

A Narrative Study of the First-person Narrator in the Catcher in the Rye

Zhengwu Chen^{1,*}, Yu Liu¹

¹Zhengzhou University of Aeronautics, Zhengzhou, China

*Corresponding author: michael@zua.edu.cn

Abstract: J. D. Salinger's first novel *The Catcher in the Rye* was written in 1951 and was considered as a classical book in global literature. Holden's life of three days and two nights was presented to us by a first-person narrator. I think the first-person narrator Holden was unreliable and I backed my opinion in analyzing the context, logical reasoning and the author Salinger's reflection on Holden. The author Salinger lived in America in 1950s when there was great success in material but vacancy of spiritual values. The relationship between people and nature was alienating and people began to search for their egos solitarily. The author's topic was clearly been exposed through Holden's hardships and Salinger's reflection on Holden: the theme of alienation.

Keywords: *The Catcher in the Rye*; First-person narrator; Reliability; Reflection

1. Introduction

The famous novel *The Catcher in the Rye* written by J.D.Salinger was considered as a classical book of 20th century in America. It was banned in America after its first publication, even right now there are still some people denying this book. Actually it's just a story of a young man's expulsion from school. *The Catcher in the Rye* is in fact a penetrating study of one's solitude of his human condition. Holden Caulfield, a teenager of 16 years old was expelled from school for the forth time. After a fight with his roommate, instead of going home, he went to New York to "take a vacation". And did many "crazy" things, he went to night club and saw many youngsters doing mad things, he felt upset about the society. He called a whore, yet when she showed up he blenched. After wet himself he was afraid of his death, so he went home to say goodbye to his sister D.B. Phoebe. He told his beloved sister, perhaps his only beloved person in this world. He said he wants to be the catcher in the rye. "And I'm standing on the edge of some crazy cliff. What I have to do, I have to watch everybody if they start to go over the cliff--I mean if they are running and they don't look where they are going I have to come out from somewhere and catch them. That's all I'd do all day. I'd just be the catcher in the rye and all" [1]. Finally his dream didn't come true because his beloved sister and he "grow up" to a young man from the adult world .

In this book, the alienation of "beat generation" was revealed, such as solitude, wander and barren mind. The author, J.D.Salinger used first-person narration in this novel, as a matter of fact; first-person narration has been the most staple used mean in initiation stories. The novel adopted first-person narration and reveals a 16-year old student's life in New York for three days and two nights. In fact, there are two narrators in this novel: the Holden who was in that life and the Holden who told us that story in hospital. I doubt both of them; I think there are several things that may lead to their unreliability. At the end of the novel, we know that Holden was dealing with a psychoanalyst which means that Holden may suffer from some mental problems. So we can say that he had lost some certain sense and logos, thus may had biased opinions towards certain things. From the author's own life experiences I'd say that Holden may be just a reflection of Salinger. The story and the world of Holden were not for the initiation of teenagers but for the criticism of adults. Salinger let Holden descript his experiences not to reflect tentative teenagers but to expose his own anxieties and hesitations. I think this may be another potential theme. This is what I am trying to investigate.

From checking researches of *the Catcher in the rye*, some databases like CNKI and PQDD. I found that most of the researches focus on the anti-hero Holden or on Salinger the author. The conclusions were like single-tracks such as 'spiritual vacancy', 'revolt and compromise' and 'initiation' etc. Few researchers compared Holden with Salinger or considered Holden as a reflection of Salinger. This context tries to prove Salinger's creative theme of alienation by studying the unreliability of

first-person narrator and the reflection of Salinger in the novel.

The novel adopted first-person narration and reveals a 16-year old student's life in New York for three days and two nights. In fact, there are two narrators in this novel: the Holden who was in that life and the Holden who told us that story in hospital. I doubt both of them; I think there are several things that may lead to their unreliability. At the end of the novel, we know that Holden was dealing with a psychoanalyst which means that Holden may suffer from some mental problems. So we can say that he had lost some certain sense and logos, thus may have had biased opinions towards certain things. From the author's own life experiences I'd say that Holden may be just a reflection of Salinger. The story and the world of Holden were not for the initiation of teenagers but for the criticism of adults. Salinger let Holden describe his experiences not to reflect tentative teenagers but to expose his own anxieties and hesitations. I think this may be another potential theme. This is what I am trying to investigate.

2. The Unreliability of First-person Narrator

First-person narrative is a normal method in literature and it has its own merits and demerits. "First-person narrative is a precise and more influential method than others in telling stories. It adds the personal perform in narration and has changeable purposes and effects. Meanwhile, first-person narrative also can create stories which are absurd and exotic because no matter how strange a story is, it could be viewed as an imagination of me [2]. Yet first-person narrative also has its disadvantages. For example, the narration always sounds unreliable, especially the narrator, who has a limited sphere of activity and always holds some personal feelings and experiences thus might have certain prejudices and even faults, all these always make the first-person narration unreliable.

Rimmon-Kenan divided first-person narrator into "narrative ego" and "experiential ego". In *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden was both a "narrative ego" and an "experiential ego". According to Rimmon-Kenan, a narrative ego was easy to be an unreliable narrator because of his personal perform in the story. However, as an experiential ego, can we say that Holden was reliable? Yet as we all know that, when someone was looking back his experiences, it's also hard to be completely calm and objective. After all, it's his or her own story, all he or she described were limited in his or her own seen and said.

As the only narrator in this novel, Holden Caulfield was unreliable to me for three reasons: his narration, self-contradiction and natural logic. In the text, he kept saying that he was a liar. We can see that clearly in chapter eight. He told lies about Ernest Morrow to Ernest's mother, all he said were lies. He admitted that: "once I get started, I can go on for hours if I feel like it. No kidding. Hours" From this, we can see that even though Holden kept saying that he did hate phonies and false world, he was actually a one hundred percent liar. His love to lying should bring doubts to readers that whether he was a reliable narrator.

Another example, Jane Gallagher was a girl that didn't show up in the novel, but we can see that Holden liked her very much. He described his relationship with her, he said that she "lived right next door to me," "I used to play checkers with her all the time. She wouldn't move any of her kings. She'd just leave it in the back row." According to his narration, he should be very familiar with Jane Gallagher. But he didn't come down and say hello to her. The ironic thing is Stradlater, the guy who was dating Jane Gallagher kept asking Holden "why don't you?" "Why the hell don't you, instead of keep saying it?" Stradlater might know that Holden was a liar in school and thought that he was lying. At last, Holden couldn't prove that he actually knows Jane and it may lead to that he lied about his story with Jane.

Holden's self-contradiction in narration also made him an unreliable narrator. As we see in the text, Jane Gallagher was the only girl that he loves. Yet she didn't show up or say anything in the novel and we can't tell whether she likes Holden or not. Holden's girlfriend was Sally, a false girl with no sincerity to Holden. From this we can see that Holden was actually a phony himself. He didn't like false things yet couldn't resist Sally's beauty. Moreover, he got an idea that he would take Sally to Greenwich Village and spend their lives in there. What's weird is that at that time, he thought "what a fool I was." After that he said: "I probably wouldn't have taken her even if he wanted to go with me. The terrible part, though, is that I meant it when I asked her. That's the terrible part. I swear to God I'm a madman." It isn't the first time that Holden called himself a madman; actually he admitted that whenever his self-contradiction showed up. He didn't like it yet he still did it. Even though he kept admitting his lies and admitting he was a madman. That only made him an "honest liar", he was still a hundred percent liar.

Holden Caulfield, a character who always jumps to conclusion about people and their phoniness, can be labeled as a hypocrite because he exemplifies a phony himself [3]. Before Holden judges others, he should take a look at himself and see his own faults. Throughout all the encounters with different people in the book, he is easily the phoniest of all the characters. Perhaps Holden cannot be evaluated better than by Trow Bridge, 'Holden is himself a phony, He is an inveterate liar: he frequently vents his spleen about his friends, despite the fact that he seems too be advocating the need for charity'.

In this novel, *The Catcher in the Rye*, the first-person narrator, Holden Caulfield was 16 years old, his words in the narration obviously showed an inner mind of an adolescent. And we couldn't find anything weird about him, he had wealthy parents and an elder brother who likes him, he went to a good school and had a good chance to attend social activities. Some people might say that that's a mad world full of "beats" and Holden was one of them, they'd say that he was in a great current of spiritual scanty. However, his psychological activity was still unreliable to me. Imagine this, in a world of 16-year old young man, how come he was so cynical and how come he detested this world so much. In Chapter One in the novel, Holden said that: "and all that David Copperfield kind of crap..." As we all know, *David Copperfield* was a great literature work of Charles Dickens. It had always been viewed as a classical inspirational book, how come Holden called it "crap". Did he find some phonies or some hypocritical things in the work? Maybe people would say that he was a special boy, well I do agree with that. Maybe he was special, but we all know that we human gain knowledge through learning and experiences. Even an adult may not read *David Copperfield* into "crap", well by saying this, I exclude the author. He must hate this book, here is my point: J. D. Salinger imposed his own feeling on Holden, so that Holden shall had a discounted reliability as a narrator. He hadn't been through the World War Two as the author had, thus I deny Holden Caulfield's representation of the American teenagers. That's to say, his narration was suitable for Salinger, who was the real "beaten one" instead of teenagers.

3. Holden Caulfield's psychological age

In the novel, Salinger created a 16-year old adolescent Holden who was kind of a premature boy. Salinger showed us an adult world with phonies and frauds through a 16-year old boy. In normal, a 16-year old boy couldn't regarded society that way as in the novel, but the author used his adolescent rebellion, made readers believe what Holden said for Holden was using his sharp eyesight reading this false world. Because Holden was a rebellious adolescent, so he might be strange in reading this world and people couldn't blame him, all readers could do was trust him. However, there are some contradictions in the text from which we can see that Holden was just a tool managed by Salinger and Holden was created to describe the author's psychological journey. That is to say, Holden was actually 36-year old, not 16. It was Salinger who was telling his feelings towards society instead of Holden Caulfield.

Checking Salinger's previous experiences, we will find that Holden could be viewed as a younger Salinger. But even though they shared similar experiences, their spiritual lives could be very different. Holden, a younger Salinger, couldn't be that penetrative to see people around him as "phonies". I have no doubt that Salinger felt that way, but speak of Holden, who had scanty experiences of life, I'd say that he didn't have enough "information" to view this world as a place full of "phonies".

This book was written in 1951, when the author was 32 and Holden was 16, I think as a young man of 16 years old, he couldn't feel that much about this world. He was lying to us, and even deceived all the American people that the teenagers were beaten. In fact, the author who represented the American adults was beaten. In America. The "beat" means a crowd of people who were exhausted, unstable, upset, solitude and spiritual sterility. In *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden described some kinds of "beat appearances" over and over. Through Holden's words, the author was trying to convince us that these phenomenon means "beat", yet I am not convinced for several reasons.

The real "narrator"---the author Salinger belonged to the "beat generation". He attended World War Two, and became a real "beat" one because of the war. I think he revealed his own spiritual sterility and solitude by means of a 16-year teenager's narration. Thus what Holden thought was actually what the author thought; an adult of 32-year old couldn't represent teenagers of 1950s in America. There are some clues in the text. The author created a narrator who was considered early mature, but I think Holden's action didn't fit the word "premature". He was just an "appliance" who carried an adolescent body but stuffed by Salinger with rebellious ideas which were actually belonged to Salinger himself.

4. The Authorial and Cultural Context

Jerome David Salinger was born in Manhattan, New York, on New Year's Day, 1919 in a rich Jewish family. Then he was sent to Valley Forge Military Academy in Wayne, Pennsylvania. It had been said that most description about Pencey Prep was set in Salinger's school. From his description we can see that Salinger hated this military school: the phony headmaster, the stiff and stupid teachers, the stereotype teaching methods and cynical students who were talking about sex all the time. Salinger lived in this situation without friends and parents, he felt upset and solitude. Actually he didn't finish his course in three departments, so finally he quit to do business, but still didn't success. In Salinger's life, just as Holden Caulfield, he couldn't find someone close enough to understand his anguish and solitude. The situation which Salinger created for Holden was just the same he felt about this cynical society, all the anguish, upset, sensitive moods and solitude of Holden were shadowed in Salinger's own experiences, Salinger was clearly reflected in Holden according to his own personal perform. In a 1953 interview with a high-school newspaper, Salinger admitted that the novel was "sort of" autobiographical, explaining that 'My boyhood was very much the same as that of the boy in the book. It was a great relief telling people about it [4].

Salinger was born and raised in Jewish culture. Jewish people had no country in America; they had roamed around for several centuries in the world. They were always maltreated by others and suffered poor lives. Although some Jewish people improved their lives through hard working, that just made their material lives more comfortable, their spiritual lives were still absent and couldn't resist their anguish in mind. As a Jewish, Salinger had a rich family, but that couldn't release his spiritual empty, he was still lonely, this can be clearly seen in the novel. After he became famous because of *The Catcher in the Rye* he bought himself a piece of land on a mountain in New Hampshire and lived a reclusion life ever since. In the novel, Holden said that he wanted to be reclusive: pretend to a man who was deaf and dumb, in that way he could ignore this false world. From this negative attitude towards society, it can clearly be seen that Holden was just a reflection the author Salinger.

This novel was written in 1951, six years after World War II. America made a lot of money during the war and gained great material progress after it. As the increasing of material lives, the spiritual lives of American people were decreasing. At the beginning of 1950, America pursued Truman Doctrine in politics and McCarthyism in economic. In the false peace world, people were ignorant of their corruption lives. Some people were dissatisfied with false things and phonies; they wanted to pretest yet couldn't find a way out. This period was called "the silent 50s". Some youths were called "the beat generation" because their negative resistance to reality. Salinger was one of them. He also went to night club and sent for call-girls just like Holden. All that Holden had been through and thought were Salinger's own feeling and Salinger was clearly showed up in Holden's experiences and personality.

From Holden's experiences and his growth of mind, we can see Salinger's reflection all the time. Salinger was telling his own upset, solitude and degeneration by creating a mode, a mode who was a rebellious adolescent. Without Salinger's unique experiences and personality, he couldn't write such a success novel and he couldn't understand teenager's confusion and hesitation.

5. Anti-hero Holden

As a classical anti-hero in American literature, who was also called "the 20th century's Huckleberry" [5]. There are three main aspects in Holden's personality. The most important aspect of Holden Caulfield's characters can be attributed to his judgment of people. He easily mocks certain people and the way they act. On teachers Holden feels that, 'You don't have to think too hard when you talk to a teacher' When his sister asks him if he would want to become a lawyer like his dad, he replies by saying Lawyers are all right, I guess- but it doesn't appeal to me. All you do is make a lot of dough and play golf and play bridge and buy cars and drink martinis and look like a hot shot According to Webster's dictionary, 'Phoniness is described as artificial counterfeit, or hypocritical' Phony is one of the words heavily used by Holden. He uses the word 'phony' several times throughout the course of this book and he uses it to describe the actions of others but not himself.

The criticism toward 'phony' things in society is expressed in the novel primarily by the word 'phony'. One of the things Holden often calls 'phony' is the world of movies and everything about it. Examples of it are his anger toward his brother D.B. because he moved to Hollywood, aversion of Sunny the prostitute who tells him she spends most of her time in film theaters and derision to the three women he met at the bar who are only interested in movies and famous actors. Another thing Holden

calls 'phony' is the theater. He finds the theater 'phony' because he thinks that instead of demonstrating reality as it is, the emphasis is put on polishing theatricality. He says he has never seen so much 'phony' things like he saw in the theater. Out of these examples and others we see that for Holden it is very important to be 'real', honest and not 'phony', thus the criticism toward the 'phony' things in society is the most significant aspect of his personality. However, Holden himself is a 'phony' too, in some ways. For example, he always lie to others, he thinks it's funny and some kind of joke. He thought that he is naïve and sincere but he called a whore and drunk. That's the ambivalent character of the Holden Caulfield.

Holden resented the adult world and resisted entry into it, but he had little choice. Society and his own body were telling him that it is time for him to change. He was attracted to the trappings of adulthood: booze, cigarettes, the idea of sex, and a kind of independence. But he despised the compromises, loss of innocence, absence of integrity, and loss of authenticity in the grown-up world. Holden struggled with family and class expectations. Like Salinger, his socioeconomic background was at least upper-middle class. His family and culture expected him to be reasonably successful at the prestigious prep school and move on to the Ivy League [6]. Holden couldn't see himself in that role, so he wanted to escape. He wanted to run off with Sally Hays and maybe get married. This frightened the practical, unimaginative Sally, who was more interested in social status than Holden. Later, Holden decided to flee to the West where he would live as a deaf mute, ideal because he would not talk with people. Holden is a romantic but a negative one. His imagined ventures are escapes from reality rather than fight for a goal.

From this novel, it's not difficult to realize that Holden hold a great affection towards his family. At the very beginning, he said that his parents are 'nice' and his elder brother treats him good. His love to his family can be especially viewed by the death of Holden's brother Allie. Although he has been dead for about three years, Allie was a mystic presence in the novel. Holden thought of him often and spoke to him when things are darkest in his life. Allie was associated with the theme of death. He also represented hope and the gifted innocence of childhood. Holden clearly loved his brother. Only two years apart in age, they were close friends. In chapter v, 'I slept in the garage the night he died, and I broke all the god dam windows with my fist, just for the hell of it.' [7]

Holden's adolescence and his confusion complicated the relationship with Phoebe, a 10-year old girl, bright, pretty, matures beyond her years. She sometimes seems to be his best friend, at other times he was actually aware of her sexuality or need for independence. Twice he said that she could sometimes be too affectionate. When Phoebe ride the carousel, Holden realized that there are times when kids wanted to try to grab the golden ring, symbolically taking a chance in life, and he must allow her the freedom to do that, even though she may fall. That realization was a big step for Holden. All things considered, the relationship between Holden and Phoebe seemed healthy and normal for caring siblings. It was in flux, as is everything in life, and Holden might regret that. But it showed he has grown when he realizes that Phoebe can't stay 10 years old forever. This was penetrated with the author true purpose that to hold a pure mind is the most important and most difficult thing in the cynical world.

Told as a monologue, the book describes Holden's thoughts and activities over these few days, forming a figure that was full of breakdown, unexplained depression, loneliness, odd and spiritual collapse. During his psychological struggle, life continues around Holden. Through the novel we are forced to think about society's attitude towards human condition, the question is that does the society have a mentality or a deliberate ignorance of the emptiness which can define human existence? If so, when Caulfield tried to find and investigate his own sense of solitude and isolation, is Holden actually the one who is going insane, or is it society which has lost it's mind for failing to see the hopelessness of their own lives? In this false world, Salinger was trapped deeply in it just like Holden in the novel. I think what Salinger was trying to telling us is that we must hold our pure mind stay away from being corrupted by phonies and barren minds. In the novel, when Holden saw some dirty words in Phoebe's school. He felt very angry, 'it drove me damn near crazy' 'I thought how Phoebe and all other little kids would see it, and how they would wonder what the hell it meant, and then finally some dirty kid would tell them-all cockeyed, naturally-what it meant' 'I kept wanting to kill whoever had written it'. At last, Holden took the adventure of being misunderstood and wiped it out. Salinger created such a hero who was saying dirty words all the time yet he didn't want the kids being involved in and he wanted to be a catcher of pure minds of little kids. I think this is the true purpose of the author: he lived in a cynical and false world full of material prosperity yet barren minds. Even Salinger himself was solitude and weird that belonged to 'the beat generation' he didn't want people follow him, and he hoped that the world he lived shall not continue, even he couldn't bring an end to it.

6. Conclusion

Salinger's famous novel *The Catcher in the Rye*, about its themes and the author's purpose, there are different opinions. In this article, I concluded the Salinger had created an unreliable first-person narrator-Holden by analyzing the context such as Holden's self-contradiction and his disordered logical sense. From this I concluded Holden was actually a reflection of Salinger himself. From Holden's personality and his psychological age, we can see that Holden was just a body of 16-year old but with a mind of 36-year old. Holden was just an unreliable model that the author created to reveal his topic of alienation. Salinger belonged to 'the beat generation', who lived a life of solitude, hesitation, with material prosperity yet barren minds. Salinger was trying to recluse from this cynical world and he described his own feelings about this corrupted world through Holden's mouth, by this he wanted to show his own alienation. His hesitation, solitude and wander can clearly be seen on Holden, thus he brought his idea to us: even though Salinger was trapped in "the beat generation", he himself did really hate this situation and appeal an end to this world. This is the author's puzzle and his implicate purpose because alienation of people was really dangerous: it could hinder the development and improvement of human beings. This novel might wake alienated people up and encourage them to search for real precious things in their lives and release themselves in coexisting with nature.

References

- [1] J.D. Salinger. *The Catcher in the Rye* [M]. Boston: Lit—Tie, 1951.
- [2] Salzberg Joe I. *Critical Essays on the Catcher in the Rye*. Boston, Mass: G. K. Hall, 1990.
- [3] Salzman Jack. *New Essay on the Catcher in the Rye*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1991.
- [4] Hamilton Ian. *In Search of J. D. Salinger* [M]. London: Heinemann, 1988.
- [5] Cowan Michael. *Holden's Museum Pieces: Narrator and Nominal Audience in The Catcher in the Rye* [C]. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990: 52—64.
- [6] Zhang Guixia, "The Catcher in the Rye Study in China" [J]. *Journal of Zhengzhou University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)*, 2004(5): 6
- [7] Alexander, Charlotte A. *J. D. Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye* [M]. Simon&Schuster, 1997: 8—9.