



PROJECT MUSE®

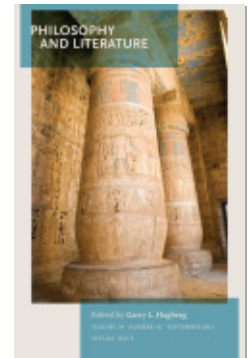
Salinger's World of Adolescent Disillusion

Dale Jacquette

Philosophy and Literature, Volume 39, Number 1A, September 2015, pp.
A156-A177 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/phl.2015.0031>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/612844>

DALE JACQUETTE

SALINGER'S WORLD OF ADOLESCENT DISILLUSION

Abstract. This philosophical treatment of J. D. Salinger's novel *The Catcher in the Rye* critically examines the stylistic and situational choices by which the author portrays a callow youth growing up absurd in post-World War II America. The portrait of youthful alienation that Salinger paints in the novel needs to be understood as an abstraction from Salinger's very individual, fictional cameo of Holden Caulfield as filled with a self-loathing he projects onto others because of his unresolved sense of loss and survivor's guilt over the death by leukemia of his younger brother, Allie.

"Almost every time somebody gives me a present, it ends up making me sad."

—Holden Caulfield in J. D. Salinger,
The Catcher in the Rye

I

J. D. SALINGER'S TALE of juvenile *weltschmerz*, *The Catcher in the Rye*,¹ portrays a personal psychology of youthful disillusion. Holden Caulfield, the novel's narrator and antihero, embarks on an existential odyssey in New York City after being drummed out of his fourth private prep school for failing grades.

Smart and resourceful enough when the occasion requires, Holden is disgusted with virtually everything and everyone around him. By maintaining a negative attitude, he excuses himself in his own mind from doing anything potentially disappointing—it is all futile and pointless anyway. Holden thereby cultivates an attitude that prevents him from devoting his energies to doing anything worthwhile at all. The reader

can only observe as Holden reveals more and more about himself and wonder why the boy is so out of step with everyone around him; why he is socially so increasingly self-destructive.

We are permitted to eavesdrop on Holden's phenomenology in his writing—the novel itself as we have it from Salinger's pen. Although it is never made clear for whom Holden believes himself to be writing, he addresses "you" in several places, and the internal evidence of the book suggests that he is writing these recent first-person memoirs and remarks in the novel's twenty-six chapters as perhaps both a diagnostic and a therapeutic exercise from the vantage of a clinic or hospital. Holden Caulfield is not posing as a young man sick of life. He is the genuine article, and he is genuinely ill. But from what? What is his illness, and how and why has it come about? As he says flatly in the final chapter, after he returns to New York to the bosom of his family, "I got sick and all" (p. 213), while in the very next paragraph he mentions obliquely "this one psychoanalyst guy they have here."

II

The novel takes form as a linear progression of scenes, like those in a movie. It is the movie as Holden later replays it in his head, in the frames where Holden is present and which he chooses to describe and comment upon.

We can almost hear the anonymous attending psychiatrist in the background suggesting, "Why don't you do me a favor, young man? We want to understand the problems that upset you as you see them yourself and in your own words. Here is a notebook. Please write down everything that happened to you from the time you left the Pencey School until you returned home at Christmastime to your parents' apartment in New York."

Some of the scenes Holden (Salinger) chooses for his notebook/movie are inevitable. Given the premise of the novel's starting point, as Holden prepares to leave another school, there is a sequence of events that should occur, things that can be expected to happen and that he can be expected to do. Salinger paints these uncomfortable moments before Holden's departure in fine, colloquial—even reassuring—detail from Holden's standpoint. Other events of the novel are unexpected, as Holden's brief adventures unfold in the unpredictable world outside of familiar academic institutional structures. We follow Holden's journey inside his head, from an obligatory good-bye visit with a history teacher

who fails him, through an overnight train trip from Connecticut to New York, to a reconnection with his younger sister, Phoebe. She is his salvation, like Penelope, the faithful wife of Odysseus, waiting ten years for her husband's return through many a brave encounter with danger and temptation in his long struggle to reach his home in Ithaca after the Trojan War.

Along the way, Holden meets the mother of a fellow student he pretends not to despise, hangs out in jazz clubs and bars in the city (trying to get served alcohol, thinking he looks old enough to get away with it), and chats up casual female acquaintances, desperately reaching out to them. His juvenile expressions of longing for their companionship quickly turn to anger and bewilderment when, as inevitably happens, he is rejected and reacts to their rejection. He arranges for the services of a prostitute with whom he decides *in media res* he cannot consummate a love act, and turns away, only to be robbed and beaten by her bellboy pimp.

He wanders city streets, buying a record for Phoebe that is broken before he can deliver it. He makes inquiries of several random persons as to where the ducks in Central Park go in winter when the ponds are frozen over. He sneaks into the family apartment to see Phoebe while his socialite parents are partying elsewhere in the building, and is almost discovered by his mother after garlanding Phoebe's room with his telltale cigarette smoke. Phoebe covers for him, lying about smoking the cigarette herself to protect him in his flight. She buys him time before he must face their parents and explain that he has been expelled from yet another school, and perhaps before he is more fully able to acknowledge the fact himself. Phoebe offers him the money she has saved for family Christmas presents, which Holden eventually reluctantly takes, weeping for his need and at the thought of his sister's generosity, having carelessly thrown away whatever means he had with him as he prepared to leave Pencey.

As Holden's psychological crisis approaches, with Phoebe's indispensable help he escapes the family apartment under their parents' noses. He makes a telephone call to meet another former teacher in the city who agrees to let him crash overnight at his house. There, in a memorable scene—again exactly as though from a contemporary coming-of-age movie—Holden experiences a classic moment of adolescent homosexual panic when he awakens on the couch to find the teacher inexplicably stroking his head. He meets Phoebe at her school the next day for a visit to the Museum of Natural History, after a night

of wandering, where he is confronted with “Fuck you”s scrawled on walls that Phoebe must pass, which he imagines as the bottom line of text on his own future tombstone.

It is then that Holden reports having fainted, perhaps a first attack of an impending nervous breakdown, from which he nevertheless seems to recover quickly enough. He joins Phoebe, who wants to run away from New York with him; she has her bag already packed. They walk and talk in Central Park. He watches her ride the carousel like a proud parent and promises her he will not leave the city without her, a promise that he tells us he kept. In the short final chapter, he reports briefly and as though in another voice on his subsequent institutionalization and ongoing psychoanalysis.

Holden fills in this basic episodic structure, in which Salinger’s cinematic ordering of scenes is itself significant in many ways, with the James Joycesian, stream-of-consciousness content of his reminiscences of these moments. These contain personal descriptions and reactions to immediate events, reflections on life, and generally defamatory portrait sketches of the people with whom he interacts. This basic storyboard for the novel, however, does not answer any of the most intriguing philosophical questions about Holden. It does not explain why he does the things he does and why he feels about them the way he says he does. It does not explain why he is so disdainful of others and so sharply attuned to their foibles and annoying behaviors, as morons, fakes, corny bastards, and the like, to recall some of the more colorful epitaphs he bestows on virtually everyone. Virtually everyone, that is, except two persons in his life, one dead of leukemia, his younger brother Allie; and the other living, his precociously mature, down-to-earth younger sister Phoebe, who serves in some ways as Holden’s ingenuous rational superego.

III

In this philosophical-literary-critical treatment of Salinger’s classic novel, I propose to examine the stylistic and situational decisions by which Salinger presents Holden Caulfield growing up absurd in post-World War II America as both individual and symbol. Holden does not grasp the point—or share a sense—of the value of most of the preexisting adult social structures, let alone most of the personalities by which he is confronted.

“Hell is—other people,” concludes Jean-Paul Sartre in his 1944 existentialist one-act play *Huis Clos* (No Exit), about the same time that

Salinger was writing the short stories that were eventually incorporated into *The Catcher in the Rye*. Holden, it seems, could only agree.² He is filled with disgust at the personal habits of almost everyone with whom he is obliged to interact: a teacher surreptitiously picking his nose or snorting Vicks nasal spray, a student cutting his fingernails and dropping the clippings onto the floor, his own roommate publicly cutting his toenails or popping his pimples, alcoholics, cheaters, liars, the snot and urine that befoul the urban landscape, the elderly with their unpleasant physical infirmities, the flits, jerks, fakes, and phonies by whom Holden feels besieged, punctuated only by the rare act of generosity, understanding, or moral or unpretentious appropriateness that Holden likes to say “just kills him” or “knocks him out.”

I want to present and defend an interpretation of *The Catcher in the Rye* that explains why Holden behaves as he does, why he is so filled with repulsion and antipathy for nearly everyone he encounters. I argue that ultimately, Holden is disappointed with the world because it fails to live up to his inappropriately idealistic demand for purity and goodness. Holden’s furious encounter with the “Fuck you” graffiti at Phoebe’s school near the end of the novel—triggering his first recorded physical symptom—is emblematic of his disenchantment over what should be a haven from cynicism and corruption for anyone as dear as Phoebe (pp. 201, 204). The same sense of loathing is dramatically illustrated by the incident in which Holden’s former teacher Mr. Antolini, the best and most reliable adult Holden seems to know, offers him the hospitality of his home, and then spoils Holden’s sense of refuge, trust, and compassion when the older man wakes him, sitting beside him on the couch where Holden is sleeping, fondly feathering the boy’s hair (pp. 180–93). Holden is caught up in confusion, disappointment, and fright.

Salinger unassumingly captures the internal narrative of a young person in post–World War II American culture, one who painfully endures the process of transition from innocence to experience, still straddling the great divide between adolescence and adulthood. Holden embarks on an accelerating downhill slide into increasingly more socially inappropriate acts, until, in the book’s concluding section, we learn that Holden is reporting on the recent events of his life from the security of some type of hospitalization where he is receiving psychological care. The photorealistic portrait of youthful alienation that Salinger seems to paint in the novel needs to be understood as an abstraction from Salinger’s very individual, albeit fictional, cameo of Holden as a particular young man at a particular moment of life in which he is filled with

a self-loathing that he projects onto others because of his unresolved sense of loss and survivor's guilt over his brother Allie's death.

The world cannot be made right for Holden, nor does he expect to find a proper place for himself in it, without Allie. The situation as he perceives it is accordingly irreparably bleak and hopeless, and, as he frequently acknowledges to himself when something disappoints him, depressed. Salinger's work as such dramatizes Wittgenstein's personally insightful remark in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922): "The world of the happy is quite another than that of the unhappy."³ If anything is going to heal Holden from his sickness of heart, it can only be time.

IV

Holden's brother Allie is first mentioned in connection with the baseball mitt incident. Holden's suave, domineering, and scholastically challenged roommate Stradlater persuades Holden to use his literary talents and write an essay for him as an English assignment. It was supposed to be: "Anything. Anything descriptive. A room. Or a house. Or something you once lived in or something—you know. Just as long as it's descriptive as hell" (p. 28). Holden, when he gets around to it, after a prolonged and irritating session with his obnoxious, unhygienic dorm neighbor Ackley, discovers that he can only write something for Stradlater about a baseball glove that had a special meaning for his deceased brother Allie.

The thing was, I couldn't think of a room or a house or anything to describe the way Stradlater said he had to have. I'm not too crazy about describing rooms and houses anyway. So what I did, I wrote about my brother Allie's baseball mitt. It was a very descriptive subject. It really was. My brother Allie had this left-handed fielder's mitt. He was left-handed. The thing that was descriptive about it though, was that he had poems written all over the fingers and the pocket and everywhere. In green ink. He wrote them on it so that he'd have something to read when he was in the field and nobody was up at bat. He's dead now. He got leukemia and died when we were up in Maine, on July 18, 1946. You'd have liked him. He was two years younger than I was, but he was about fifty times as intelligent. (p. 38)

Allie's poetry-inscribed baseball glove comes in for a second mention later in the novel when their older brother D.B., back from the war and since off to Hollywood, asks to see it and questions Allie as to

whether his favorite war poet was Rupert Brooke or Emily Dickinson. “Allie said Emily Dickinson,” Holden tells us (p. 140). In this way, the glove—notably a fielder’s rather than a catcher’s mitt—ties the three brothers together indelibly in Holden’s mind. The image of the verses scrawled on the glove’s leather surface is etched in Holden’s mind, for he even remembers the wonderful detail of their being written in green ink, by which the tale of Allie’s glove and its importance to Holden gains a vividly meaningful credibility.

Stradlater is not amused by Holden’s effort. He claims it is totally worthless for his assignment, and in the ensuing argument, Holden rips the manuscript to pieces. The episode is significant not so much because of Stradlater and his incivilities in the prep school environment that Holden rejects but because the incident affords our introduction to Allie. Such a unique and brilliant young mind. Who else would think of writing poems on a baseball glove? The date of Allie’s death, significantly, is the only date that appears anywhere in the novel. Holden is no historian, as we know from his failing essay on the elective topic of the ancient Egyptians, but the exact date of Allie’s death, day, month, and year, has evidently made a deep impression on his memory.

V

The loss of Allie from the family and from Holden’s company makes an even deeper impression on Holden’s depleted sense of purpose, lack of ambition, and sour emotional outlook on life. He tells us in detail that when Allie died he became violent, expressing his anger in a destructive gesture:

I was only thirteen, and they were going to have me psychoanalyzed and all, because I broke all the windows in the garage. I don’t blame them. I really don’t. I slept in the garage the night he died, and I broke all the goddamn windows with my fist, just for the hell of it. I even tried to break all the windows on the station wagon we had that summer, but my hand was already broken and everything by that time, and I couldn’t do it. It was a very stupid thing to do, I’ll admit, but I hardly didn’t even know I was doing it, and you didn’t know Allie. (p. 39)

Holden acts out in rage at the injustice of Allie’s death. Allie was “about fifty times more intelligent” than he, a boy of incomparable even temper and sweet disposition, especially for a redhead, who at the age

of eleven was chosen by the uncontrollable forces of the universe to die while Holden lived. It is wrong, it makes no sense, it is irreversible, and it permanently deprives Holden of the younger brother he loved and admired. Why is the world so, and since it is, what's the point of anything, of doing anything, trying, caring, thinking ahead, planning for a future that might suddenly drop away to reveal a bottomless pit? The first hint that psychoanalytic treatment had already been considered for Holden is dropped in this vital passage, in a prophecy that comes true in the book's concluding postcard from the facility where Holden is being observed and receiving psychotherapy.

Although he tells us repeatedly that he is a coward, and generally acts the part, Holden stands up to Stradlater, is wrestled to the floor, and gets a bloody nose. His passion is aroused by Allie and the baseball mitt, and he defends the memory of his lost brother by defending the value of the baseball mitt description. After the prostitute Sunny visits his hotel room later in the story, Holden, ultimately indifferent to the girl, having indulged in erotic reminiscences and associations in anticipation, sends her away with offended professional honor and minimal compensation, and immediately engages in imaginary conversation with Allie. Salinger, as always, spins the tale in Holden's voice:

After old Sunny was gone, I sat in the chair for a while and smoked a couple of cigarettes. It was getting daylight outside. Boy, I felt miserable. I felt so depressed, you can't imagine. What I did, I started talking, sort of out loud, to Allie. I do that sometimes when I get very depressed. I keep telling him to go home and get his bike and meet me in front of Bobby Fallon's house. (p. 98)

An apparent source of Holden's survivor guilt about Allie's passing revolves around the occurrence he mentions here. The incident turns out to be pivotal for the novel's denouement when Holden promises Phoebe in the park that he will return home, after which we hear from him again, almost as an afterword, only in the book's final, highly condensed chapter. By then Holden has suffered some kind of breakdown, he tells us that he got "sick," and he is writing, and is probably meant to be understood as having written everything contained in the novel, from the cloistered walls of his clinical internment.

When they were younger, before Allie became ill, Holden refused to allow Allie to accompany him and a neighborhood friend, Bobby

Fallon, on their bikes to Lake Sedebego for the day to shoot their BB guns. He continues:

Allie heard us talking about it and he wanted to go, and I wouldn't let him. I told him he was a child. So once in a while, now, when I get very depressed, I keep saying to him, "Okay. Go home and get your bike and meet me in front of Bobby's house. Hurry up." It wasn't that I didn't use to take him with me when I went somewhere. I did. But that one day, I didn't. He didn't get sore about it—he never got sore about anything—but I keep thinking about it anyway, when I get very depressed. (p. 99)

Holden describes a palpable feeling of guilt. He cannot turn back the clock and undo what he has done or make things right with Allie. It is too late to apologize, and he has been deprived of the opportunity to make amends for humiliating Allie by calling him a child (only two years younger), and excluding his brother from the bicycling trip he had wanted to join. Holden knows that he cannot take it back, so instead he does something symbolic: talks out loud as though to Allie, as though the boy were still among the living, returning always to the same day when he denied the boy his desire to join Holden and his friend, and telling him this time that he is valued, that he is welcome on their BB-gun bicycle lake trip.

When Holden says that he keeps "thinking about it anyway, when I get very depressed," he touches on a theme that pervades Salinger's novel. In his own mind, Holden often reverses or at least confuses cause and effect. It is not that he becomes depressed and then thinks about the time he disappointed Allie, but rather the reverse. He thinks about Allie frequently, since he misses him so terribly, and when he thinks about Allie he thinks about the bicycle trip, denying the boy's wish and hurting his feelings, which depresses him.

The shame and regret Holden feels is only compounded by the fact that Allie did not even get angry upon being rejected, something that in his presumably selective memory Holden says Allie never did. Holden finds it easier to imagine the boy turning away and licking his wounds, nursing his bruised ego and coming to terms with the understanding—perhaps for the first time—that Holden would not always include him in his activities, would not always choose him as a friend, and accepting that understanding simply as another unexpected fact about the world. It must have been something that Allie had wanted to do, something that Holden willfully denied him, and now it is forever too late to make it right.

VI

Holden desperately seeks the solace of the opposite sex when he returns to New York. Why? Is it the comfort of a mother's bosom he actually wants? His mother distracts herself with parties, a social butterfly at events that turn Holden's stomach. She too has not yet recovered from Allie's death, according to Holden, and perhaps she has shut Holden out or has no time for him or is too painfully reminded of Allie and what he might have become whenever she sees Holden. Is that why he is repeatedly sent away to schools, and why he repeatedly fails in order to return home?

The boy woos and tries dancing with three Seattle girls (pp. 66–68) in a New York jazz club in a series of stunningly humiliating faux pas. He recalls being happy on one occasion when a friend, Jane, unexpectedly strokes his neck at the movies (p. 79). Nevertheless, as Holden puts it, "People are always ruining things for you" (p. 87), and it is no different where girls are concerned. He meets up with another potential flame, Sally, in the city, and proposes running off with her on the money he has in store—until it disappears and he abandons the daydream of working odd jobs to keep body and soul together. He sounds the popular, time-worn "men are romantic, women are pragmatic" theme (p. 132), but there is more to his story than that.

When Sally refuses to indulge him in his wild quest for Peter Pan freedom, and brings him abruptly back down to earth by pointing out the realities of adult responsibility, Holden rejects her brusquely with the declaration that he finds her "a royal pain in the ass" (p. 133), to which the whiplash of her unforgiving reaction surprises even Holden. Later, he gets drunk enough to call Sally up once again, threatening to help her trim the Christmas tree at her house. She humors him sufficiently to get him off the telephone, but has evidently written him off permanently as an irredeemably unpresentable potential boyfriend (pp. 150–52). His last chance at female companionship is with Phoebe, and he ends up circling around his younger sister nestled in their parents' apartment through chapters 20–23.

In the most dramatic of his struggles to make physical contact with women, Holden entangles himself with the jaded prostitute, Sunny. He tries to cooperate with her hired advances, but he doesn't have the heart, dismisses her instead, and sends her off with five dollars, the originally agreed-upon price if Holden's memory is correct. He is soon thereafter confronted by Sunny's pimp, claiming that Holden owes another five dollars for her time. Holden must have seemed an easy mark, unable to

perform like a man, which of course he is not, even with a working girl, and there is also the question of Sunny's pride and Holden's rejection of her, as he recoils with his usual fear and repulsion from the carnal opportunity she presents.

Remarkably, Holden does not simply hand over the relatively small sum, despite the fact that he says earlier and repeatedly that he has lots of money. "I was pretty loaded," he says (p. 52), while he later donates ten dollars to two nuns he happens to meet (pp. 109–11). Holden wants to please, both with the unsolicited gift of money and the sincere expression of his love of English and Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* in particular, but more important, it seems that he wants to be thought fondly of by women, even if they are nuns, who genuinely accept him. He resists handing over the extra five dollars when threatened by the bellboy, perhaps because he is stung by the injustice of the demand, assuming his memory is correct that the deal was made for five dollars. What Holden finds intolerable is the injustice of being deceived, of being lied to, and of being made a target for exploitation despite fulfilling his end of the bargain.

He may also be accepting a subconscious bid for physical punishment. When Sunny lifts five dollars from Holden's wallet as the bellboy restrains him, Holden responds by antagonizing the man verbally even further, just as he had done with Stradlater in defending his choice of Allie's baseball mitt as an essay topic:

I was still sort of crying. I was so damn mad and nervous and all. "You're a dirty moron," I said. "You're a stupid chiseling moron, and in about two years you'll be one of those scraggy guys that come up to you on the street and ask for a dime for coffee. You'll have snot all over your dirty filthy overcoat, and you'll be—"

Then he smacked me. I didn't even try to get out of the way or duck or anything. All I felt was this terrific punch in my stomach. (p. 103)

Why, unless he wants to suffer pain, would Holden not have tried to dodge the blow? Apparently he saw it coming, from what he says, and he could have predicted some kind of violent reaction from the man who had already pushed him. So why not avoid the attack?

One Freudian kind of explanation that comes to mind is that Holden was seeking physical danger. He literally asks for it from the bellboy. He knows the man is a bully who is certain to strike if provoked. Why, then, does he goad the bellboy? Perhaps he does it to awaken himself

externally from his own recognized lack of direction and complacency, as a result perhaps again of Allie's absurd death, or perhaps to atone for his having been unkind to Allie that day when he and Bobby Fallon did the arrogant slightly older brother thing and left him behind. Or perhaps Holden, who sees himself as a coward, needs to approach as closely as he dares to joining Allie in death.

Holden explains that on his way to the bathroom after being gut-punched by Sunny's bellboy pimp, he indulges in an elaborate melodramatic fantasy. He imagines that he has actually been shot by the bellboy with a pistol, and ends up contemplating suicide in a conspicuously weak and indecisive way, as he completes the story:

Then I got back in bed. It took me quite a while to get to sleep—I wasn't even tired—but finally I did. What I really felt like, though, was committing suicide. I felt like jumping out the window. I probably would've done it, too, if I'd been sure somebody'd cover me up as soon as I landed. I didn't want a bunch of stupid rubbernecks looking at me when I was all gory. (p. 104)

What is Holden trying to do? If his hand is stayed from ending his own life by narcissistic concern for the appearance of his corpse, then he is clearly not sufficiently suicidal to carry out the act. The idea appears to be just another romantic fantasy of Holden's adolescent imagination, a symptom of a deeper genuine death wish related to Allie's passing. Later in the novel, Holden makes a similar empty declaration of his desire for suicide when he says, "I'm sort of glad they've got the atomic bomb invented. If there's ever another war, I'm going to sit right the hell on top of it. I'll volunteer for it, I swear to God I will" (p. 141). A work of literature, unlike a scientific or philosophical treatise, sometimes thrives on precisely such ambiguities of motive, fact, and expression. If the interpretation I have been developing is correct at least in basic outline, then we need not decide further which, if any, of these specific Allie-centric accounts of Holden's behavior and attitude best fits the novel's facts.

VII

Why, beyond the normal hormonal call of testosterone singing in his veins, does Holden so desperately want a woman's hand to hold? Why, when he is sucker-punched by Sunny's bellboy pimp, does Holden

romanticize about being shot and having his own automatic weapon with which he imagines himself striking back and seeking vengeance? The scene as he represents it is straight out of the movies. His actual impotence in confronting the bellboy is translated, American style, into angry ballistics.

Holden, however, claims to hate the movies. The most likely reason is that Hollywood has claimed his older, war-hero brother and talented short-story writer, D.B. Another brother spirited away, this time by Hollywood and D.B.'s decision, as Holden sees things, to prostitute himself as a writer for the cinema, buying a Jaguar and giving up being "just a regular writer" (p. 1). Does Holden really have such high aesthetic standards as to despise, with only a few exceptions, all the phonies and corny, inauthentic actors in the movies? Or does he not rather resent the movies for stealing another brother of extraordinary ability and dependable personality to the farthest ends of the United States, as far as one can go from New York, as though to the ends of the earth, or for that matter to heaven?

Without trying to answer all of these difficult questions, left open in many instances just because we are dealing with incompletely described fictional characters, the main argument I am trying to make is that in one way or another everything that we learn about Holden Caulfield in the course of Salinger's writing can be most satisfactorily explained as Holden's painful and prolonged reaction to his brother Allie's death as he struggles through what is—even in the best of circumstances—the difficult time of trying to become an adult. We can better understand the structure, episodic content, and phenomenological narrative voice of Salinger's masterpiece, I believe, if we interpret the novel as fundamentally about death and the effect of a person's death on persons who knew and loved the deceased. Salinger's genius is to depict this closely examined individual case through the still-rippling effects of Holden's deep psychological reaction to Allie's death.

The death—the center around which all of Holden's thoughts and actions revolve, whether talking to himself; talking to Allie, as he says he sometimes does; or writing in his notebook or diary—manifests itself also in other ways. Holden indirectly links Allie to Jesus Christ in a largely overlooked passage of the novel, as he recalls: "The thing Jesus *really* would've liked would be the guy that plays the kettle drums in the orchestra. I've watched that guy since I was about eight years old. My brother Allie and I, if we were with our parents and all, we used to move our seats and go way down so we could watch him. He's the best

drummer I ever saw" (pp. 137–38). Allie keeps cropping up in Holden's stream of consciousness in contexts where one would least expect him, showing that Holden cannot get his fallen kid brother out of his mind. He is grieving for Allie, and in the shadow of his grief, nothing else makes sense to him.

Here we also touch base with the novel's remarkable title. What is it to be the catcher in the rye? We learn of Holden's overhearing a child singing an invented version of the traditional Scottish ballad "Coming Through the Rye," corrupted by the boy who is accompanying his parents:

The kid was swell. He was walking in the street, instead of on the sidewalk, but right next to the curb. He was making out like he was walking a very straight line, the way kids do, and the whole time he kept singing and humming. I got up closer so I could hear what he was singing. He was singing that song, "If a body catch a body coming through the rye." He had a pretty little voice, too. He was just singing for the hell of it, you could tell. The cars zoomed by, brakes screeched all over the place, his parents paid no attention to him, and he kept on walking next to the curb and singing "If a body catch a body coming through the rye." It made me feel better. It made me feel not so depressed any more. (p. 115)

Something has evidently gone slightly amiss. The lyrics of the intended song are not what the boy sings or what Holden remembers the boy singing, but rather: "Gin a body meet a body. Comin' thro' the rye. Gin a body kiss a body. Need a body cry?" There is no mention of *catching* a body, but only of *meeting* and *kissing* a body, for the sake of which it is asked rhetorically whether such a body need cry.

The boy's substitution is key to the book's enigmatic title, as revealed in the exchange Holden has with Phoebe in her bedroom after surreptitiously entering his parents' apartment and explaining that he has left another prep school in disgrace. Phoebe declares to him repeatedly, "Daddy's going to kill you. He's going to *kill* you" (p. 172). Holden defends himself, saying what a bunch of phonies these schools nurture and how he couldn't stand it, wasn't learning anything anyway (pp. 166–68). Phoebe then complains of his unrelenting negativity, challenging him to say something positive about what he likes and what he wants to do or be. "You don't like any schools," she says. "You don't like a million things. You *don't*" (p. 169). The two continue:

“You can’t even think of one thing.”

“Yes, I can. Yes, I can.”

“Well do it, then.”

“I like Allie,” I said. “And I like doing what I’m doing right now. Sitting here with you, and talking, and thinking about stuff, and—” (p. 171)

Phoebe interrupts him, but he digs in logically to support the example, adopting the reasonable stance that liking a person need not imply that the person is alive, and need not apply only to persons who are alive. He defends Allie passionately once again, as an appropriate, indeed preferred, object of value and affection, against Phoebe’s levelheaded criticism:

“Allie’s *dead*—You always say that! If somebody’s dead and everything, and in *Heaven*, then it isn’t really—”

“I know he’s dead! Don’t you think I know that? I can still like him, though, can’t I? Just because somebody’s dead, you don’t just stop liking them, for God’s sake—especially if they were about a thousand times nicer than the people you know that’re *alive* and all.” (p. 171)

Phoebe demands: “All right, name something else. Name something you’d like to *be*. Like a scientist. Or a *lawyer* or something” (p. 172). Holden predictably rejects these career options, and when pressed by Phoebe finally proclaims:

“You know what I’d like to be?” I said. “You know what I’d like to be? I mean if I had my goddam choice?”

“What? Stop *swearing*.”

“You know that song ‘If a body catch a body comin’ through the rye’? I’d like—”

“It’s ‘If a body *meet* a body coming through the rye!’” old Phoebe said. “It’s a poem. By Robert *Burns*.”

She was right, though. It *is* “If a body meet a body coming through the rye.” I didn’t know it then, though. (pp. 172–73)

Holden discovers in the mistaken verses a meaning for his life, something he could imagine himself doing, strange and romantic as it seems. The song is associated in his mind with the boy’s singing unconcernedly along the curb, his parents oblivious to the child’s beauty and to the danger that surrounds him, walking in the street with passing cars honking their horns in every direction. Accordingly, Holden tells Phoebe:

"I thought it was 'If a body catch a body,'" I said. "Anyway, I keep picturing all these little kids playing some game in this 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. I know it's crazy."

Old Phoebe didn't say anything for a long time. Then, when she did say something, all she said was, "Daddy's going to kill you." (p. 173)

As the catcher in the rye, Holden saves kids just like Allie from falling over the cliff as they play their innocent childhood games in a pastoral field of grain. If he could do anything with his life, it would be to prevent the tragic loss of any more young persons, holding them back from the abyss. It is too late for Allie, and he might not have been able to rescue him anyway when the precipice is as deadly and insidious as leukemia. But that, most emphatically, he tells Phoebe, is what he would like to be able to do. It is the only justifiable exercise of his energies as a vocation that he can sincerely conceive of himself doing, even if it means contributing to the survival of more children who grow up into the adults he despises and distrusts.

That there is no such job description as "a catcher in the rye" is further indication that Holden cannot envision any practical way of applying himself. In a world where children go dancing over the cliff into oblivion with no good reason, no compensation, no meaning, and no hope, the only thing he wants to do is save as many of them as possible from taking a fatal plunge. Salinger's novel is a profound statement of the fundamental outlook of popular existentialist philosophy: that the world in and of itself, independent of our assuming personal responsibility and infusing it with goals of our own, is altogether purposeless and devoid of meaning.

Holden has come to see this with all the clarity of his youth, shocked into philosophical reflection by the death of his brother, and clinging as desperately as he can to the days when he and Allie were just beginning to grow up together. Holden gets himself bounced out of every prep school because he does not believe he is worthy to be there—or anywhere else—pursuing the dreams for a future of which Allie has been deprived. Holden is drummed out of yet another academy so that he can return home symbolically, to Phoebe in particular, as the

best mother and brother substitute and most perfect reminder of Allie. Holden fails at every turn because he cannot make himself continue as though everything were the same, now that, after Allie's death, absolutely everything has tragically and irrevocably changed for him.

VIII

After leaving his parents' apartment, slipping immediately into the Antolini fiasco, Holden meets up with Phoebe again at her school, as the novel draws to its prolonged dramatic conclusion. Holden had previously reflected on the circumstances, unfairness, and hypocrisy of a typical family funeral, fixated once again on Allie's death and being laid to rest. Again, Holden interprets Allie's demise as posing, by implication, the same threat and carrying the same dread of his own inexorable mortality:

They ["about fifty aunts—and all my lousy cousins"] all came when Allie died, the whole goddam stupid bunch of them. I have this one stupid aunt with halitosis that kept saying how *peaceful* he looked lying there, D.B. told me. . . . I kept worrying that I was getting pneumonia, with all those hunks of ice in my hair, and that I was going to die. I felt sorry as hell for my mother and father. Especially my mother, because she still isn't over my brother Allie yet. I kept picturing her not knowing what to do with all my suits and athletic equipment and all. The only good thing, I knew [my mother] wouldn't let old Phoebe come to my goddam funeral because she was only a little kid. . . . When the weather's nice, my parents go out quite frequently and stick a bunch of flowers on old Allie's grave. . . . It rained on [Allie's] lousy tombstone, and it rained on the grass on his stomach. It rained all over the place. All the visitors that were visiting the cemetery started running like hell over to their cars. That's what nearly drove me crazy. All the visitors could get in their cars and turn on their radios and all and then go someplace nice for dinner—everybody except Allie. I couldn't stand it. I know it's only his body and all that's in the cemetery, and his soul's in Heaven and all that crap, but I couldn't stand it anyway. I just wish he wasn't there. You didn't know him. If you'd known him, you'd know what I mean. (pp. 155–56)

Remarkably, it is Allie whom Holden calls upon to save him from sinking desperately into the street upon stepping off the sidewalk from the curb, in a passage just preceding the carousel scene, much like the inspirational little boy walking in the street and singing the "catcher in

the rye” theme song. Holden explains his feeling on his way to meeting Phoebe:

Anyway, I kept walking and walking up Fifth Avenue, without any tie on or anything. Then all of a sudden, something very spooky started happening. Every time I came to the end of a block and stepped off the goddam curb, I had this feeling that I’d never get to the other side of the street. I thought I’d just go down, down, down, and nobody’d ever see me again. Boy, did it scare me. You can’t imagine. I started sweating like a bastard—my whole shirt and underwear and everything. (pp. 197–98)

Now Holden is in need of someone to catch him as he is metaphorically coming through the rye, and Allie becomes the savior to whom Holden addresses his plea for salvation:

Then I started doing something else. Every time I’d get to the end of a block I’d make believe I was talking to my brother Allie. I’d say to him, “Allie, don’t let me disappear. Allie, don’t let me disappear. Allie, don’t let me disappear. Please, Allie.” And then when I’d reach the other side of the street without disappearing, I’d *thank* him. Then it would start all over again as soon as I got to the next corner. (p. 198)

Allie is with Holden in his thoughts, particularly in this moment of imaginary peril, playing a version in his mind of the childhood walking rhyme: step on a crack, break your grandma’s back. It is as though their roles have been reversed, with Allie there to save Holden, instead of the other way around. If we ask why this should be, the only apparent answer is that Allie has already crossed over and as such has the relevant experience, knows what to expect, how it happens, and how to prevent Holden from also slipping into the void.

If Allie can rescue Holden from tumbling into freefall, more importantly, then Allie does not need Holden’s help, absolving Holden of responsibility for Allie’s catastrophe. When Holden writes, in the final sentence of chapter 25, at the carousel, soaked with rain but uncaring, “so damn happy all of a sudden, the way old Phoebe kept going around and around,” before he accompanies her back home off-screen, “God, I wish you could’ve been there” (p. 213), it is only too easy to imagine that the “you” he is addressing in his soliloquy is not only the intended reader but also, perhaps, none other than his deceased kid brother Allie, with whom in dire circumstances he sometimes imagines himself to be in communication.

Holden soon joins up with Phoebe, who is clutching a suitcase and has an insistent desire to stay with him, look after him, and leave the city with him as they walk through the zoo in Central Park (pp. 206, 209–13). She too has lost more than her share of brothers, and does not want to see Holden disappear without her. Holden, however, must tell her no, just as several years before, perhaps even at approximately the same age, he told Allie not to tag along as he and Bobby Fallon took their BB guns on their bikes to the lake. The decision he cannot take back or rectify, the pain he caused youthful innocence on that occasion several years ago, now springs back in the form of Phoebe.

This time Holden acts differently, telling Phoebe that he is not going away after all. If Phoebe cannot come along, then he will not go either, as perhaps he wishes he had once said to Allie on the day that can never be undone. “I meant it, too,” he tells us. “I wasn’t lying to her. I really did go home afterwards” (p. 212). He then puts Phoebe on the park carousel, buying her a ticket and giving her money to buy more for herself, and watches her go around on the ride. The girl’s beauty, perfection, and personality, the salvation of her innocence and charm, captivate Holden and give him a first glimpse of why, despite all, life might still be worth living.

IX

Holden’s attachment to Allie is indicated in another of Salinger’s most memorable symbols: the red hunting cap that Holden buys in the city and wears or keeps on his person throughout most of his voyage. The very fact that the cap is red makes it conspicuous whenever it is mentioned, and provides an imaginary visual focus as the novel proceeds, making an appearance from time to time in crucial scenes like a bright red marker in a crowd of black-and-white facts.

At one level, the hunting cap with its side flaps is the sort of impulse purchase that Holden, exercising his immature judgment, might be expected to make, even with all its practical advantages, at a cost of only one dollar. He buys the hat after losing all of the fencing equipment for the school team for which he was manager on a New York subway on the way to a match. Does he buy the hat at that moment because he knows that he has finally screwed up so badly, on top of his discreditable academic performance, that there is no other choice but to leave the school and head back home in the cold of mid-December? Or, reversing (or at least projecting) ambiguity onto cause and effect again, does

Holden subconsciously leave the foils behind to give himself a perfect excuse to withdraw unceremoniously from another school he has come to hate? The hat dates the events of the novel with a lively touch of realism, like the Gladstone suitcases Holden packs as he prepares to leave (pp. 50, 53).

The symbolic importance of the red hunting cap nevertheless goes beyond red-flagging Holden's progress from school to psychiatric clinic. Returning from New York, in the wake of the fencing-equipment disaster, Holden tells us, "I took off my coat and my tie and unbuttoned my shirt collar, and then I put on this hat that I'd bought in New York that morning" (p. 17).

It was this red hunting hat, with one of those very, very long peaks. I saw it in the window of this sports store when we got out of the subway, just after I noticed I'd lost all the goddam foils. It only cost me a buck. The way I wore it, I swung the old peak way around to the back—very corny, I'll admit, but I liked it that way. I looked good in it that way. (pp. 17-18)

Ackley then comments. He whose very name onomatopoeically suggests a gagging throat is someone who, Holden tells us, "damn near made you sick if you saw him in the dining room with his mouth full of mashed potatoes and peas or something" (p. 19). Ackley eyes the red hunting cap and maintains with characteristic negativity that Holden paid too much for it (p. 22). Stradlater pretends to admire it when schmoozing Holden to write his English composition (p. 29). Holden wears it at a certain jaunty angle, like Robin Hood returning from the Holy Land to the wilds of Sherwood Forest as he prepares to leave the Pencey School on his fateful return to New York City:

When I was all set to go, when I had my bags and all, I stood for a while next to the stairs and took a last look down the goddam corridor. I was sort of crying. I don't know why. I put my red hunting hat on, and turned the peak around to the back, the way I liked it, and then I yelled at the top of my goddam voice, "*Sleep tight, ya morons!*" (p. 52)

He takes the hat off on the train to New York City (p. 53). Though he keeps it in his pocket most of the time, the very fact that it is a hunting hat suggests the possibility that he may be symbolically hunting for something, the target of his search being, of course, his lost brother Allie. He knows that the hat makes him look odd, but perhaps he chooses it because it is the kind of thing that Allie would have gotten a kick out

of. His mind in many ways is after all that of a child, as his purchase of the red hat indicates, and he seems to want to return to, or remain suspended in, a happier childhood, although his questions are generally reasonable. Where *do* the Central Park ducks go in the winter when the water is frozen solid? If the adults standing in judgment of him are supposed to be so smart, why don't they know?

When he gets to his hotel, Holden says: "We [the taxi] got to the Edmont Hotel, and I checked in. I'd put on my red hunting cap when I was in the cab, just for the hell of it, but I took it off before I checked in. I didn't want to look like a screwball or something. Which is really ironic. I didn't *know* then that the goddam hotel was full of perverts and morons. Screwballs all over the place" (p. 61). He quickly confirms this proposition by a voyeuristic experience in which he watches a transvestite exhibiting across a span of hotel windows (pp. 61, 81). Afterward, he explains, "There was hardly any snow on the sidewalks. But it was freezing cold, and I took my red hunting hat out of my pocket and put it on—I didn't give a damn how I looked. I even put the earlaps down" (p. 88).

"I took my old hunting hat out of my pocket while I walked and put it on," he tells us later. "I knew I wouldn't meet anybody that knew me, and it was pretty damp out" (p. 122). Eventually he offers the hat to Phoebe, who is wearing it when he meets her after school. "Finally, I saw her. I saw her through the glass part of the door. The reason I saw her, she had my crazy hunting hat on—you could see that hat about ten miles away" (p. 205). When, in a pivotal scene that mirrors his rejection of Allie's request to accompany him and the Fallon boy to the lake, Holden refuses to let Phoebe run away with him, she reacts by crying, and then: "She wouldn't answer me. All she did was, she took off my red hunting hat—the one I gave her—and practically chucked it right in my face. Then she turned her back on me again. It nearly killed me, but I didn't say anything. I just picked it up and stuck it in my coat pocket" (p. 207).

In the famous carousel scene before the novel's conclusion, the red hunting hat makes a final symbolic appearance. Holden says, "Then what she did—it damn near killed me—she reached in my coat pocket and took out my red hunting hat and put it on my head" (p. 212). Someone is caring for him, for his health and welfare, just before Christmas, when the park is cold and rainy, by covering his head. The implication is that children like Allie disappearing through the rye field and tumbling over the cliff are not his exclusive unfulfilled responsibility. There is reciprocity in the world after all, such that if Holden can also be taken

care of—even if only in small, metaphorical ways—then he might not bear the entire moral burden for all the lost children dashing through the rye, through time and the hazards of life, perishing as they plummet to their predetermined doom from the false security of a schoolyard game, an unchoreographed country rye-field dance.⁴

UNIVERSITY OF BERN

1. J. D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye* (New York: Bantam Books, 1951; 21st printing, 1968). All subsequent references, cited by page number, are to this edition.
2. Jean-Paul Sartre, *No Exit and Three Other Plays* (New York: Vintage Books, 1946), p. 47.
3. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, ed. C. K. Ogden (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1922), 6.43. Compare the precursor anticipation of Wittgenstein's remark in Wittgenstein, *Notebooks 1914–1916*, 2nd ed., trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, ed. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), esp. pp. 73–81.
4. For related interpretations with a distinctively different emphasis, see also especially the essays by Arthur Mizener, Alfred Kazin, and John Updike in *Salinger: The Classic Critical and Personal Portrait*, ed. Henry Anatole Grunwald (New York: Harper Brothers, 1962); and the more recent collection, *If You Really Want to Hear about It: Writers on J. D. Salinger and His Work*, ed. Catherine Crawford (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2006).