Quest for identity: Bitter reality of American society in

The Catcher in the Rye

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Introduction

 The surge in popularity of J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* is often attributed to the brutal honesty and introspective nature of Holden Caulfield. An anti-hero who not only exposes people for their "phoniness" but is able to understand his own inability to connect with others is an attractive quality to an American culture which prides itself on independence and anti-elitism; Holden's total rebellion against bitter realities of American conventions posited him as a type of literary posterchild for the American countercultural movement of the 1960s. The counterculture championed Holden's anti-establishment views as a bold indictment against a corrupt, oppressive society, and they developed a type of community around his story. This paper will examine Holden's personal struggles with identity as well as his social struggles with American institutions. The impact of *The Catcher in the Rye* on youth counterculture exemplifies the postmodern qualities of the novel, and it is these postmodern qualities—an ironic self-identity, a questioning of social structure, and a resistance to definition—which posit the novel as a literary beginning of the post/modern era.

The similarities between *Catcher* and the countercultural movement can be seen in both Holden's personal life as well as his social life. In both aspects, Holden's influence on youth can be defined by his idea of a childlike innocence and an adult encroachment upon this innocence. During the countercultural era—a time marked by war, global instability, and major technological advances in warfare—many youth viewed the world as an incredibly hostile place, an attitude that caused many to both question the purpose of society as well as remove themselves from that society all together. Margot A. Henriksen describes how Salinger's story

about a loss of childhood innocence occurred during the beginning of an age of fear in America. Mark Hamilton further remarks how Holden's personal life became a source of influence for many countercultural youth: "First published in 1951 and popular ever after, it was among the baby boomers one of the most widely read novels. As poignantly as any author of the era, Salinger defined the landscape of psychological discontent. Who could have been more profoundly alienated than preppy Holden Caulfield? *The Catcher in the Rye* caught the insecurities of those born in the atomic age" (45). This insecurity began as a question of self and then translated into an overall questioning of society, a development that can be seen through Holden's experience.

The countercultural movement began as a youthful question regarding age, identity, and purpose, and Holden's journey through adolescence reflects this response. While Holden certainly struggles with relationships with others, Holden first struggles to understand his relationship with himself. He struggles with understanding how his behavior should reflect his age, how he should prepare for his future, what he believes in, who he trusts, and how he can prevent himself from growing up, all questions pertaining to who he is and why he matters as an individual. The text indicates that Holden's identity crisis began when his brother Allie died, a fate that Holden fears for himself and all the other children in the world, and this threat of death draws similarities to a countercultural fear of death brought about by the beginning of the nuclear era:

> The one group of postwar Americans least able to deny reality and block out their
> fears were the young of America, those children and young adults, like David in
> *Invaders from Mars* and Holden Caulfield in *The Catcher in the Rye*, who
> wereemotionally and psychologically susceptible to atomic nightmares and atomic
> insecurities. By focusing on the psychological troubles of America's young and
> by highlighting social deviance and rebelliousness of American youth, the culture
> of dissent illuminated the social and psychological disruption that characterized
> life in the age of anxiety (Henriksen 149).

The threat of death and robbed youth was a daily reality to many youth, and their reaction to this

personal threat was to question the purpose of the values and institutions that their parents had created for them. While parents promoted their values to youth as methods of living a long and successful life, many youth rejected these values because they did not view life in the long term. Holden's disdainful opinion about his family, his school, and religious figures signifies the beginnings of a youthful distrust of these institutions. What began as a personal question of identity translated into a reaction against the social institutions created by older people to help younger people have a sense of purpose and direction in their lives; the young sought to be separate from their parents and their parents' standards, but, like Holden, they were unsure of what they would replace this gap with, a common dilemma among countercultural youth. Rather than viewing their adolescence as a time of opportunity and growth, many youth related to *Catcher* because it presented a very real picture of confused, distant, and disconnected adolescence that was becoming more common in postwar America:

> In modern middle class American parenting, as in expressive forms of culture such as the novel, adolescence has served as a complex symbol of cultural innocence and hope for the future…In the postwar period, however, recognition of the increasing dissonance between American ideals and the realities of social experience has become unavoidable, and it is precisely this cultural dissonance that is highlighted by Salinger's novel (Edsforth and Bennett 131).

It is important to note that *Catcher* does not necessarily signify a clean, distinct break from the modernist period; rather, the novel represents a subtle movement away from modernist ideology. *Catcher* is neither clearly modern nor postmodern—Salinger himself would have abhorred such stringent categorizing of his writing—but *Catcher* is indicative of a culture that was beginning to develop a collective understanding of the frailty of society and the breakdown of the self. It is not my goal to prove that *Catcher* is a postmodern novel, but it is my intention to exemplify the fact that the novel is significantly unique—and consequently possesses postmodern themes—in the way that it is difficult to categorize. The conventional ideologies—both pertaining to religion, politics, and personal choices—presented to countercultural youth by their parents were commonly rejected; rather, the only definition that countercultural youth could identify with was their opposition to their conventional parents and standards created by their institutions. This culture of difference and opposition is not a culture of definition because it depends on the

opposition for definition, similar to Jacques Derrida's description of postmodernism's lack of definition: "By definition, difference is never in itself a sensible plentitude. Therefore, its necessity contradicts" (53). While Derrida's ideas were specifically in regards to postmodernism's impact on language, the idea that language in itself resists definition resonated with a postmodern idea of self-identity. Youth counterculture and its necessity were dependent on the culture they were resisting, a self-defeating idea. While the countercultural movement resisted definition, on a personal level, this lack of definition impacted the average youth's sense of identity. Holden's struggle with identity is similar to the struggles of many youth during the countercultural era, and his lack of direction is indicative of a postmodern resistance to a metanarrative.

Contrary to an overtly simplistic interpretation of *Catcher*, it is not this study's intention to make direct comparisons between Salinger and Holden because such comparisons would unfairly reduce Salinger to a mere literary character; however, the environment that surrounded an author during his writing process can at times reveal key elements behind a text, and Salinger's wartime experience and ideological transformation following the war directly correlate with the postmodern qualities of the novel. Salinger's personal changes following his service in World War II were significant because his religious beliefs, opinions about mankind, and questioning of his own identity signified a personal transformation to a more postmodern view of the world. Rather than approaching the novel from an authorial intent interpretation, the study will approach the novel largely from a new historicist approach, and a brief overview of Salinger's background will contribute to a better understanding of the postmodern qualities of *Catcher*.

Prior to the war, Salinger possessed a moralistic attitude towards humanity, believing that the human race, while corrupted, was still redeemable. Largely due to his Jewish upbringing and elitist prep school education, Salinger readily adopted a more conventional idea that man was a moral being who actively chose between right and wrong (Bloom 53). His decision to join the Army during World War II was largely due to his patriotism and desire to help those who were under oppression from Nazism, and by most accounts he was a very brave and admirable soldier who served in some of the bloodiest battles in the European front (Reiff 9). However, following

the war, Salinger experienced a disenchantment with the human race as Kenneth Slawenski states that "[t]he army would eventually have a profound effect upon Salinger's work… he was forced to adjust his attitude towards people.

Salinger's writing following the war took a noticeably darker turn as he began to craft stories dealing with death, suicide, depression, alienation, and anxiety, and this change in mood to his writing can be attributed to his experience at war. Many of his short stories were about soldiers dealing with anxiety after the war, and he visited the theme of depression frequently. His short story "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," while critically celebrated, exposes a much darker side of Salinger as the story deals with a main character who is unable to deal with Post- Traumatic Stress Syndrome and eventually commits suicide. His story "For Esmé with Love and Squalor" deals with a U.S. Army Sergeant (Sergeant X) who found it difficult to connect with others and express compassion: "[a]waiting the D-Day invasion, he expressed the exact same determination to appear less cold and more compassionate to those around him. Like Sergeant X, Salinger lost sight of that resolve after the war" (Slawenski 188). following the War, Salinger decided to reintroduce the

character of Holden, and he created the Holden in *Catcher* as a much more pessimistic character detached from the world around him. This version of Holden was more relevant to the countercultural movement and signified some form of philosophical break from Salinger's previous writings: "Though historians are fond of defining virtually every era as one of

transition, it does make sense to locate the publication of Salinger's novel on the cusp of change. The novel benefited from the loosening of tongues that the Second World War sanctioned" (Whitfield 597-98). This transition in Salinger's writing is indicative of Salinger's own personal change in philosophy, as well as America's transition and "loosening," into a more postmodern viewpoint. The controversy surrounding the novel indicates that the novel was in the least challenging some aspect of American culture—most notably, conventional, nationalistic American culture—and Salinger's personal change in philosophy reflected in *Catcher* were representational of a cultural change in America.

The release of *Catcher* in 1951 caused an immediate strong reaction to the novel, both positive and negative, and the public opinion of the novel reflected the "culture wars" America was undergoing at the time.

William Faulkner's opinion on Holden after reading *Catcher* further reveals how Holden's lack of place and identity were both tragic and shocking, indicating a character who was willing to question the meaning of authority and structure:

> To me, his tragedy was not that he was, as he perhaps thought, not tough enough or brave enough or deserving enough to be accepted into humanity. His tragedy was that when he attempted to enter the human race, there was no human race there. There was nothing for him to do save buzz, frantic and inviolate, inside the glass wall of his tumbler, until he either gave up or was himself, by himself, by his own frantic buzzing, destroyed (244).

Holden's attitude towards others stems from his idea that "[p]eople are always ruining things" (87), and this attitude is perhaps what people found most shocking about him. This disconnected view of humanity reflected the philosophical climate in which *Catcher* was written, and the popularity as well as controversy of the novel in the 1960's provides explanation for why youthful counterculture were so attracted to Holden.

This rebellious worldview that Holden possesses was mainly why many youth were so drawn to his character; culturally speaking, *Catcher* is unique because of its popularity among adolescent readers and their overwhelming response to the novel. Holden's narration surpasses a mere teenage diatribe against the world; rather, the growing counterculture of the 1960's gravitated towards Holden because his narration itself represents an America that was beginning to question and deconstruct basic foundational institutions. David Castronovo explains how *Catcher* resonated with the American public: "Formal discourse, sequential thinking, reverence for the dignified and the heroic: these acts closed by the 1960s. The voice of Holden played a part in shutting them down. Its tone—directed against prestige and knowingness—is as cutting today as it was in 1951" (186). For many countercultural youth, Holden became a literary hero not only for his adolescence but because of his complete distrust of adults, institutions, and his overall disdain for those who represented hierarchical thinking in both relationships and society. The novel became a type of manifesto for youth culture, and its popularity among adolescents reflected the dawn of a new era of thinking that many youth would adopt. The novel changed and grew up with America, and the conventional response to the novel confirmed that there was at least some aspect of Holden's story that many found disturbing. *Catcher*'s cultural impact and its

postmodern themes, specifically in regards to the American adolescent, were most greatly seen through its presence in high school reading lists and the controversy that surrounded the novel. Whitfield describes how twenty-two years after the novel's publication, high school English classes were assigning *Catcher* despite a significant public outcry against the novel: "In 1973 the *American School Board Journal* called this monster best-seller 'the most widely censored book in the United States.'

Holden's first person narration connected with youth largely because he actually invites the reader to not only perceive the world as he does but also invites the reader to feel as deeply as he does. His confusion, his depression, his frustration, and his eventual mental collapse provided a strange sense of comfort to a confused youth culture; they were called to feel and hurt with Holden, and in the end they were told that this confidant was not mentally stable to begin with. It is reasonable to infer that perhaps some people felt so uncomfortable with Holden—and others felt so comfortable with Holden—not because he is vulgar and honest but because they felt betrayed or comforted by his mental instability. Steinle describes the reaction to *Catcher*:

> The division, then, is over whether to prepare adolescents for or to protect them from adult disillusionment, and it is a split I believe indicates a contemporary crisis in the process of middle class enculturation… In the postwar period, however, recognition of the increasing dissonance between American ideals and the realities of social experiences has unavoidable, and it is precisely this cultural dissonance that is highlighted by Salinger's novel (131).

Postwar and New Generation's Lost Identity

The effects of the postmodern era on American culture can be seen in the rise of youth counterculture in the 1960s. Predating the rise of youth counterculture, the publication of *Catcher* provided an image of a rebellious teenager, confused and lacking clear personal identity. Following the publication of *Catcher*, this confused teenager became the stereotype for the American teenager, and Holden's character became a type of literary model for the average countercultural youth. Manifested through massive cultural changes in race relations, women's rights, sexual liberation, the Vietnam War, and an emerging drug culture in the middle class, American youth were promoting a new way of life that emphasized a breakdown in social structures—such as the role of the state, family, and religion in the life of the individual—and a

rise in individual separation from these structures, tenets. Along with influencing the social institutions of American society, youth counterculture began primarily with the individual teenager's struggle for personal identity, a dilemma that Holden helped to popularize. *Catcher* is the staple novel of American youth counterculture, and Holden's personal influence on the average countercultural youth—most clearly seen through Holden's identity struggles—is evidence of the postmodern aspects of the novel. While the countercultural movement was a movement against society, the movement

began as a very personal resistance to maturity and adulthood. Prior to the counterculture's prominence and impact on American society, youth began a questioning of self and identity. Issitt describes how the counterculture's origins "advocated self-enlightenment and individual experience" (64) and sought to create a "society in which the group did not obscure the individual" (64), and many youth first questioned basic personal traits—such as age, sex, race, and family—that were traditionally used to give a person definition. The beginning of the counterculture first signified a questioning of these traits, and many youth adopted an identity that simply resisted what their parents had done. The commercial response to *Catcher* among youth provides evidence of the novel's influence on the teenage perception of identity.

The novel's popularity among countercultural youth is largely seen in overall sales as well as the general countercultural response to the novel during the countercultural movement. Scott Hurley describes how by the early 1960s the novel had already taken on the status of a classic American novel, but *Catcher* differentiated from other classics in the way the novel continued to sell, especially among teenagers (1). Pinkser comments that the novel's commercial success during the 1960s was due to "readers who were attending colleges and universities" and that "Holden Caulfield is meant to be a sharp critic of such 'phony' values, and his desperate search for a more authentic, more spiritual alternative linked him with other postwar rebels" (6- 7), revealing how countercultural youth identified with his desire for identity and authenticity. Ian Hamilton describes how his youth, as well as the lives of many of his contemporaries, during the countercultural movement was largely defined by Holden's narrative: "*The Catcher* was the

book that taught me what I ought already to have known: that literature can speak *for* you, not just to you. It seemed to me 'my book'" (5). Youth financially supported the novel and also promoted its value as an academic, social observation of their generation. Conveniently, whether

Salinger intended to or not, the novel's popularity with youth coincided with a growing teenager market in America.

The creation of the American teenager was a result of both economic interests as well as the changing culture of America. Young people were an untapped market, and marketers began to promote the idea of youth culture largely due to the fact that they could potentially create an identity for an entire generation left struggling with questions of identity—both in societal structures as well as their own identity—after returning from war. Bill Osgerby describes the rise of the American teenager following World War II as the concept of a teenager began during the 1940s (18), and Osgerby later goes on to explain the economic influence of teenagers in the 1940s: "During the 1940s the term [teenager] was increasingly utilized in the world of advertising and marketing, steadily leaking into popular discourse where it was used to denote a new breed of affluent, young consumers" (18). Twenty years later, the rise of teenager culture peaked as counterculture developed. Conveniently, the publication of *Catcher* occurred during the middles stages of this rising youth market, and the novel had amassed over three million sales and five republications in its first ten years of existence with the overwhelming majority of those purchasing the book under the age of twenty-five (Steinle 89, 92). Not only was *Catcher* successful commercially with youth culture, but it also quickly became a staple on high school reading lists5 as teenagers across the country were now encountering *Catcher* in their English classes6, bringing a literary and philosophical discussion of the novel to the forefront of this new youth culture. Undoubtedly, Holden Caulfield and his distrust of adults and society greatly resonated with youth, and Holden became a type of spokesperson who could adequately represent the confusion and angst of post-World War II youth counterculture.

The lack of clear definition in youth counterculture draws similarities to postmodernism. Staller provides a definition of the average countercultural teenager, who she deems as "runaways": "They were either 'rejecting' or 'seeking liberation from' traditional social values and institutions, including family and work. They were searching for 'identity' or 'spontaneity' or 'natural life'" (36-37). As the name itself indicates, counterculture is most easily defined by what it is not—namely, youth began to gravitate to the idea that they were anything but what was the accepted social norm, an otherness or opposition. Peter Braunstein and Michael Villiam Doyle corroborate this idea of otherness found in youth of the 1960s: "These roles were played by

people who defined themselves first by what they were not, and then, only after having cleared that essential ground of identity, began to conceive anew what they were" (10). Many youth of the countercultural movement adopted an identity simply by drawing comparisons to and distancing themselves from what had come before, a movement that Braunstein and Doyle claim permanently changed American culture as "millions of people formally in its thrall incrementally realigned their values and actions to contradistinguish themselves from it" (11), developing an anti-identity rather than an identity. This movement against traditional personal identity created a unique dilemma among youth—rather than breaking down the norm and creating something better, many youth were left only with what they had destroyed, a "deconstruction of our national hymn, which managed to simultaneously evoke chauvinistic pride for and unbridled rage against the American way of life…seemingly incompatible feelings" (Braunstein and Doyle 190).

Holden's lack of identity and definition is further seen in his deceptive tendencies. If he is not able to define his own self and age, then he reacts by withholding truth from others as well, attempting to define their reality. Holden even describes how he finds a strange sense of control through his ability to define his own reality: "It's funny. All you have to do is say something nobody understands and they'll do practically anything you want them to" (157-58). Throughout his narrative, Holden frequently withholds the truth from others strictly because he finds gratification in being able to determine how others perceive reality. He tells a woman on a train that his name is Rudolf Schmidt because "I didn't feel like giving her my whole life history" (54-55), he lies about his age often and even once made his voice deeper over to phone to do so (64), and he constantly relays false information about past events. While Holden understands what he is doing, he does so simply because he is in the mood to lie to people: "Once I get started [lying], I can go on for hours if I feel like it. No kidding. *Hours*" (58). This deceptive tactic correlates with a youthful expression of angst—in a postmodern era14 in where one can only find definition through comparison to others, control is found by attempting to define others.15 This attempt to define others' reality is how Holden deals with his lack of identity, and his desire to be a savior for children everywhere, defining for them their permanent existence as children, is Holden breaking down their natural progression into adulthood. He is enforcing his own standards upon children, attempting to provide them with his own definition.

Phoebe, the Greek word for "protector of children" (Bloom 185), exists in order to expose to Holden a living embodiment of childhood. Sarah Graham asserts that Phoebe, while being the youngest character in the novel, in fact is the most reasonable character (76), John C. Unrue claims that Holden views Phoebe as "the antithesis of the phonies" (144), and Bloom comments that Phoebe represents a "time of innocence which he [Holden] would like to recapture or perpetuate" (32). This image of Phoebe—as a living symbol of childlike innocence—causes Holden to compare her to Allie as well as express fear that perhaps she too will be robbed of her childhood and die. While Phoebe certainly is still very much childlike, she does exhibit some behavior that is very much reasonable and adult-like, which is very disturbing to Holden. She scolds Holden for flunking out of school, (174) she supports Holden by giving him her Christmas money (178), and she takes the blame away from Holden in order to protect him from their mother (178). All of these actions present to Holden the opposite of what he is trying to do for her; rather than Holden protecting Phoebe, Phoebe is the one who protects Holden, a realization that makes Holden weep: "Then, all of a sudden, I started to cry. I couldn't help it. I did it so nobody could hear me, but I did it. It scared hell out of old Phoebe when I started doing it, and she came over and tried to make me stop, but once you get started, you can't just stop on a goddam dime" (179).

Rejected identity in American society

Catcher's social impact was greatest in the way that the counterculture almost entirely interpreted the novel in the same manner, creating some semblance of community amidst a multitude of questioning young people. The majority of countercultural youth discovered a voice through Holden, and their collective agreement and emotional connection to his character somewhat created a platform for their post-modern, post-institution ideas. Harold M. Foster discusses that youth of the 1960s communed around the novel like future youth cultures found community in MTV; Holden Caulfield became a pop culture icon, embodying a youthful dissatisfaction for social institutions: "[T]he first modern tribal youth experience was the collective reading of *The Catcher in the Rye*… so many people read it at the same time and seemed to receive the same message that the phenomenon is similar to an MTV special today. The messages from *The Catcher in the Rye* helped shape the youth culture of the late 1960's and

early 1970's" (31). Youth culture developed a community around Holden largely because of the novel's popularity in academia as well as the commercial market, indicating that the novel was both a best-seller and a quickly becoming a respected work of literature. David Simmons describes the counterculture's overall unity around Holden: "Indeed, in an ideological stance reminiscent of

The Catcher in the Rye's Holden Caulfield, during the 1960s the adult world is largely delegitimized as 'phoney' or corrupt. In the 1960s, youth is positioned in opposition to the adult world and imbued with a distinctly savior-like role, possessing the sole capacity to rejuvenate American society" (34). A "post-American way" correlated with a post-institution way, and Charles Jencks argues that the 1960s were an age of protest and postmodern lack of identity: "Post-Modernism was a confluence of streams that became much bigger in the 1960s with the counterculture and its protest movements. The arguments were against bigness, the loss of local identity" (n. pag.).

Similar to theories about society posed by postmodern critics such as Derrida and Foucault, many countercultural youth not only distrusted their society but also questioned the purpose of the society. Simon Gottschalk observes a connection between the countercultural movement and postmodernism. (354) Barbara Epstein suggests that the counterculture movement was "under the influence of postmodernism, an intellectual movement that calls for exposing and questioning the assumptions behind all accepted ideas" (18), and Todd Gitlin comments on what these postmodern tendencies meant for American society: "History was ruptured, passions have been expanded, belief has become difficult… Old verities crumbled, but new ones have not settled in" (58).

Conclusion

Catcher's popularity during the countercultural era of the 1960s was largely due to Holden's introspective honesty about himself and others around him. Following an era of intense nationalism during the 1950s, countercultural youth gravitated towards Holden as a representative voice for their dissatisfaction with the "American Way" of their parents. Much like Holden, youth of the 1960s were willing to question their culture, question their parents, and question themselves; however, similar to Holden, the answer to that question brought them right back to where they began: community, definition, and identity. Holden's postmodern influence

on the counterculture exists in the very fact that he became a literary figure for countercultural youth. Rather than accepting an identity in their parents or their culture, many countercultural youth looked to Holden as an embodiment of their identity. The novel's popularity, especially among youth, following the 1960s speaks not only for the novel's literary qualities but also for its ability to connect with youth culture during and after the countercultural era. *Catcher*'s influence on teenager culture following the 1960s is largely a result of the postmodern influence of the novel. Rather than viewing Holden as a literary figure from the 1960s, many youth still connect with him as a voice for their generation, perhaps because of his influence on American culture as a whole: "In a sense, the persona of Holden Caulfield is a contemporary continuation of a figure which has a long social and literary tradition in our culture… Holden speaks in a language uniquely his own… He uses this language strategically to re-create the world around him. The reader is thus 'shown' the world through the particular perspective of a sixteen-year old teenager" (16). This "recreation" of the world is what establishes *Catcher* as both a postmodern novel as well as a novel that influences youth culture.

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