

# An Interpretation of the Catcher in the Rye from Bildungsroman Perspective

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**Abstract:** In the “modern classic” novel *The Catcher in the Rye*, Salinger captures the spirit of a generation. Through the analysis of Holden, the hero, from the helplessness in adolescence to the gradual stepping on the road of growth full of thorns and mists, we can understand the psychological course of the formation of teenagers’ thoughts and personality changes in postwar American society, and understand the spiritual crisis behind their highly-developed material civilization.

**Keywords:** *The Catcher in the Rye*; Bildungsroman; Holden; Growth

## 1. Introduction

Jerome David Salinger is the well-known writer in America. He is regarded as one of the most influential American writers in 1950s. *The Catcher in the Rye* is the first American Bildungsroman of the 20th century and also the masterpiece of contemporary novels, “which has exerted a crucial influence on the initiation of the youths all over the world”<sup>[1]</sup>. The novel portrays the experience of a little boy called Holden who escapes from the school and wandered about. The protagonist Holden is also considered as the spiritual icon of the “Beat Generation”.

Salinger was born in New York in 1919. Salinger graduated from military school in 1936. In 1942, Salinger joined the army. He published some short novels before joining the army. During the second World War, he stopped his writing; however, he turned all his attention to the writing when he went back to New York. In 1951, Salinger’s first novel *The Catcher in the Rye* was published. He became one of the most famous writers at that time due to the success of this book<sup>[2]</sup>. Some argued that Salinger’s tale of the human condition is fascinating and enlightening, yet incredibly depressing. T. Morris Longstreth noted this book “is not fit for children to read”<sup>[3]</sup>. Likewise, the publication of *The Catcher in the Rye* also resulted in considerable controversy among the readers. Some parents held the idea that the novel was not suitable for the teenagers. Since its publication, the novel has attracted wide attention from critics and great interest from readers. Researchers at home and abroad have made a lot of analysis on the themes contained in the novel.

Although he published some other novels after 1951, the protagonist Holden was the most impressing figure among his works. As a typical Bildungsroman novel in America, *The Catcher in the Rye* describes the protagonist’s growth process from ignorance to maturity in a very distinctive language, which brings new inspiration to many readers and expresses the voice of a generation. In fact, the plot of this novel is quite simple. The beginning of the whole story is Holden’s memory in the mental hospital. Under the gross appearance, Holden’s dilemma in growing up is hidden, which also highlights the theme of growth expressed in this novel.

Holden, the protagonist, is a 16-year-old boy, born in a wealthy middle class family in the United States. His teachers and parents force him to study hard and get ahead one day in order to buy a luxury car. However, he is cynical, sensitive and impulsive, and can’t get used to everything around him. After he is expelled from school for the fourth time, he wanders alone in the “wasteland kingdom” of New York for one day and two nights for fear of being blamed by his parents. He tries to rediscover himself, and hopes to wander around the city for a wild weekend of confusion and tragedy. He stays in hostels, goes clubbing, drinks too much, even uses prostitutes in a silly way, and kisses each other with his beautiful vain girlfriend. Yet, around this lonely wandering boy is the sense of emptiness and disillusionment. He tries to escape from the adult world of pretentious, power fraud, cold social reality to find purity and truth, but does not find a way out, and finally falls ill in a mental hospital.

The protagonist Holden seems to reflect the personal experience of Salinger himself. The author attended several preparatory schools in his teenage years and got mediocre grades. He was admitted to three later schools and failed to graduate. After the publication of *The Catcher in the Rye*, Mr. Salinger lived a secluded life in the country, always trying to escape the public spotlight, and rarely published his work. He refused to allow his novel to be adapted, and as a result, *The Catcher in the Rye* is one of the few American classics not to appear on the big screen.

## 2. Bildungsroman and *The Catcher in the Rye*

The theme of growth has probably been traced back to ancient times. Everyone must face the transition from the young to the adult. Whether in the wild hunting times, or in the modern society with highly developed technology, every young person faces the test of undertaking responsibility out of free childhood. Therefore, the theme of growth appears in different arts. Literature as a carrier of inheritance of the spirit of the times, of course, has done some deep researches on this important topic [4]. From ancient times to the present era, there have been the classic literary works on growth, and the novels have accelerated the development of the growth theme. In the birthplace of novel art, Europe, great Bildungsroman came forth in large numbers.

### 2.1 Bildungsroman

Bildungsroman is one of the most important literary phenomena in the history of the Germany literature. "Roman" means "novel". "Bildung", a key concept in the medieval theology, means "one God", that is, "according to the image of God." The introduction of the word "Bildungsroman" shows main ideas and the ultimate purpose of Bildungsroman is that people should be making efforts to be closer to God, and gradually to be perfected.

In literary criticism, a Bildungsroman--novel of formation, novel of education, or coming-of-age story is a literary genre that focuses on the psychological and moral growth of the protagonist from youth to adulthood (coming of age), and in which, therefore, character change is extremely important. Through narration of the growth experience of a person or several people, Bildungsroman reflects the changing process of the character's thoughts and psychology from naivety to maturity. Therefore, the Bildungsroman should be limited to the narrative from the adult world state into the known state of the protagonist. That is to say, the protagonist has taken a key step towards maturity, and this kind of novel can be regarded as Bildungsroman.

### 2.2 *The Catcher in the Rye* as a Bildungsroman

Growth is not only an important experience in one's life, but also a cultural phenomenon, which is ubiquitous in human life. In recent years, scholars and experts have gradually realized its value, because it provides a broad space for literary creation and has a strong cultural metaphor. Bildungsroman has a long tradition of creation in the history of western literature. The main character of Bildungsroman is the adolescent group. The content is the most important growth stage in the journey of life, and the artistic expression of the common or similar growth experience of people. Bildungsroman roughly follows the changing track from European tradition to modern America, and the growing process of teenagers has always been one of the themes concerned by American literature.

The story of initiation novel contains the growth of characters, the core content includes the experience of the growth journey, the narrative structure of naivete-seduction-escape-puzzle-loss of naivete-epiphany -- life and self-awareness [5]. The result must be that the protagonist acquires a new understanding of society, life and self-awareness after going through the hardships of life. *The Catcher in the Rye* is called a model of American Bildungsroman novels because of its inheritance of the tradition of the theme of growth.

In a way, the novel is regarded as a key to the understanding of adolescent development. Teenagers reflect an era and a society, and they are cultural inheritors and innovators. On the one hand, the life situation and mental state of teenagers reflect the cultural characteristics and social environment characteristics of an era. Their ideals and pursuits, values and ways of life are reflected in the spirit of The times. Through them, we can reflect ourselves and the society we live in. Moreover, despite the growing prosperity of today's economy, more and more people are experiencing the frustrations and pains of growing up and learning how to move from the naive and romantic world of fairy tales to the complex and contradictory reality. Many commentators have explored this subject, but growth is

perhaps the most important and eternal subject for human beings. Therefore, it is very meaningful to discuss the novel from Bildungsroman perspective .

### 3. Holden's growth in *The Catcher in the Rye*

From the perspective of characters, the hero is still an adolescent boy, whose gender and age conform to the category of initiation novel; from the perspective of the plot, *The Catcher in the Rye* includes the opportunity and perception of growth. The positive and negative guiding forces encountered in the journey are generally narrated in chronological order. From the point of view of the subject, *The Catcher in the Rye* embodies the experience and insight of the typical growing subject in the process of socialization, and decisive things happen. Salinger uses his keen insight to explore the complex psychology of teenagers in detail and vividly portrays the spiritual world of the protagonist.

#### 3.1 Holden's puzzlement

After being expelled from school, Holden has to wander the streets of America. Holden's inner world is pure, but he is still infected with the malignancy of the society at that time and becomes a person with bad behavior. This leads to the existence of two worlds in the protagonist's heart: one is the childlike innocence of the world, the other is the ugliness and hypocrisy of the adult world. "But it can be easily tempted by the colorful things in society, such as drinking, cigarette-smoking, sex" [6]. Holden is at the stage of saying goodbye to his innocence and stepping into the adult world. He feels loss and fear in his heart. As a result, his inner world has been drifting away, and he can neither integrate into the current environment nor go back to his childhood, which makes him more confused, contradictory and lonely.

Family and parents have a great influence on the development of adolescents, because parents are role models in the minds of children. Children not only imitate their words and actions but also are influenced by their parents' values and outlook on life. With no understanding and no help from his peers or teachers, we would have thought that Holden must have taken guidance from his parents. Holden's family was quite well off. There are parents, a sister and two brothers, the younger of whom has died. Holden's father is an ambitious and famous lawyer, but in Holden's eyes, his father is a hypocrite. He is adamant that his father's profession is a reflection of his character.

In the family, the mother is selfish and indifferent. In the face of her son's "lack of success", she will only nag and lack understanding. She even gives her son the wrong gift (a pair of ice blades). He has become estranged from his parents. All he has is a family in name only. There is little care or warmth for him. The family is supposed to be the best shelter for teenagers, but Holden's parents apparently neglect their responsibilities, and they end up having him committed to a mental institution without a care in the world.

He "hates living in New York", and every monotonous, boring, and phony day. He especially "hates" the school. School is a place where teenagers gather, but Holden keeps complaining that it is full of "fake" people who are studying to buy Cadillacs... He said in the school,

"It's full of phonies, and all you do is study so that you can learn enough to be smart enough to be able to buy a goddam Cadillac some day, and you have to keep making believe you give a damn if the football team loses, and all you do is talk about girls and liquor and sex all day, and everybody sticks together in these dirty little goddam cliques. The guys that are on the basketball team stick together, the goddam intellectuals stick together, the guys that play bridge stick together. Even the guys that belong to the goddam Book-of-the-Month Club stick together" [7].

His roommates, who lives near him, doesn't understand him. Holden and Acre are similar in that both of them are not accepted and respected by people. However, Holden reveals the society's contempt for him with his rebellious attitude against the tradition. Therefore, his sensitivity makes him unable to tolerate all kinds of fake behavior at school. In the process of growing up, teenagers try to break free from the shackles of family and go out into society independently.

#### 3.2 Holden's quest for identity

Adolescence is a key period which everyone has to experience in his life. It is an indispensable period to step into adult and maturity. The process of finding themselves is, however, not smooth at all, but full of contradictions, puzzles, and conflict. It consists of many kinds of mental clashes, heart's

maturing and the understanding of the society and human nature. The shaping process can represent all the human beings' development of their maturity.

Teenagers will soon find that the society is not as simple as they think, and the education they receive from their families and schools will not tell them how to adapt to the society. This is the dilemma that teenagers face in the process of socialization. Holden is in his adolescence, and his restless psychological characteristics make him unable to deal with the complex social reality. He is caught in a dilemma between the beautiful ideal and the dirty reality. The "fake" school can't guide his psychology correctly, and his family is indifferent to him. The protagonist's raving and repeated fantasies, which appear to be the harbingers of his schizophrenia, reveal the inevitable steps of growth that the human experience undergoes.

From above-mentioned we can find that Holden shows his respect for innocence. He cherishes the childhood even though he has been seventeen years old and has gray hair. He always acts as if he was thirteen even twelve. He is not only to act younger than his age to cherish childhood innocence but also to attach importance to the people who own the character and spirit of innocence. We can easily find that his younger brother Allie and his younger sister Phoebe are the most purest angels in Holden's mind. Holden considers them as the Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden. When Holden hears the news Allie passed away, he breaks the windows to give expression to his sorrow. He keeps the mitt to mourn the death of Allie. It is more significant that the mitt symbolizes the innocence Allie owns. In addition, Phoebe is another person Holden cherishes. Although she is a little girl, Holden adores her all the time. In Holden's opinion, Phoebe stands for childhood innocence. No matter where Holden goes, he is always nostalgic for Phoebe; that is to say, Holden longs for the innocence of childhood in fact.

However, innocence brings about the awkward situation Holden lives in. Holden holds the hostile view towards the phony things and people. He thinks that he is already surrounded by the phony people, therefore, he thirsts for going to New York to seek his innocent world. Unfortunately, he will confront a most cruel world in his journey of initiation. Holden struggles alone, struggling between the beautiful dream and the vulgar reality, which is the reason why he often feels lonely, depressed and hopeless. Holden felt bitter not only for his own misfortune, but also for the human condition. However, he did not give in to reality, but explored the connotation of existence by thinking about nature, society and life.

#### 4. Conclusion

The three days and two nights of experience and inner feelings of a depressed middle school student described by Salinger not only reflect the confusion and loss in the growth of teenagers, but also reflect the hypocrisy and darkness in the development of society and the falsity and ups and downs in the adult world. All this paints a grim picture of 21-century urban life, in which sensitive and intelligent young men grow up not with fresh air and bright sunshine, but with the suffocating undercurrents of the earthly world.

It can be said that Holden's pain represents the pain of those who cannot find their place in the society and are struggling to find a perfect spiritual world. Teenagers will inevitably experience various kinds of loneliness and pain in the process of growing up. They should actively cope with the challenges and strive to integrate into the complex society. Holden's ambivalence not only reflects the growth characteristics of American teenagers in the 1950s, but also represents the growth problems of teenagers in different times and countries.

Adults should pay more attention to the growth of teenagers, give them more understanding and love, and guide them with the purifying power and inspiring power of art. "To be a catcher in the Rye" is not only the wish of the young Holden, but also the burden of every adult, who should learn how to face the troubles and pains in life, dispel the anxiety and confusion in the heart, and successfully locate and realize personal value in the process of socialization. The clever interpretation of the theme of growth in this novel has important implications for modern people.

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