

[There] is a great importance in recognizing the basic similarity between the characters of Hamlet and Holden; and it lies chiefly in the following "truths." Such recognition helps clarify Salinger's attitude toward his "hero" by giving additional support to those of us who, for other reasons, already view Holden as symbolizing the plight of the idealist in the modern world. Most importantly, however, it suggests why Holden Caulfield won't go away, why we can't stop thinking about him, why after almost as many words have already been spilled over him as over Hamlet himself, he continues to fascinate us, why he continues to remain so potent an influence on the now aging younger generation that he first spoke to, and why he continues to brand himself anew on the young. In fact, in this age of atrophy, in this thought-tormented, thought-tormenting time in which we live, perhaps it is not going too far to say that, for many of us, at least, our Hamlet is Holden. (p. 29)

Clinton W. Trowbridge, "Hamlet and Holden," in *English Journal*, Vol. 57, No. 1, January, 1968, pp. 26-9.

#### CLINTON W. TROWBRIDGE

Once we recognize that J. D. Salinger's depiction of Holden Caulfield as symbolizing the plight of the idealist in the modern world provides the primary structural framework of *The Catcher in the Rye*, we can see every other aspect of this concise, symbolically compressed novel as reinforcing that design. Whether we look at the significance of the briefly drawn but highly individualized minor characters or at the use of concrete details, whether we consider the major or the minor emphases, we recognize each in turn as symbolic extensions of the protagonist. Thus *The Catcher in the Rye* stands on every count as one of the masterpieces of symbolist fiction.

By utilizing many of his secondary characters so purposively, as exaggerated or distorted forms of Holden himself, Salinger succeeds in rendering the character of his "hero" more objectively than he could otherwise. In fact, it is largely this technique that makes Holden the extraordinarily "round" character that he is. We see him not merely from the highly limited first person point of view, but also in a series of dramatic self-portraits.

Some of the characters, like Stradlater and Carl Luce, dramatize Holden's man-of-the-world image of himself. The paradoxical attitude that he adopts toward these—he both admires and despises them—are resolved when we realize that these are really attitudes that he has adopted toward images of himself. Others, like Antolini, Allie, Phoebe, and to some extent, Mr. Spencer, are Catcher figures, symbols, that is, of Holden in his imagined role of protector of innocence and goodness. James Castle represents the apparent inflexibility of Holden's idealism and thus dramatizes for us the fearful image that Antolini has of Holden—that of his dying nobly for some highly unworthy cause. Not only does Holden say he admires Castle's behavior, but he and Castle are symbolically identified through Holden's sweater. But the genuineness of Holden's admiration is tested and found to be wanting when he refuses to jump out of the window after the Maurice episode. That Holden's idealism is anything but inflexible is further shown by the fact that Maurice himself represents another and completely different ideal of behavior to Holden: that of the tough guy who gets what he wants when he wants it. By being an extension of the assertive personality that

Holden would like to have, Maurice dramatizes both the phony-ness of that ideal and the fact that Holden actually despises it.

With some of the characters a recognition that they are symbolic extensions of Holden himself is absolutely necessary if we are fully to understand his attitude toward them. His treatment of Sunny, for instance, is not just the result of adolescent inexperience; he cannot treat her as a prostitute because she is too close to being a pathetic image of himself; she so depresses him because his pity for her amounts to self-pity, because she contributes to the gradually encroaching vision of himself as the homeless wanderer, alienated from man and society. So, too his admiration for the drummer at Radio City Music Hall can only be fully understood when we recognize that to Holden he represents a kind of saintliness. If the aim of life is to retain, or regain, youthful innocence and goodness, the drummer, with his total absorption in perfecting a relatively simple and uninteresting task, has achieved a kind of beatific state.

We fail to see the significance that Holden attaches to Jane Gallagher's keeping her kings on the back row unless we realize that both Holden and Jane are scared of the adult world into which they are plunging. . . . Stradlater's date with Jane so upsets Holden not just because he knows what a lady's man Stradlater is but because he would like to approach her romantically himself but no more dares to upset their childish relationship than she to move her kings from the back row. That Stradlater symbolizes Holden's romantic ideal of himself in this scene is underlined by the fact that Stradlater is actually wearing Holden's jacket. It is significant that only after Holden feels momentarily secure at the Antolinis does he actually decide to call Jane on the telephone. His failure to call her is a symbolic reminder to us of two things: that he cannot reestablish contact with what he believes to be goodness and innocence; and secondly, that he is experiencing a growing alienation from his world. That he never does call her and that there is no specific mention of her at the end also reminds us that, although he has been saved from figurative and perhaps literal death, he is still far from being "romantically" adjusted to the adult world.

Salinger's method of using other characters to dramatize various images that Holden has of himself does more than just increase the "roundness" of his character, however. It reinforces the structural pattern of the novel in that it allows Holden to sort out the true from the false images of himself through direct confrontation with them. He thinks he admires James Castle, for instance, but he cannot act like him. Actually, he comes to the final stages of his quest by discovering whom he can and cannot act like, and the person he most acts like at the end is Mr. Spencer.

At first glance, Mr. Spencer does not seem to embody any of Holden's ideals. He is old, sickly, and generally pathetic; he is phony enough to laugh at the headmaster's jokes; in the lecture he gives Holden, he is by turns blunt, sarcastic, and woe-begone about Holden's future. In marked contrast to Antolini's sympathetic understanding of Holden's condition, all Mr. Spencer can offer is to underline the headmaster's observation that life is a game and must be played according to the rules. Perhaps his parting cry: "Good Luck!" sounds so terrible to Holden because taken literally it puts the outcome of Holden's quest wholly on the level of chance, whereas what Holden is so desperately seeking is a plan whereby he can control his life. But behind all this is Mr. Spencer's loving

concern for Holden and the fact that Mr. and Mrs. Spencer both seem to get a bang out of life. Holden's whole treatment of Phoebe at the Museum is similar to Mr. Spencer's treatment of him (It is in fact much harsher); and, at the end, he is getting a bang out of the counterpart to Mr. Spencer's Navajo Indian blanket: Phoebe's blue coat.

That Mr. Spencer represents the nearest thing to a dramatization of Holden's final image of himself is suggested in several other ways by Salinger. They are both tall and stooped in posture. Like Mr. Spencer, Holden constantly uses the term "boy," nods his head, repeats himself, and is often sarcastic. While he criticises Mr. Spencer bitterly for his phony laughing at the headmaster's jokes, one of the most obvious things about Holden's behavior is that he is outwardly conventional. Though he hates saying "Glad to've met you" to someone he is not glad to have met, he is constantly doing so. (pp. 5-8)

Many of the characters in the novel can be understood as exaggerated portraits of Holden as he is. All of these characters are treated with a greater or lesser degree of pity, scorn, or annoyance by Holden, and, as we have seen to be the case with two of these—Sunny and, to some degree, Mr. Spencer—his attitudes are only fully understood when we see that Holden is really concerned with these traits in himself. Again Salinger's method is to take one of the traits or attitudes that Holden deplores in himself, exaggerate it, and dramatically portray it in the form of another character. The three "grools" from Washington who are going to get up early to go to Radio City Music Hall are pathetic examples of tourism and of the hold that phony values, as epitomized by Hollywood, have on Americans; but not only does Holden himself go to two movies and a play in the course of the action of the novel, he goes to Radio City Music Hall as well. What he says about the movie that he sees there expresses succinctly the dilemma he is in, the manner in which he is trapped in the very world he is so hostile to: "It [the picture] was so putrid I couldn't take my eyes off it." Holden does not look for his initials on the bathroom doors, as does the old alumnus of Pencey Prep, but the smells of the Natural History Museum and of his old public school make him just as nostalgic and sentimental, and what he does find engraved on the walls of both places symbolize not a romanticized version of lost youth—the initials—but a crass reminder of the defeat of innocence. (p. 8)

While many of the characters in *The Catcher in the Rye* take on an additional interest and importance once their symbolic connection to Holden is seen, Salinger's deepest and most suggestive symbols are found not in them but in some of the apparently minor details of the novel. Of these the most important is Holden's red hunting hat. The effectiveness of this symbol lies in its great suggestiveness. Not only does it operate on several different levels of meaning, but Salinger is so careful to make it unobtrusive as a symbol that to most readers it is simply a funny hat, just the sort of thing that a rebellious adolescent would wear. Even the circumstances of Holden's buying the hat, however, suggest that we must go beyond this understanding of it. Holden purchases it just *after* he notices that he has lost all the fencing foils. As manager of the fencing team he is immediately ostracized by the other boys, and thus, from the very beginning, the hat is comforter, a consolation prize for failure. He feels comfortable in it when he is reading alone in his room; but partly because he likes to wear it with its long peak toward the back of his head, he does not feel at ease wearing it in public. On its sur-

face level the hat is simply a detail by which Salinger dramatizes an important part of Holden's character.

Yet there is a deeper meaning. Holden is outwardly conventional in manner and particularly in dress; but, as we discover when he ruminates about his Gladstone bags from Mark Cross, he sees this conventionality as a sign of phoniness in himself. Through his conventional dress and manner he dimly sees himself as supporting the very world that he is so hostile to. Thus, wearing the cap also symbolizes his desire to break through the phony conventions of his world; not wearing the cap dramatizes his failure to destroy what is phony, either in himself or in his world, as well as reminds us of the power that the conventions have over him. (pp. 8-9)

The hunting hat, then is closely associated with the basic structural pattern of the novel: Holden's quest for truth. In fact, it is even more intimately connected to it than we have so far indicated. To Ackley the hat is simply a hunting hat, a deer shooting hat, as he calls it. Holden's response is: " 'Like hell it is,' I took it off and looked at it. I sort of closed one eye, like I was taking aim at it. 'This is a people shooting hat,' I said. 'I shoot people in this hat.' " At the core of Holden's personality lies the double vision, and therefore double nature, of the idealist. The essential paradox of his being is his love-hate for humanity. He sees with frightening clarity the difference between what is and what ought to be, and that vision is the basic motivation for whatever he does. (p. 9)

[One other important aspect of the hat is reflected in] the fact that Holden likes to wear it backwards. This detail leads us to the full richness of the symbol. With the peak to the back, he looks far more like what he really is, a catcher rather than a killer. Nor is the literal image of a baseball catcher inappropriate to consider here. One of Holden's most prized possessions is his brother Allie's fielder's mitt. In the fact that it is a left-handed mitt and that Allie had covered it with poems so that he could read them when no one was up at bat, the mitt is a rich symbol in its own right. Holden idealizes Allie as by far the brightest as well as the nicest member of his family. When Allie died Holden so damaged his hand by breaking out the garage windows that, as he tells us, it still hurts him when it rains and he can no longer make a proper fist. Part of what is suggested here is that Holden, equipped by his brother with a means of catching the good and the innocent, has, because of his love for his brother, made himself ineffective as a hater (the broken fist) and, like his brother, has dedicated himself to an impossible ideal. When the impossibility, and more importantly, the undesirability of the ideal is finally grasped (as it is by Holden while watching Phoebe on the merry-go-round), the idealist is saved from self-destruction and uselessness and led back to man and the world by means of love.

The fact that Holden likes to wear his cap with the peak reversed not only provides us with an ironic visual picture of the catcher ideal but also dramatizes for us the very direction of Holden's search. In many senses of the phrase, Holden is trying to go backwards. He is between childhood and adulthood, a condition that is symbolically represented in the fact that the hair on one side of his head is grey. More than anything else he wants to keep for himself and others what he imagines to be the untarnished goodness and innocence of the child. The reversed peak, then, suggests his idealization of and yearning for the childhood condition. (p. 10)

[When Phoebe wears Holden's hat outside the museum, she

reveals that] she has accepted his quest as her own. When she meets him she throws the hat at him in fury because she recognizes that his refusal to accept her as a companion is really an admission of phoniness, both in himself and in his plan. In reality, of course, she has saved him by symbolically showing her willingness to die with him. Instead of looking to the past, he is now going to try to deal with the future. This is the affirmation with which the novel ends, and Salinger has very unobtrusively underlined it by the use he makes of the hunting cap in this final scene. He has forced the hat upon her—given up the quest, that is; and her forgiveness of him for disappointing her is again symbolically portrayed in her giving him back his hat, his identity as an idealist. That he has changed the direction of his quest and that she is the person responsible for his doing so is told us by her putting on his hat for him and putting it on his head with the peak facing the front. It is clear that she does so place the hat on his head, but Salinger is clever enough not to force the symbol on us in so direct a manner. Rather he chooses that we discover it. While Holden watches Phoebe ride around on the carousel, it begins to rain. He sits there in the rain and Salinger tells us: "I got pretty soaking wet, especially my neck and my pants. My hunting hat really gave me quite a lot of protection, in a way, but I got soaked anyway." The "especially my neck" is Salinger's master stroke in the use of symbolic technique, a technique that so often in modern fiction results in lifeless allegory. Holden has thus been re-born into at least a partial acceptance of life. His direction has been radically changed. It seems to be no mere happenstance, then, that Salinger should set this final scene in the Zoo, the place of life, after leading Holden from the Egyptian tombs, the place of death. Nor, particularly as we know that Salinger himself is deeply interested in Zen, does it seem improbable that Salinger means us to see the carousel as symbolic of the wheel of life, the constantly changing pattern of the Eternal One. (p. 11)

Clinton W. Trowbridge, "Salinger's Symbolic Use of Character and Detail in 'The Catcher in the Rye,'" in *The Cimarron Review*, No. 4, June, 1968, pp. 5-11.

#### G. S. AMUR

[*The Catcher in the Rye*] seems to have cast a permanent spell on the critics not only as a literary masterpiece—[Brian Way praised it as] "a classic novel of adolescence"—which is understandable, but as one of the most powerful myths of our time.

In spite of the large body of Salinger criticism, however, with the exception of a few critics like Brian Way, Carl F. Strauch [see *CLC*, Volume 12] and D. B. Costello [see excerpt above], very few have spoken with the actual literary object before their eyes. The appeal of *The Catcher in the Rye* as a psychological, social and philosophic myth seems to have been far more powerful than its artistic and literary appeal. . . . [The] basic question whether the novel has "a firm and complex controlling intention"—a question which Arthur Mizener poses and answers in the negative—has not been satisfactorily answered. The object of this paper is to attempt such an answer.

Primarily, *The Catcher in the Rye* is neither a story of social rebellion nor one of philosophical quest. Holden, the central character whose experiences provide the subject-matter of

the novel, is neither a revolutionary, nor a saint or seeker of Truth. He is an American adolescent facing a psychological crisis and in desperate search of personal relationships powerful enough to pull him through. The search, which ends, after a series of frustrations, in Holden's surrender to his child-sister Phoebe, is the basis of the novel's thematic unity as well as the source of its tensions. The role of the catcher-in-the-rye—the preserver of innocence—which Holden is romantically ambitious to assume but which is limited to the erasing of obscene writing on the walls of a school—and the diametrically opposite role of the recluse which also attracts him temporarily but which he never assumes—are not central to his experience as it is presented in the novel, and it is highly doubtful whether they would fit him at all.

Holden's search for genuine and satisfying personal relationships—essentially a simple search—becomes a tragic search in the context of his complicated personality, his unusual family background, his passion for discrimination, and his adolescent immaturity.

"Holden," says Edgar Branch, "is essentially homeless, frozen out." But he is only partially right because, though Holden, the only "dumb one" in the family, as he describes himself, never seems to have aroused more than parental solicitude in his wealthy but "touchy" father and his "not too healthy," "psychic" mother; and, though the house is for him a place where "everything creaks and squeaks," he is a "wanderer" only in a limited sense. It is with Phoebe—for him the centre of the family after the death of Allie and the fall of D. B.—and with Phoebe alone that he finds tranquillity. He quietly returns home when the crisis is over, and is unable to sever himself from it. (pp. 11-12)

Holden's inability to sever himself from home may be a result of a lack of courage to which he often confesses, but it is more likely that it is caused by a paralysis of the will brought about by his allegiance to Phoebe, Allie and D. B., his utter dependence on personal relationships.

Holden as Ihab Hassan points out [see excerpt above], has a natural and powerful urge "to commune and communicate" with his fellowmen, and it is this urge that decides for him the quality of things and people. Phoebe is "nice" because "she was somebody you always felt like talking to on the phone." A book like Isak Dinesen's *Out of Africa* is a very good book because "you wish the author who wrote it was a terrific friend of yours." But this urge in Holden is continually thwarted by another urge—the urge to discriminate—which is equally powerful. . . . [His] discriminations range from the purely instinctive and idiosyncratic, such as his dislike for pimples, sickness and old age, to the deeply deliberate and purposeful, like his hatred of the movies, the Hemingway school of fiction, and the Ivy League colleges. For him, the differences—like the one between "phony" and "nice" or that between the child and the adult—are real and fundamental. . . . What particularly maddens Holden is the horror of the ordinariness of life that he tells Sally Hayes:

But it isn't just it's everything. I hate living in New York and all. Taxi cabs, and Madison Avenue buses, with the drivers and all always yelling at you to get out at the rear door, and being introduced to phoney guys that call the Lunts angels, and going up and down in elevators when you just want to go outside, and guys fitting your pants all the time at Brooks. . . .

(pp. 12-13)