

## REPRESSED SEXUALITY AND QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN THE CATCHER IN THE RYE BY J. D. SALINGER

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### Abstract

To create a fulfilling life, any young adult needs to embark on a journey of transformation and self-discovery, but such a healthy development was hampered in the life of the protagonist Holden in the story *The Catcher in the Rye* by J. D. Salinger due to unexpected conflicts or maladjustments crept into his life. The present study investigates the psychic turbulence of the protagonist to trace the teenage problems, especially the hidden sexuality and quest for identity. By applying psychoanalytical methods and gender theory, the study has tried to serve some moral and spiritual enlightenment and also reveal the pathetic plight of a young adult caught in labyrinth repression. Troubled young adults like Holden can attain self-realization and social adjustment only thorough love, kindness, and support from humankind.

**Keywords:** repression, teenage sexuality, the quest for identity, maladjustment.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

"The only journey is the journey within."

- Rainer Maria Rilke

Life can be an aimless journey for some individuals like Holden in *The Catcher of the Rye* by J. D. Salinger. The precarious life of Holden, devoid of love and full of angst and alienation, is on the verge of a chaotic doom where none of the people around matches his ideas or helps him adjust with the environment. Holden does not quite 'fit' in high society, although he belongs to the upper class. His communications fail to find rapport with the pretentious social codes of the upper-class society where he lives. Holden feels alienated from the café society, movies, and an elegant lifestyle. He lies to people he meets to abstain from talking about himself. His teenage life seems bleak and finds everything uninteresting except dance. For Holden, dance is the only pure form of expression, and he wants to connect with others through dance since he feels it is the single activity not marred by any self-consciousness and the usual pretensions.

According to Lingdi Chen (2009), Holden's behavior "reaches far beyond any normal teenage impulses," and he "has negative attitudes towards almost everything and everyone he meets." (146). As a growing young teenage boy, he despises the highly pretentious behavior patterns of his peers, and it interferes with his interpersonal relationships. The character of Holden Caulfield has been unfairly judged negatively by several literary critics, and the novel was banned in the list of American School Board Journal books. But considering *The Catcher in the Rye* as a creative work to evoke awareness about struggling young adults and critique Holden's character from a psychological perspective, it is more empathetic to prove why Holden remains the way he is, i.e., why he feels, thinks, reacts and responds differently from other young adolescents. The paper investigates the concealed repressions, conflicts, hidden sexuality, and his mental struggle to 'fit' into society for his survival. *The Catcher in the Rye* is a fantastic monologue of a psychic teenager ardently trying to recover, and this gives a chance to trace the inherent problems of young adults like Holden by applying the Psychoanalytical approach.

### 2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

As a result of societal values, interpersonal relationships and mental attitudes, the protagonist faces a psychic dilemma and suffers "psychic warping." As Frantz Fanon (2008) stated about alienation, Psychoanalytical approach is the most significant approach to trace the isolation, teenage sexuality, and maladjustment in Holden. The paper aims to retrieve hidden problems as Peter Barry (2017) believes the connection between conscious behaviors and the unconscious mind through Freudian psychoanalysis.

Naturally, the verbal and physical actions, as well as dreams and desires, are all analyzed to understand what is happening inside the character's mind. Barry also explains that in Freudian psychoanalysis, a method to treat patients is by encouraging them to speak freely, which releases their repressed fears and conflicts out of the

unconscious mind. The aim of this kind of therapy in psychoanalysis is to treat patients with mental disorders (Barry 97); nevertheless, Psychological theories equip literary critics to reveal the connection between sexuality, instincts, and human subconscious and behavior as well.

Various factors cause mental problems in young adults such as the effect of environment, family history, interpersonal relationships, personal disasters, abuse or neglect, loss of a loved one, maladjustment and teenage depression. Most of those items are referred to in the novel, and therefore those elements are examined to trace what had influenced the mental state of Holden by applying the Psychological approach. Since Salinger himself had experienced such mental pressures, the author emphasizes on the quest of the protagonist, his inability to 'fit' in with the environment, and the social values as he despised once. The first person narrative of the novel opens new vistas for investigating the psychic pangs of the protagonist.

As Freud hypothesized, many psychological problems have their roots in childhood experiences, and some of those unexpected incidents may clash within as one grows into adulthood. Hence the mental issues of Holden are investigated in this study applying psychoanalytical theories and gender theory to evaluate Holden's relationship with the people around him as well as his sexuality.

Lois Tyson (2001), in his book, suggests that the purpose and application of psychoanalytic theory are to identify and elaborate on these problems to prevent them from reoccurring in lives. (23). If undetected and cured on time, these problems can cause dysfunctional behavior in some individuals. If a young adolescent is unable to cope with these problems, life becomes fragile and ends up in broken relationships allowing depression to take over, and he/she may undergo self-torture. Based on psychoanalytic theories, the experiences and internal monologues in the novel, the hidden twists going on in Holden's sub-conscious, and its dysfunction in a human being are all validated. Holden beholds many symptoms of a psychotic individual and at times, behaves like a patient with Schizophrenia. Holden displays acute stress, utter depression, awful anxiety, and Thanatos along with other symptoms like fantasy, daydreaming, sexual perversions, fixation, repression and also tends to show many problematic behaviors like Narcissism and aggressive outbursts.

#### **2.1. Holden's complex character:**

James E. Miller (1965) describes Holden as "a bright but sick boy whose psyche needs adjustment" but also as an "ideal rebel" as well as a "neurotic misfit" (Miller 8). Miller also states that Holden is more complicated than "his admirers are willing to recognize" (8).

Many other critics have also referred to Holden's narcissistic traits as the reason for his alienation. Holden feels miserable when he communicates with others, and his inhibitions prohibit him from real communication, and he is seldom as confident as times he shares his inner thoughts within himself. Repercussions of his sexuality and real emotions prompt him to say lies to his teacher, the nuns, the three women at the bar, or maybe most excessively, to Ernest's mother on the train.

Donald Foran (1966) finds Holden a complex character due to many shortcomings from a psychoanalytical perspective (22). No wonder why such defects of Holden appear real, when one once probes into the personal life of J. D. Salinger. Salinger was stubborn and solitary, and the discrepancy between his desire for fame and his hatred of the pretentious social values and codes form the foundation of this novel and Holden's precarious existence. Reflections on the author's indecisions and uncertainties are accurate in Holden's life, too, as Foran (1966) describes the working of Holden's psychological state: "Holden is not altogether unaware of his shortcomings, however. he frequently labels himself 'a damn liar,' and more often still claims that he has "meant." something when Holden did it, or when he said it, but, upon reflection, sees that he has committed the Capital Sin of the Caulfield world, that of phoniness." (78)

Besides, escaping from problems instead of finding a solution may lead to further complications in life. Researchers like Levi A. Olan (2005) and Charles Kaplan (1999) have the opinion that the protagonist Holden Caulfield and Huckleberry Finn are somewhat similar. Olan claims that Holden is a modern version of Huckleberry Finn since they both have complications adapting to the rest of the world. Olan finds that: "Both ( Holden and Huckleberry Finn) are strange and alien to their world, not unlike the disoriented figures of much of modern literature." (24).

Critic Lilian R Furst compares J.D Salinger's novel *The Catcher in the Rye* to the stories of the Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky. Helen Weinberg compares Salinger's novel *The Catcher in the Rye* to Franz Kafka's novels while John M. Howell compares it to T. S. Eliot's poetry. Considering Holden's multiple crises, William T. Noon (2005) claims that Holden has a life crisis, for he is continually tensed and tries to run away from life. According to Hamilton (1998), "Throughout most of the novel, Holden is running away." (17). By following Sigmund Freud's theories on psychoanalysis, Holden's hidden desires and concealed fears are unveiled while

investigating his childhood, many traumatic events like the death of a sibling, sexual abuse, etc. pop up to expose his real mental and emotional state.

The complex nature of Holden becomes more authentic, considering the troubled childhood of the author, and obsessively private man. Salinger's inner conflicts and struggles to fit into the society he disliked, his experience with dance to connect with the environment, and his expulsion from school for poor performance are some of the reasons for Holden's suffering too. In "Interview with J.S Salinger", *If you Really want to Hear About it, Writers on J.D. Salinger and his works* Shirlye Blancy (2006) states that when Salinger was asked about the autobiographical elements in the novel, *The catcher in the Rye*, in an interview Salinger declared that "Sort of, I was much relieved when I finished it. My boyhood was very much the same as that of the boy in the book, and it was a great relief telling people about it."

## 2.2. Holden's dual nature

Frederic I Carpenter (1957) describes Holden as "a boy who is badly mixed up" (12). David D. Galloway (1970) calls Holden a "misfit hero" (Galloway 227)

For many critics, *The Catcher in the Rye* represents a quintessential tale of one teenager's struggle in this chaotic modern world. Recently, as part of the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the book in 2011, *The Catcher in the Rye* is considered as a new debate on modern teenagers. Holden is fully aware of his duties towards his parents, yet he is never true to himself or his family. He hides his failure at school, but in doing so, he is caught in a whirlpool of guilt and indecisions. It further carries him towards more intense internal psychic struggles which proliferate maladjustments. His failure is he cannot 'fit' in or 'stick together' to where he does not belong to and forced to present a false front.

Holden's journey from his traumatized childhood to troubled adulthood is not smooth, and as a child, he felt insecurity and other discrepancies, which multiply gradually to develop into anxiety, chaos, and alienation. He seeks out anonymity and visits crowded night clubs surrounded by 'jerks.' He even hires prostitutes and takes dates out, whereas he hates boys talk about drinks, sex, and girls. More intriguing is the inconsistency in his ideas and actions. Though he hates wealthy 'jerks' he also confesses his displeasure and discomfort with people with less money and 'somebody has cheap suitcases.' He hated the hypocritical mentality of the upper-class and the silly ways of the needy. He discloses how he despises the snobbish plenteous culture of the elite, yet he socializes with the wealthy high class. Holden's fluctuating attitude and unstable mentality are part of his divergence from normalcy, too; the more he tries, the deeper he is caught in the web of false values surrounded him.

## 2.3. Holden's Repressed sexuality

*The Catcher in the Rye* was frequently banned in America for the deep undertones of sexuality pervading in the novel and the casual handling of the profanity as well. The book was revived rigorously for "immorality" perversion and "obscene language" (quoted in Hamilton, In Search of J.D. Salinger 117)

An investigation of the fiction from the 19th to 20th Century shows that the most common theme in young adult fiction is getting into trouble with societal cliques, coming of age problems, teenage sexuality, or strange sexual abuses that affect the mental stability of youngsters. Many critics focus on the gender roles in *Catcher in the Rye* as major issues provoke Holden's psyche, especially his sexual encounters with both men and women. The novel leaks Holden's obsession with women and his inability to act on his desire and establish a causal relationship with the opposite gender. Even though the book has gained much popularity, many critics argue that the book is too vulgar, immoral, and immature and not part of serious literature. The first person narrative occasionally reveals Holden has several severe sexual conflicts: his family situation is far from ideal as Holden always felt his "parent's secretive tendencies."

According to Hamilton, as far as Holden and Phoebe are concerned, the children lack their mother's emotional support and affection, as well as the father's image in their lives (Hamilton 71). Freud believed the mother or mother substitute sets the foundation of the emotional wellbeing of a child. The absence of such loving care and support might be part of Holden's insecurity. This emotional insecurity and helplessness drive him to many and perverse adventures.

The perversion and concealed sexuality in Holden's life are displayed in several parts of the narrative. Holden rents a hotel room in Manhattan, but soon the sexual acts of his neighbors disgust him. Holden comments on what he saw in the opposite room.

I saw a man and a woman squirting water out of their mouths at each other. First, he'd take a swallow and squirt it all over her; then she did it to him--they took turns, for God's sake. I'm not kidding; the hotel was lousy with perverts. (55).

Though the scene was repulsive, he could not stop watching the erotic game. He states in his monologue that this kind of junk is fascinating to watch. And he confesses that he is the biggest sex maniac and no one knows about his secret. And the irony is that he also announces his innocence that sex is something he doesn't understand.

Holden's immediate conscious response towards Mr. Antolini caressing his hair when Holden visited his former English teacher is a visible reflection of the unconscious psychic torture he has been experiencing due to sexual abuse. Holden is virtually shocked when Mr. Antolini touched him while he was about to fall asleep on a sofa:

I laid awake for just a couple of seconds thinking about all that stuff Mr. Antolini'd told me. Then something happened. I don't even like to talk about it. What it was, it was Mr. Antolini's hand. What he was doing was, he was sitting on the floor right next to the couch, in the dark and all, and he was sort of petting me or patting me on the goddam head. (172).

Symbolism is the theory of interpreting particular objects to trace the hidden meanings beyond the obvious ones. Vera Panova states that a symbol need not always be an object in the narrative, and it can also be an action (62). Here Holden's immediate response can be interpreted as a symbol of his sexuality. Therefore, Holden recognizing Mr. Antolini's advances and fleeing the apartment in shock, hints the sexual abuses he had experienced before. It also refers to something that Holden has been repressing all these days:

I know more damn perverts at schools and more than anybody you ever met, and they're always poverty when I'm around. (172)

Holden's sudden shock and response is a persuasive example and the reminiscences of the abuses he had undergone on several occasions probably when he was a little kid and also later during his days at the preparatory schools. Holden reveals his secret pangs.

Boy, I was shaking like a madman. That kind of stuff's happened to me about twenty times since I was a kid. I can't stand it. (172).

His tormented psyche is apparent from the critical statement that it happened about "twenty times" and also epitomize Holden's sexuality and internal 'convulsions' as Walt Whitman refers in the poem *I sit and look out*:

I hear convulsive sobs from young  
men, in anguish with themselves,  
terrified after deeds done.  
Walt Whitman

Considering a Survey of United State Department of Health, the statistics and information substantiated gives strong evidences of a child sexual abuse in every 9 minutes (Child Protective Services Agencies, 2018), shifting from one boarding school to another throughout his young life, Holden might very well have witnessed or was subjected to sexual abuse on various occasions.

Unlike his schoolmates, Holden finds difficulty in developing intimacy with girls, and instead, he tried to focus on his younger sister, Phoebe mostly for emotional support from her. Though there is no reference to incest in the novel, some critics have interpreted this as evidence of Holden's repressed desires. And considering his psychological immaturity, and a perverted mind, he might have had such wanton thoughts. However, the intimacy and the affectionate bond he maintains with Phoebe demonstrates Holden's innocence as well. Since Holden lost Allie and his elder brother has become a 'phony,' and left alone in this troubled world, and he clings to his innocent little sister for empathy and affection. And finally it is Phoebe who saves him from his doom.

Even though the novel does not provide any vivid descriptions of Holden's sexuality; sexuality is a vital aspect of his character traits. Barry (2017) believes that by applying the psychoanalytical approach, we can contemplate the overt content in the first person narrative to trace the covert meaning associated with the subconscious mind. According to him, the connotative meaning of the text is "what the work is 'really' about" (Barry 107).

The novel displays Holden's deep quest to find someone who will understand him, but unfortunately, Holden repeatedly encounters people who add to his agony. Holden's great dilemma is that he tries to connect with people who end up hurting him (Sunny, the prostitute, Sally Hayes, Mr. Antolini, etc. are some of them). Simultaneously, he avoids those who can help him, such as his family and the only girl for whom he cares for, Jane Gallagher. The only exception is Holden's relationship with his sister Phoebe Caulfield.



#### 2.4. Holden's quest for Identity.

According to Jay Anthony (2016), the alter ego that Salinger creates through Holden's voice allows him "to insulate himself from both responsibility and consequence, an inherently narcissistic goal, but a uniquely necessary one for Holden in his search for an authentic identity". (1).

While facing the vague apprehension at the onset of sudden biological growth and development, the urge for status and decision making, increased pressure from parents and school, and one's search for self and identity are some of the glitches young adults reported to have experienced during their transition from teenage to adulthood. Since adolescence is a period of the significant social stage, mood fluctuations, and changes in relationships, the slightest insecurity or adverse experiences can topple the healthy emotional development of young adults. In Holden's case too, lack of surety and security at home; various forms of abuses within the boarding schools that he attended; and the pretensions of the affluent class would explain his maladjustment and failed quest for identity. Although Holden was expelled from school for low grades; he does not seem to suffer from any learning disability. On the contrary, throughout the novel, Holden appears to be quite sharp and quick in tacking situations.

Innumerable hurdles loom on the way of Holden in achieving his self-identity. What disgusts him most is the stupidity and self-obsession he beholds whenever he meets people. Holden either ruins the conversation by uttering rude comments or resort to telling lies. Holden, in his pursuit for someone who can understand him, repeatedly reaches out to wrong people and also fails to 'fit' into the environment around him.

Holden wanted to establish real communication with people and adjust to the environment around him. In Holden's typical "Caulfield" state of agitation and excitement, he tells Phoebe what exactly he would aspire to be in the future. Holden's intense desire is to become a Catcher in the Rye, and he discloses that,

Anyway, I keep picturing all these little kids playing some game in this big field of rye and all. Thousands of little kids and nobody's around--nobody big, I mean--except me. And I'm standing on the edge of some crazy cliff. What I have to do, I have to catch everybody if they start to go over the cliff--I mean if they're running and they don't look where they're 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. I know it's crazy, but that's the only thing I'd really like to be. (154)

A vital aspect of this scene is how it encapsulates the title of the novel as well as many concealed crux of Holden's personality. Holden wishes to save children from being harmed and from losing their innocence. Holden's intense desire to protect others symbolizes Holden's own secret wish to defend himself from perverted people and the polluted world outside. Holden is engulfed at the threshold between childhood and adulthood, but many calamities hamper his journey towards normal adolescence, and he had no control over them. He ardently wants to remain in the innocence world of childhood to avoid a rupture in his personality. Holden lost his younger brother to death, and the traumatized protagonist never recovered from the shock. He suffers from the guilt of a survivor, often haunted and desperate seeking help and advice from his dead brother whenever Holden is in pain and despair.

Holden's only pleasure is his craving for dance. Like Salinger, the protagonist of the novel has an enthusiastic passion for dance and found peace in dance even when he had drifted towards an emotional breakdown. However, he is unable to behold total freedom in other activities except when he dances with his sister Phoebe. Phoebe is the only one who saves him from final doom and helps develop a sense of self-awareness and set him on the right path.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Readers sense impending doom and faint clues of a disaster at the beginning of the novel. In other words, the initial stage of the narrative foreshadows that Holden's story is a chronicle of loneliness, loss, isolation, sexual abuse, and mental breakdown. An in-depth dissatisfaction and anger permeate throughout the novel though Holden does not revolt against anyone. He elects repression as his defenses mechanism and hides the low grades and ultimate expulsion from school to his parents. Running away from home and secretly hiring apartments to stay are part of that repression. The novel permeates with Holden's madness, his mental confusion and the first page itself reveals that he is in a mental asylum and he is writing from a rest home in Southern California, after 'this madman stuff' ( 51) occurred in his life. The reasons for Holden's feelings of guilt and grief concern the concept of Thanatos or the death wish as well. The psychologically postulated death drive allegedly compels a human being to engage in risky and self-destructive acts that would eventually lead to his/her end. Behaviors such as thrill-seeking and aggression are such actions that stem the Thanatos

instinct. Holden's mood swings, aggressive nature, lying or hiding facts, tendency to indulge in smoking and drinking, and the struggle to make friendship with women older than him lead to further despair and alienation. The hopelessness and helplessness resulting from such encounters push Holden further into the caverns of Thanatos.

The loss of his sibling Allie too left a deep emotional wound on his psyche. Holden's intense frustration, violent outbursts immediately after the death of Allie added another chapter to his unhappy childhood which ultimately has him "Psycho analyzed" (P.39) for his mental stability. In spite of all this chaos in life, Holden humbly desires to lead a normal life in a safe new world. Through several events and situations throughout the story, Holden manifests a deep need to nurture and care for children is an innate desire for peace and stability in his own life. His siblings were his only source of friendship and affection, especially Phoebe and Allie. It is worth noticing that Holden mentions Allie whenever he feels lonely. To some extent, he realizes through his sister Phoebe that he too must become an adult and take responsibility in the course of his life.

Holden's therapy at the therapeutic center is another realization of his maladjustment, signaling the need for self-transformation. He realizes it is inevitable to adjust with the society he despises and overcome the inner conflicts to survive. His growth or transformation is based on the realization of his ability to change as well as discard all the regressions and impurity he gathered from the society all these years. One has to align with the environment or perish that is the law of nature as Darwin stated about all species. As if receiving a mysterious revelation, Holden, in spite of having all those fluctuating mood swings and aggressive outbursts repeats several times in the novel that one has to 'fit in' with the surroundings.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

To create a fulfilling life, any young adult needs to embark on a journey of transformation and self-discovery, but such healthy development is hampered if unexpected traumatic experiences cause conflicts and maladjustments in one's life. The present study investigated the traumatic childhood and mental state of Holden Caulfield to trace teenage problems, especially the protagonist's hidden sexuality and quest for identity. There is a ray of hope finally, when Holden in the presence of Phoebe, hopes to gradually recover since he realizes that his sibling is the only source of support in his quest for identity and happiness. What all young adults require is empathy, emotional support, and a favorable societal environment for a healthy transition from teenage to adolescence. And thereby create a happier protective world that changes the trajectory of one's life for the better.

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