

The Catcher in the Rye and the Crazy Cliff

Scott T. WELLMAN

In 1981 I was thirty years old and so was the novel, *The Catcher in the Rye*. I don't know whether to be alarmed or charmed by this alignment. But I mention the fact only to suggest that Americans of my age have grown up with this novel, one with a sensational publication history. When it first appeared it became an immediate best seller and it has continued to have very high sales in paperback (20 to 30 thousand copies a month) ever since, so that now more than 10 million copies of the book have been issued in America alone, and translations have been made in over a dozen languages. *The Catcher in the Rye* is second to John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* as the most frequently taught novel in public schools. But sales figures only partly illustrate the impact this novel has had on readers since 1951, an impact that shaped people's lives and gave voice to the growing sense of what came to be called "alienation" in American society. And since this is a novel about growing up it is no wonder that it has been the young people, especially those between 15 and 25, who have made it a perennial best seller, a so-called modern classic. This is not to say that the novel has not also won great critical favor, after a certain initial reception characterized by shock, disbelief, and disgust over the audacity of Salinger's achievement. Though critics have tended to dismiss most of Salinger's later works, which are few and far between, as overplayed versions of his earlier themes, *Catcher* has tended to rise above suspicion and, in the words of another well-known American novelist, Peter De Vries, has what is necessary to "last forever".

Catcher is Salinger's only novel to date. It was preceded by a collection of nine short stories and succeeded by four longer works of fiction, none of which could be fairly classified as a novel, that have been collected in two separate books. Since *Catcher* made Salinger famous he has become reclusive and aloof and, some would say, essentially paranoid, avoiding fans and critics alike, giving no interviews, and keeping his photograph off the jackets of his books. This seems appropriate behavior for an author whose characters often fantasize about living behind the walls of a monastery, far from the rush and roar of modern urban life.

Though *Catcher* is a novel it is a very compressed one, both in terms of its length, 230 pages or so, as well as its dramatic compass, three days in the life of sixteen-year-old Holden Caulfield. This reflects Salinger's calling as a short story writer. The short story has been called a mode which gives dramatic form to a lyric impulse; or in other words, instead of writing a poem that expresses an overflow of spontaneous emotion in the voice of a first person, the writer channels his intense feeling into the words and actions of fictional characters. Salinger brings this same intensity to *Catcher*, and it catches the reader up exactly like a short story, so that it becomes the kind of book you don't linger over, it tends to be read in a day or two. It catches you up also because there is so much in it that is recognizable—in the settings, feelings, and language—i. e. Salinger perfectly fulfills Pope's dictum to write that which is often thought, though not so easily expressed.

Catcher bears some resemblance to *Huckleberry Finn* and critics have often compared the two books. Both Huck and Holden are adolescents, the former, at 13, three years younger than the sexually aware Holden. Both want to know the truth and taste its freedom, running away from hypocritical and miseducating societies, and towards some clearing of their own in the wilderness. Both are outsiders narrating their own tales in the form of some kind of

The Catcher in the Rye and the Crazy Cliff

personal address. There are other parallels, but it is probably the differences that are more important. Huck is a poor, uneducated child, still at home in the natural world, able to be satisfied floating down a river observing the river in heaven. Holden, on the other hand, is a child from an affluent, urban family, over-educated (despite his infamous track record at prep schools) and apart not only from society, but from nature and himself. What Holden has to do, in an idiom popular in the sixties, is to get himself together. He's all in pieces, he's scattered. Huck is more secure, less disgusted with himself, and less disgusted with the poor samples of humanity he has to associate with. Yeats has said that all ladders start in the foul rag and bone shop of the heart. Huck knows this, and he's climbing, Holden avoids such wisdom, and he's falling.

The story of the novel takes place in and near New York City during the Christmas season. In his own unique and charming voice, both sensitive and abrasive, funny and sad, Holden tells of having to leave the third prep school he's attended after failing all his subjects but English. He says goodbye to Pencey Prep and to all the "morons" he's hated and loved and heads back to the city. But instead of going straight home to his family's apartment and facing the wrath of his disappointed parents once again, he takes a room in a hotel and spends the next two nights and days roaming the city making contact with old acquaintances, recalling his past, reflecting on the love and companionship and wisdom of his brothers and sister, and getting more and more depressed, saddened, and suicidal as he encounters the deceit and filth and perversion of modern life. The ending suggests that the clearing Holden seeks is only in the past, in the land that children are all fated to depart from.

Holden wants to stay behind and he can't; he wants to stay among the children and keep them from doing harm to themselves, the greatest harm being to grow up into an adult perverted by values transmitted in the popular movies of the day; "phoney" or fake or

insincere values, those which leave behind everyone not interested in getting ahead, getting along, or getting even. Holden seeks a haven, what Hemingway made famous as a “separate peace”, but in the course of the book he discovers that his quest is impossible. No matter where one goes, no matter where one seeks refuge, somebody has always gone before and made sure there’s an obscenity, a “fuck you” on the wall. And Holden can’t prevent children from being exposed to that, as much as he would like to.

Catcher is a picaresque story, a story of a hero’s often comic misadventures, but much of it is cast in a caustic, sardonic tone which depicts Holden’s disgust and bitterness with society as he finds it. No matter where he goes the “phonies” he so often refers to are literally coming through the windows, destroying his sanity, ruining the nature of things. These phonies are the people who only appreciate what they’ve been told to appreciate, they are the people who depend upon received opinions, and received life. Holden comments: “People never think anything is anything really. I’m getting goddam sick of it”. In other words people miss the authentic and go for the faked and contrived. For example, at Radio City the crowds are moved to tears by the pagentry of the Christmas festival when actors troop across the stage carrying crucifixes singing “Come All Ye Faithful”. But Holden is appalled by this display of acting, by this contrived attempt to jerk sentimental tears out of the audience. To him the only authentic performance at Radio Cito is given by the kettle drummer. Holden says that Jesus would have “puked” to see the phoney religious display but that he would have really liked the guy who plays the kettle drums in the orchestra. “He only gets a chance to bang them a couple of times during a whole piece, but he never looks bored when he isn’t doing it. Then when he does bang them, he does it so nice and sweet, with this nervous expression on his face”. The book is studded with these kinds of appreciations, all of them displaying Holden’s extraordinary perception and sensitivity,

The Catcher in the Rye and the Crazy Cliff

and amid the outpouring of anathema upon the jerks and fools and morons that infest society, it is these appreciations that lift the book above mere satire and invective. Holden cares, he really does, it's that his disgust keeps overcoming him, making all his efforts appear to be futile and to no point. And in this disgust Holden is tempted to despair, despair in the definition of Kierkegaard, to lose the eternal.

For this novel, like all Salinger's works, is religious in intent. He is in search of the missing key throughout the body of his fiction, and he finds it in a blend of Christian mysticism that bypasses conventional church pieties, and Zen Buddhism, with its focus on the here and now, on that which is, on oneness. Here too Salinger was ahead of his time. Not only did he create characters who rebelled against the accepted notions and conventions of mass society long before James Dean became a cult figure, but he saturated his works with references to a body of Eastern knowledge that Americans soon began to discover in the fifties; a discovery which eventually reached fashionable dimensions in the sixties and early seventies, and that was essential in forming the counter culture of people who no longer believed in the old dichotomies of heaven and earth, good and evil, rich and poor.

Instead of just an individual's nervous breakdown there was a cultural nervous breakdown that took place in the sixties, one accelerated by the Vietnam war but fed essentially by the young rejecting the authority of both culture and church, and set loose in a society that could no longer absorb them, guided by the inner light or whatever drug best duplicated the inner light. The only watchword in this anarchy of self-indulgence and self-discovery that carried any weight was "love". The Beatles said it was all you need, but again Salinger had beat them to it as far back as 1950 when he published one of his most famous stories, "For Esmé with Love and Squalor". That story affirmed what Dostoevsky had written in *The Brothers*

Karamozov, that hell was the “suffering of being unable to love”. In Salinger’s story of war-time suffering, only love, a communion of spirits, can heal the wounds of man’s inhumanity to man. And it is significant that it is the compassionate love of a child that is the key. It is the same in *Catcher*. Holden is restored, his faculties given some kind of preliminary reordering by the faithful love of his kid sister, Phoebe, a ten-year-old, whose precocity stretches the bounds of belief, but who is genuinely winning beyond any reservation. Salinger repeatedly turns to children because he finds that only they have retained the capacity to follow their original bent leading to the *authenticity of here and now, the love of the moment*. Heaven and earth meet in the moments of children and it was for this reason perhaps, that Christ said that unless one has the heart of a child he cannot enter the kingdom of heaven. This is Salinger’s essence, and in many ways, his doom.

Because for all their insight and appreciations, his characters tend to discover that child-like heart in an increasingly closed circle of like-minded characters, who are often members of the same family, and moreover, rather thinly disguised aspects of one dominant ego, the author’s own. The message is love, but it is a love shared only by a secret sect. For the rest—the phonies, the jerks, the morons—there is pity, sadness, forgiveness, but rather doubtfully, love. So that by the time we reach Salinger’s later works we feel almost frozen out of a tight circle of brothers and sisters feeding off of one another exclusively, and looking down upon the rest of us with a contemptuous *there-but-for-the-grace-of-God-go-I* attitude. A similar kind of attitude was observable in the counter culture. Love increasingly came to be a byword passed between the initiated, while all of those who failed to spout the agreed upon platitudes and indulge in the agreed upon vices were ostracized.

And between the culture and the counter culture fell a shadow of people so alienated, so alone, and so uncaring, that violence became

The Catcher in the Rye and the Crazy Cliff

their natural reflex. They were neither on this side nor that, but in the middle and falling. Salinger's characters too, are falling, but they either catch themselves or are caught before they go over the "crazy cliff" as Holden refers to it. This is where the title of *Catcher* comes from. I'm sure that most people have spent some time in their fantasy lives picturing themselves both as saviors and as the saved. But to the deluded inhabitants of this shadow land I'm speaking of, the contact which the seek can only be established through some agent which represents what they do not have, power, either over themselves, as masters of their fate, or over others, as heroes in bold newspaper print. And to the powerless, nothing is more convincing than a gun.

There are two infamous cases we can examine that are illuminated by the themes we've been looking at in *Catcher*. The first is that of Mark David Chapman, the murderer of John Lennon, and it is the more obvious of the two. Because immediately after he had shot Lennon on December 8, 1980, he sat down outside the Dakota apartment building where Lennon had lived, and opened up a book, *The Catcher in the Rye*. Later at his sentencing Chapman chose to read this passage from the book :

Anyway, I keep picturing all these little kids playing some game in this big field of rye and all. Thousands of little kids, and nobody's around-nobody big, I mean-except me. And, I'm standing on the edge of some crazy cliff. What I have to do, I have to catch everybody if they start to go over the cliff-I mean if they're running and they don't look where they're going I have to come out from somewhere and catch them. That's all I'd do all day. I'd just be the catcher in the rye and all.

Clearly Chapman had already fallen off some crazy cliff to persist in the delusion that what he had done was some kind of humanitarian

deed. Chapman was 25 when he pulled the trigger and his life up to that time seems to have been a struggle to shake off a close identification he had made with Lennon since he was a young teenager, and to become his own self. Lennon's last album was called "Double Fantasy" and in the depths of his delusion this is what Chapman was caught in. The psychiatrists say that Chapman projected so much of himself into Lennon that he could no longer stand for his rival, his double, to displace him as the true Lennon. It was either kill or be killed. No one has theorized, to my knowledge, about why Chapman also apparently maintained such a close identification with Holden Caulfield. But ever since I learned of this bizarre piece of information, I've been trying to make some kind of sense of it. And it strikes me this way.

Much like Holden, Chapman at an early age, mainly through his worship of the Beatles, chose to rebel against authority, especially that of his parents. He was not a delinquent, but he was determined enough to insist on following his own bent. This led to fights with his parents and to running away from home. Later, about the time he graduated from high school, he was drawn to working with children, mainly through the Y. M. C. A. At one point his dedication led him to be sent to Lebanon as a missionary. However, the unstable situation there in 1975 forced him to come home early. He continued to work with the young and the disadvantaged in other programs, and was often praised by his fellow workers. However, once he reached college an unhappy love affair, the divorce of his parents, and other unknowable factors threw him into a depression which eventually resulted in a suicide attempt. He recovered from that, regained his stability, married, and proceeded to live a fairly normal life until shortly before December of 1980 when his life started coming apart.

Clearly Chapman was a man of sufficient sensibilities to appreciate the situation of Holden, on the run from school to school,

disgusted with the phony conventionalities his parents wanted him to embrace, determined to decide his own future. And like Holden Chapman sought and found a refuge among the young in being their caretaker, in giving them guidance. But this occupation could not hold Chapman, nor could society ultimately hold him. As we have seen, Chapman's murder of Lennon was motivated at least in part by the need to be whole, to destroy the other more powerful half of the double fantasy. The corollary to this is that Chapman wanted to insure, I think, that he alone was the only "big" person around in the rye field to attract the children. Lennon had always been a bright shining light to the young, and as such he displaced the role that Chapman, following Holden, envisioned for himself. Much like Holden, we can assume that Chapman had dug a hole for himself, that he had come to feel that he alone had to bear the burdens of living in a society that overwhelmed its members with phony and conventional substitutes for life.

The critic Alfred Kazin is convinced that the vast public audience for Salinger's works, "is based not merely on the vast number of young people who recognize their emotional problems in his fiction and their frustrated rebellions in the sophisticated language he manipulates so skillfully. It is based even more on the vast numbers who have been released by our society to think of themselves as endlessly sensitive, spiritually alone, gifted and whose suffering lies in the narrowing of their consciousness to themselves, in their withdrawal from a society which they think they understand all too well, in the drying up of their hope, their trust, and their wonder at the great world itself". As we have seen many of these kind of people found a refuge in the counter culture. But for others this "narrowing of the consciousness", this withdrawal from a society to which they have a categorical aversion, was so complete that all connection was impossible, since the light had swallowed itself. And into the black hole of themselves they can only draw in others, they can no longer

come out.

This is even moreso the case with John Hinckley, who attempted to assassinate President Reagan on March 30, 1981. By the time he pulled the trigger he too was 25 and even more of a blank than Chapman. Hinckley was not caught in any kind of double fantasy bind, but at least part of his motivation was to impress a movie actress, Jodie Foster, who had played the role of a young teenage prostitute in "Taxi Driver". In that movie Robert De Diro played a taxi driver who, driven crazy by the filth and perversion of New York City, becomes unhinged, stalks a presidential candidate with the idea of shooting him to impress a woman who's rejected him, fails, and instead fixes on a child prostitute whom he decides to save in a fantastic, fiery climax that is like a brief visit to hell in all its horror. Apparently Hinckley had no trouble envisioning himself in this role, only he took it a few steps further than most, and decided to do what he could to live it out.

This may appear to be far from *Catcher*, but there are prominent parallels. Like Holden, the taxi driver is overcome with disgust at the perverts and morons who are ruining things for him. His reaction is so powerful that it has a completely polarizing effect. The taxi driver loses all connection with others, eventually loses his connections with reality, and escapes into the heroic fantasy of an adolescent, determined to die to redeem the innocence of a child. In *Catcher* one of Holden's former teachers had quoted a famous saying of the psychoanalyst Wilhelm Stekel who said: "The mark of the immature man is that he wants to die nobly for a cause, while the mark of the mature man is that he wants to live humbly for one". The taxi driver decided to take the easy way out, and was ironically enough hailed in the newspapers as a hero. Hinckley too decided to fulfill his destiny, as what he called a "psychotic poet", and won the infamy that his actions deserved. Both envisioned themselves as noble, embattled, romantic figures, knights of the darkness. In

The Catcher in the Rye and the Crazy Cliff

Catcher Holden too, often fantasizes about the last heroic spasms of his life, about a violent death and the commotion it will raise. But in the end he rejects becoming just another flame-out and he goes home to recover. The same cannot be said, unfortunately, for the many Chapmans and Hinckleys who now wander through our modern societies too lost in their homelessness to do anything other than rage and destroy. What these people embrace from literature and art is what fictive heroes are meant to reject. The problem is that these potential psychopaths read books and see movies not in order to change their lives for the better through the vicarious experience of a hero's trials and triumphs, but to confirm their worst fears and anxieties. And against this kind of willfull misinterpretation we will never be safe.