

Beth Warnken

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Dr. Bickford

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Switching Suitcases: Holden's Novel for the Proletariat

Since its publishing in 1951, J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* has had an elusive way of defying structure that has led critics and readers alike to speculate as to what Salinger intended for this polarizing novel. Many critics have looked into Salinger's personal life and religion, the cultural and historical context of the novel, Holden's psychological issues, or just the text itself in attempts to decipher this novel that seemingly does not follow any particular pattern or structure. In his article, "Hyakujo's Geese, Amban's Donuts, and Rilke's Carrousel: Sources East and West for Salinger's *Catcher*," Dennis McCort claims that Salinger's inspiration for Holden comes from his own personal Buddhist beliefs (McCort), while other articles, like "Repetition, Reversal and the Nature of the Self in Two Episodes of J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*" from duMais Svogun go as far as to suggest that Holden is repressing sexual feelings for his little sister Phoebe (duMais Svogun). However, I would argue that this lack of structure was somewhat intentional on Salinger's part. This novel is largely a look at class and Holden's attempt to remove himself from a certain social class, which in turn undermines a lot of societal structure. Salinger uses Holden as a paragon of someone existing outside of society's imposed superstructure. Holden attempts to determine his own consciousness and creates literature with the intention of overthrowing the dominant hegemony. Despite his familial ties to the upper

class, or bourgeoisie, Holden produces this narrative to use literature as a weapon for creating an alternative hegemony for the proletariat.

Holden comes from an upper class family, which is evident in the way that he attends several different high class boarding schools. He also claims, “[m]y father’s quite wealthy... He’s a corporation lawyer. Those boys really haul it in” (Salinger 140). However, we come to learn that Holden, despite being a part of this upper class world, really feels quite bad about it. For instance, later while he is sitting next to two nuns eating breakfast he notices they were only eating toast and coffee, while he was eating bacon and eggs. He says this “depressed” him, and he gives them ten dollars (Salinger 143). This shows how Holden feels bad about his privileged family and upbringing, so much that it leads him to act upon it, by giving his possessions to those of the proletariat.

Holden also talks about a roommate he had once had at one of the boarding schools that owned “very inexpensive suitcases” (Salinger 141). The roommate used to hide his suitcases out of embarrassment since Holden’s “came from Mark Cross, and they were genuine cow hide and all that crap” (Salinger 141). Holden said he started hiding his own under his bed too and even writes that he wanted to “trade with him” so that the roommate could have the nice ones (Salinger 141). It is significant that Salinger uses suitcases as a representative of class here. Suitcases are what hold all of one’s possessions and are very representative of one’s material belongings. His roommate kept saying that Holden’s suitcases “were too new and bourgeois” (Salinger 141). This discourse is no accident on Salinger’s part as he is clearly identifying Holden’s possessions as representatives of the bourgeoisie. In fact, Holden himself even claims, “[e]verything I had was bourgeois as hell” (Salinger 141). The differentiating factor of Holden, however, is his longing to not be a part of this privileged class. In fact, his longing to switch

suitcases with his roommate is representative of his longing to be outside of the bourgeoisie and its ideologies, and instead be a representative of the proletariat.

Holden rejects and attempts to disassociate himself with the bourgeoisie. He has not only failed out of four prep schools, but he has a particular disdain for them. Prep schools to him not only are a reminder of his wealthy family, but they also are symbolic of the society which he is trying to escape. In his article, “Pencey Preppy: Cultural Codes in *The Catcher in the Rye*,” Christopher Brookeman asserts, “Holden’s commentaries on the value of the system of Pencey Prep lead him to conclude that the whole official vision of the school as a cooperative caring family is a mask for an actual ideology of intense competitive struggle between its individual members and factions” (Brookeman 61). This “ideology of intense competitive struggle” is reminiscent of his Pencey Prep’s headmaster, Dr. Thurmer’s sentiments that “Life is a game” (Salinger 12). To which Holden mentally replies:

Game my ass. Some game. If you get on the side where all the hot-shots are, then it’s a game, all right – I’ll admit that. But if you get on the *other* side, where there aren’t any hot-shots, then what’s a game about? Nothing. No game. (Salinger 12-13)

This competitive or game like mindset of the prep schools reflects the American Dream, or the ideology that suggests competition drives the economy and upholds the idea that anyone can break out of their lower social class into the bourgeoisie. Holden’s rejection and disassociation with prep school reflects his rejection of the ideologies upheld by society’s elite and the superstructure.

Holden leaves his prep school life and spends a majority of the novel staying in New York City with society’s lower, working class. He spends time assimilating to these people, from

prostitutes to elevator operators to middle aged women from Seattle. Holden truly longs to be a part of the proletariat. Another hint Salinger leaves that Holden is trying to leave his social class is his interaction with Ernest Morrow's mother on the train; he lies about his identity to the mother. In his critical piece, "A Retrospective Look at the Catcher in the Rye," Gerald Rosen writes, "it is interesting that when he lies to her about his name, he doesn't do it for the usual reason one lies—to aggrandize oneself—but rather he takes on the name of Rudolph Schmidt, the dorm janitor" (Rosen 551). With this statement, Rosen points out something quite interesting about Holden; he is constantly trying to put himself below his current social class. Taking the identity of a dorm janitor at Pencey Prep, instead of one of the students attending the boarding school, Holden is attempting to feel a part of what he considers the desirable alternative hegemony of the proletariat.

At one point Holden even begins throwing the \$3 and little change he has left into the pond to "take [his] mind off...dying" (Salinger 202). To quote his mentor, Mr. Antolini, instead of being an "immature man" that "wants to die nobly for a cause," Holden is striving "to live humbly for [a cause]" by throwing his money into a pond to forget "dying" (Salinger 244). Instead of choosing to commit suicide, which is heavily referenced throughout the book as an escape from Holden's situation, particularly his upper class situation, Holden escapes his bourgeoisie life by living humbly for his cause, by attempting to become a member of the proletariat. He is literally and metaphorically throwing away his connection to the upper class, his money, in an attempt to live humbly and without money in the lower class. The "cause" he is living nobly for here is the idea that wealth determines a person's value. He is very opposed to the dominant hegemony that places one's appearance at the highest of importance. In an attempt

to overthrow the dominant hegemony, Holden gets rid of his materialistic hold over his possessions and begins writing this narrative for his cause.

Holden hates almost everything about prep school, but seems to have an affinity for writing, even shyly admitting so in the narrative. In Robert A. Lee's article, "'Flunking Everything Else Except English Anyway': Holden Caulfield, Author," Lee speaks to Holden's authorial skills. He says Holden's writing consists of "these made up identities" and "self-discovery" (Lee 186-187). Holden's ability to reshape himself in this narrative and draw from his privileged education that he almost completely disregarded, except for English, has enabled Holden to partake in Louis Althusser's concept of production theory. Charles Bressler's textbook, *Literary Criticism: An Introduction to Theory and Practice*, introduces production theory as suggesting that "working-class people" must "write their own literature" and doing so "can establish an alternate hegemony" (Bressler 173). Holden uses the privilege of his wealthy education to draw on his writing abilities, and after assimilating himself to the lower working classes, he begins to "produce" a narrative to "establish an alternate hegemony" for the proletariat (Bressler 173).

One of Holden's infamous insults and biggest pet peeves is when he feels someone is being a "phony," which is part of the dominant hegemony Holden is fighting against. Many of the "phony" things or people that Holden takes offense against are of the upper class. In fact, one of Holden's first uses of phony is in reference to Elkton Hill's prep school headmaster, Mr. Haas, who, according to Holden is, "the phoniest bastard [Holden] ever met in [his] life" (Salinger 19). Holden then further elaborates Mr. Haas's phoniness, citing mainly his mistreatment of people in the lower class writing,

On Sundays, for instance, Haas went around shaking hands with everybody's parents when they drove up to school. He'd be charming as hell and all. Except if some boy had little old funny-looking parents. You should've seen the way he did with my roommate's parents. I mean if a boy's mother was sort of fat or corny-looking or something, and if somebody's father was one of those guys that wear those suits with very big shoulders and corny black-and-white shoes, then old Haas would just shake hands with them and give them a phony smile and then he'd go talk, for maybe a half an hour, with somebody else's parents. I can't stand that stuff. (19)

Mr. Haas treats people who cannot afford the nice suits and shoes poorly. His emphasis on materialistic things as opposed to someone's character highlights what is valued in that society, for which Holden shows extreme distaste. Another example of Holden's hate of phoniness and its association with wealth comes when his sister, Phoebe, suggests Holden become "a lawyer – like Daddy" (Salinger 223). Holden replies to this commenting that lawyers don't really save lives and that "all [lawyers] do is make a lot of dough and play golf and play bridge and buy cars and drink Martinis and look like a hot-shot" (Salinger 223). This does not appeal to Holden, and although it is his father's job, he is very distant from this lifestyle since his father never actually makes an appearance in the book. Rosen elaborates upon this concept writing, "Here is the genesis of [Holden's] hatred of phoniness. His parents live in two worlds: the real world and the world of appearances" (552). Holden writes about phoniness and the culture's obsession with having a wealthy appearance in an attempt to undermine this dominant hegemony displayed so evidently in the life of his father.

Holden even astutely points out society's hailing of the subject as unfulfilling, which Salinger starkly offsets by one of Holden's dates, Sally. Her firm belief in it leads Holden to say of prep schools,

"It's full of phonies, and all you do is study so that you can learn enough to be smart enough to be able to buy a goddam Cadillac some day, and you have to keep making believe you give a damn if the football team loses, and all you do is talk about girls and liquor and sex all day" (170).

Holden then tries to convince her to run away with him, and live off the grid. Sally does not understand Holden's strong desire to exist outside of the bourgeoisie. Interpellation has already so heavily shaped her that the thought of existing outside of the societal structure seems absolutely ridiculous. Rosen writes "Sally, who has been successfully acculturated, explains to Holden about his obligation to fulfill the traditional male role of husband and provider" (554). She tells him that following in society's structure will still allow them to have "oodles of marvelous places to go to" (Salinger 172). Out of his frustration, Holden responds,

I said no, there wouldn't be marvelous places to go to after I went to college and all. Open your ears. It'd be entirely different. We'd have to go down- stairs in elevators with suitcases and stuff. We'd have to phone up every- body and tell 'em goodbye and send 'em postcards from hotels and all. And I'd be working in some office, making a lot of dough, and riding to work in cabs and Madison Avenue buses, and reading newspapers, and playing bridge all the time, and going to the movies.... (172).

It is particularly important to note Holden's inclusion of having to bring their suitcases. He is once again referencing the suitcases' symbolism as material possessions. Holden was originally

suggesting to Sally they leave as they are, without suitcases or anything, and go to “Massachusetts and Vermont” (Salinger 171). When Sally suggests they work jobs that make a lot of money and live a socially acceptable and normalized life, and just vacation to those places once they have accrued wealth, Holden’s fears are realized. He is afraid that they would be so tied to their material possessions that they couldn’t leave without bringing their suitcases with them. Rosen writes in his article of Holden, “He believes he will succeed and it is the successful life he fears” (554). Holden is attempting to run away from the successful life before he becomes too attached to his own suitcase. He is desperately trying to switch suitcases with someone before he becomes like Sally.

Holden’s desperate attempts to switch suitcases and to live outside of society’s structural classes make him look quite foolish to his prep school peers and teachers, his date Sally, and practically everyone he comes in contact with, because they are so heavily shaped by the dominant hegemony. In the end of the novel, it is realized that Holden has landed himself in a mental institution. His being “sick” and the “psychoanalyst guy” battering him with questions point to this conclusion (Salinger 276). This is a rather depressing view of society’s rejection of Holden’s desire to live outside of its bounds and to revolt against the dominant hegemony. The psychoanalyst’s question asking Holden if he will “apply” himself when he returns to school, suggests that they are trying to make Holden buy into the belief that it is good to “learn enough to be smart enough to be able to buy a goddam Cadillac someday” (Salinger 170). Holden’s only way out of the mental institution is to buy into this hegemony. Salinger uses Holden to show the reality of societal pressure. While *Catcher in the Rye* doesn’t present an optimistic view for establishing an alternate hegemony, there is an awakening to the reality of the dominant hegemony’s control.

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