use must be consistently recreated; i.e., it does have redeeming social, political, cultural, and literary value. And the teachers for whom I have developed the greatest respect over the past 52 years (I still supervise student teachers for my university) recognize its nature and place, and they work with their students to establish that perspective.

Beyond the language issues, there remains much in this novel that thoughtful teachers can use with students in secondary grades, and not only with “college-bound” students. There exist in *Catcher* a number of themes that are of general and continuing significance and that should be of concern to young adults everywhere. A crucial element in these strategies is the establishment of classroom environments in which students draw inferences, make judgments, and/or make relevant comparisons and contrasts through the subtle guidance, and not the overt pronouncements, of their teachers.

Here are several of the possible themes that attuned critical readers can discern and assess through the study of *The Catcher in the Rye*:

1. The loss of a beloved, older sibling: Throughout the novel, Holden mourns the passing of his older brother Allie, the only role model he has followed during childhood and early adolescent years. Holden has retained possession of Allie’s baseball mitt and even writes a theme on it when a classmate asks him to write “on anything descriptive.” Portrayed as a confused, immature, and vulnerable young person, Holden has obvious trouble coping with the loss, a problem with which numerous teenagers can empathize. This theme can also be found in the poetry of E. A. Robinson, Robert Frost, John Crowe Ransom, Karl Shapiro, and a host of other renowned American poets, thus offering the teacher many opportunities for comparisons and contrasts.
2. The desire to protect younger siblings from harsh realities: His sister Phoebe is the one living in-

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dividual to whom Holden is genuinely devoted. He risks detection by his parents when he sneaks into his home late at night to visit with Phoebe and confess his latest expulsion from yet another pricey private school. The next day, he goes to her school to continue the serious dialogue they had initiated the night before. It is while waiting for her that Holden sees a “F-you” written in crayon on a school wall. He erases it and another, but the third inscription has been engraved on the wall with a knife, thus making its erasure impossible. It is this discovery that leads Holden to realize he can’t shield her from “F-you’s” as well as a host of other harsh realities. There is pathos in his fruitless attempts to protect Phoebe and his realization of this incapacity. As with many struggling young adults, the world presents a formidable adversary to their quixotic reform efforts.

3. Frustration and fear in dealing with predatory adults: Holden’s skepticism about the attitudes of adults toward him is well founded. He is confronted with the bullying of a crude adult in Maurice, the bellboy whose offer of a prostitute’s services results in the violent extortion of cash. His encounter with a former dormitory proctor, Carl Luce, only reinforces his feelings of ineptitude and lack of maturing.

Perhaps most damaging of all is his meeting with Mr. Antolini, an English instructor from another school from which Holden has been dismissed. Exhausted, hopeless, and feverish, Holden goes to Mr. Antolini’s Manhattan apartment as a possible haven. Befriended and soothed by this married adult, Holden falls asleep only to awaken when he feels the caresses of his host. In a panic, he escapes this apparently manipulative pedophile, who has only corroborated Holden’s suspicions of allegedly concerned, kindly adults. Their world offers Holden Caulfield some distinctly perverse role models.

4. Parental absenteeism: Certainly a theme of this novel that will resonate with young people of today is that of parental neglect and/or insensitivity to the true needs of their children. Seeing Holden as not meeting their expectations, his parents shunt him off to the care of others. Caught up in their life as New York socialites, they enroll him in one expensive private boarding school after another and then scold him when he fails to achieve at

each of them. They mourn the loss of the favored Allie, show pride in their Hollywood writer D. B., and adore their beautiful, precocious daughter, darling little Phoebe. To them, Holden is the ugly duckling, incapable and unwilling to take advantage of the opportunities they have bestowed on him. They buy him off with expensive clothes and accessories and allow his grandmother to “reward” him with large sums of spending money. Nowhere in the text do they demonstrate any attempt to show genuine love for him or concern for his confused, vulnerable state of mind. And don’t think that Holden is unaware of this lack of parental affection or the disdain with which they regard him.

5. Loneliness: Closely related to #4 above is the abject loneliness felt throughout the novel by its protagonist. One beloved older brother is dead, another is 3,000 miles away and preoccupied with his career. Phoebe is his only friend, and the distance between them is reinstated each time Holden is consigned to another boarding school. Throughout the novel, he expresses his fear and unhappiness at being alone. Ironically, his negative outlook on life makes it difficult for him to establish meaningful, lasting relationships with fellow students or other peers. Couple this with his confusions about sex and his fear of females, and you have a young person who does much to create his lonely status. As partial compensation for his isolation, he lashes out at siblings, classmates, and most adults, branding them as “phonies.” The ultimate irony of this miserable state can be seen in his profession to Phoebe, late in the novel, that he sees himself as one destined to save vagrant children from a calamitous fate; i.e., that his goal in life is to be a “catcher in the rye.” The fact that the entire story is a flashback, told by Holden while being treated in a California sanatorium, adds a further ironic touch to this tale of loss of self-identity.

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6. Initiation into adulthood: Arguably the most significant aspect of Salinger's text is the manner in which it portrays the theme of initiation into adulthood (also called the *Edenic archetype*, *loss of innocence*, and *rites of passage*). In doing so, the novel takes its place among others who portray an archetypal pattern in their reflections on the human predicament.

In the latter half of the 20th century, the work of the renowned psychologist C. G. Jung, in his description of the *collective unconscious*, provided the groundwork for a new approach to literary criticism, one called the theory of archetypes. Jung describes his theory in the brief summary that follows:

I have chosen the term *collective* because this part of the unconscious is not individual but universal; in contrast to the personal psyche, it has contents and modes of behavior that are more or less the same everywhere and in all individuals. It is, in other words, identical in all men and thus constitutes a common psychic substrate of a suprapersonal nature which is present in every one of us. (Jung, 1959, pp. 3–4)

Thus, to Jung, all mankind throughout human history is affected by and shares in all that has gone before: the good and the evil, the angels and the beast. He contends that this nature is primordial and eternal: that we all share in these collective myths:

(The unconscious) is the deposit of all human experience right back to its remotest beginnings. Not, indeed, a dead deposit, a sort of abandoned rubbish-heap, but a living system of reactions and aptitudes that determine the individual's life in invisible ways—all the more effective because invisible. (Jung, 1960, p. 157)

Some major figures in mid-20th-century literary criticism seized on the archetypal theory and used it to characterize one way of looking at meaning and stylistic nuance in modern literature. Among these scholars, Joseph Campbell, Lionel Trilling, Northrop Frye, and Maud Bodkin are especially significant. As related to the archetypal themes in *The Catcher in the Rye*, the work of Ihab Hassan in *Radical Innocence: Studies in the Contemporary Novel* is particularly relevant. Hassan defines the initiation into adulthood as “a process leading through right action and consecrated knowledge to a viable mode of life in the world.” He then identifies the three phases of this process:

1. Separation—from the childhood phase. This is considered by some to be a symbolic death.

2. Transition—from childhood to adulthood. This includes a time in which the initiate ingests the “right actions” and “consecrated knowledge” of the tribe.

3. Incorporation—in this climactic phase, the initiate is accepted as an adult by tribal elders, a symbolic rebirth. (Hassan, 1961, p. 41)

In modern society, Hassan feels, the transition phase is often flawed. The actions and knowledge often reflect corrupt and questionable values, the actions/knowledge often convey mixed messages, and the role models are often suspect. Thus the incorporation phase often produces a young person like Holden Caulfield, who is alienated, misled, and skeptical of his membership in the “club.”

A brief review of certain key works of American fiction, written over the past 115 years, will serve as prime examples of the initiation process in general and the flawed nature of incorporation in particular. (This is not intended to be an exhaustive list.)

1. Huck in Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884). Having been through a series of tumultuous, frightening experiences during young adulthood, Huck chooses to reject membership in the adult world of his area and to “light out for the territory.”
2. Nick Adams in Ernest Hemingway's *In Our Time* (1925). In another related series, the young Nick witnesses, and is revolted by, the violence, the cruelty, and the double standards practiced by a number of adults with whom he closely associates and whose wisdom he comes to doubt.
3. Mick Kelly in Carson McCullers's *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* (1940). This early adolescent female protagonist seeks to rise above her poverty-stricken family circumstances in a deep South community during the Great Depression. Her unrealistic goals and frequent fantasies lead her to a series of disillusioning setbacks, one of which is the loss of her virginity. At the novel's end, she continues to despair about her new life as an adult.
4. Conrad Jarrett in Judith Guest's *Ordinary People* (1976). Born into an upper middle class family in a posh Chicago suburb, Conrad is a bright, handsome, athletically gifted and ambitious teenager whose life begins to unravel with the drowning death of his older brother, who was also his role model during his senior high years. He, like his father and mother, is incapable of coping with the

disaster. This eventually leads to his attempted suicide and the gradual estrangement of his mother.

5. Harry Potter in British author R. K. Rowling's seven-novel series named for its protagonist (1997–2007). Harry must come to grips with the death of his beloved parents, his own peculiar gifts, and the insidious evil that is omnipresent in his fantasy world and lodged in many of the elders with whom he associates. The young Harry provides readers with situations that (1) highlight the nasty results of intolerance and (2) encourage the resistance of any authority that appears to be deceitful or immoral. That this series has been wildly popular among today's young people is evident by its success; more than 400 million copies have been translated into 67 languages, making these the fastest-selling books in history. What sets Harry Potter apart from the novels described earlier is its reliance on fantasy, magical events, supernatural encounters, occult characters, etc. The aura of realism that is the staple of the initiation novels from *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* to *Ordinary People* is totally absent from the Harry Potter saga. And it is this exploitation of the world of imagination to the nth degree that has caught the fancy of young readers, surrounded as they are with video games, TV science fiction extravaganzas, and tech-laden commercial films that boggle the earthbound mind ubiquitously. (It is also worthy to note that, in the past decade, the Potter series has been the target of censorship complaints and challenges raised primarily from the Christian Right. These defenders of orthodoxy based their opposition on the use of witchcraft and wizardry throughout all seven novels.)

As Holden Caulfield represented the *zeitgeist* of his generation, so Harry Potter represents his: obsessed with supernatural fantasies and beset with the potential of magical powers to do good things. That latter predilection should not be surprising in a generation so totally immersed in the blogosphere, cell phones, text messages, iPods, Twitters, Facebook, and the rest of the constantly morphing harvest of the high-tech revolution. The critical factor in dealing with the need to reclaim their students' attention to serious issues and truly reflective thinking is the role of today's teachers. Their backgrounds, their ability to teach critical reading/thinking skills, and their

determination to establish a classroom environment in which those skills can be introduced, practiced, and reinforced are all vital if their students' awareness of themselves and the world around them are to become more than superficial; our students need to understand that the latest text message or Facebook comment does not provide a substantive understanding of what is going on in the global village.

I do believe that young people are concerned about the political, social, and cultural milieu in which they find themselves. Witness their interest in the Presidential election of 2008. To tap into this interest, the classroom must once again become an environment where deliberate, reflective reading takes place; where responses are articulated orally and/or in writing, and not just summarized electronically; and where the experiences of adolescents, depicted in certain imaginative texts, are given room to grow and develop. Teachers who commit to establishing such a learning atmosphere must always keep in mind the warning offered by Marshall McLuhan some 45+ years ago: "the medium is the message" (McLuhan, 1964); i.e., they must keep in mind the effects of current technology on the perceptions of their students. If those teachers can swing it, maybe someday Huck, Holden, *et al.* will join Harry in the pantheon of young readers' favorite literary characters.

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#### Note

- <sup>1</sup> One criticism I failed to find in the negative treatment of the teenage behavior of the time was the attire they wore. On several occasions, Holden expresses contempt for the "phony Ivy League" clothing of his peers: their dark gray flannel suits, their "flitty tattersall and figured vests," their dirty white bucks. I can corroborate, as a college student, 1949–1953, that those *were* features of the fashion of the day.

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Our 2010 theme, "Reclaiming Creativity," will give us an opportunity to look at English language arts leadership in light of multiple intelligences, differentiated instruction, gender issues, cultures, race, languages, and different kinds of schools—private, parochial, charter, and public; urban, suburban, and rural.

Submit your completed proposal to the 2010 CEL Program Chair, Scott Eggerding, at [seggerding@lths.net](mailto:seggerding@lths.net), or mail your proposal to Scott Eggerding, Lyons Twp HS, 100 S. Brainard Ave., La Grange, IL 60525-2101 **by May 1, 2010**.