Narrative Narcissism: Holden Caulfield and the Art of Self-Preservation

By Jason A. Walker

J.D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* is one of the most enduring works in all of American Literature and, arguably, one of the most influential. Holden Caulfield, the protagonist and narrator, chronicles his efforts, not so much to understand himself or other people, but to ridicule their “phoniness” and insulate himself from becoming one of them. He attempts to accomplish this goal in his role as a not-so-reluctant and profoundly narcissistic narrator. His unique voice and diction render him simultaneously involved in and removed from events and interactions with which he is not only engaged, but which deeply impact his fragile sense of self. Telling his story in this manner is a desperate attempt at self-preservation and protection, as well as (what he believes to be) a secure approach to restoring his sanity and connection to himself. Caulfield’s language of contempt for what he sees as the phoniness of virtually every one of the power figures around him wrests control away from those people whom he believes are responsible for his life not being what he thinks it should be. I will show that just as J.D. Salinger does with Holden Caulfield the character, Caulfield the narrator (author) creates an alter ego or “second self” through whom he engages the reader in his story. In doing so, he attempts to insulate himself from both responsibility and consequence, an inherently narcissistic goal, but a uniquely necessary one for Holden in his search for an authentic identity.

In order to fully understand Holden Caulfield, it is important to first understand his relationship to his creator, J.D. Salinger. There are many theories regarding the possible connections between Caulfield and Salinger—some more credible than others. While Salinger would likely eschew the idea of analyzing Holden Caulfield the character as a fictionalized autobiographical incarnation of himself, noting genuine comparisons between the two is both
informative and instructional for the reader to see the full spectrum of who Holden Caulfield is and what motivates him. Like Caulfield, Salinger was not a good student and was expelled from prep school. According to one commentator, Salinger would likely encourage students not to believe everything their professors told them (Salinger). Determining how connected the author and his text are, however, is not a simple proposition. In the case of Salinger and Caulfield, it is important to identify likenesses which go beyond similarities in their lives and personalities. In his theory of the Author Function, Michel Foucault writes:

We now ask of each fictional text: from where does it come, who wrote it, when, under what circumstance, or beginning with what design? The meaning ascribed to it and the status or value accorded it depends on the manner in which we answer these questions. And if a text should be discovered in a state of anonymity—whether as a consequence of an accident or the author's explicit wish—the game becomes one of rediscovering the author. (109)

Following his unceremonious exit from the McBurney School, Salinger’s parents enrolled him in the Valley Forge Military Academy. Despite his successful completion of his education there, he did not continue on with a military career. However, like millions of other young men of his generation, he was drafted into the army upon the entrance of the United States into World War II (Salinger). In June of 1944, J.D. Salinger stepped off an armored personnel transport and onto Utah Beach during the Allied invasion of Normandy on D-Day. He was carrying six pages of the manuscript from The Catcher in the Rye in the pocket of his uniform and he worked on the novel while the army worked its way across Western Europe. As a member of the Counter-Intelligence Division, Salinger was one of the first Americans to see the horrors of the Holocaust, entering an abandoned Nazi death camp in the spring of 1945. After the
conclusion of the war, Salinger suffered a nervous breakdown and was admitted to a military psychiatric hospital for treatment. Holden Caulfield made his debut in the short story “I’m Crazy” published by *Collier’s* in 1945 and later reworked into the novel almost immediately after Salinger’s release from the hospital (*Salinger*). Given the atrocities which Salinger witnessed first-hand during the war, it is clear that to at least some degree, Holden Caulfield is a manifestation of Salinger’s distrust of his world, and in particular its power structures. Caulfield gives a voice to the anger, frustration, and bitterness which Salinger himself could not speak. Through Caulfield, Salinger finds a way to tell his story—or at least the portions of it he is willing to share without reliving it.

From the beginning of the novel, it is clear that young Holden fancies himself a participant in his own story only by sheer happenstance. As such, he is a mere observer and reporter of the events which surround, involve, and impact him; and he is only willing to provide the reader information which he deems relevant to the conversation that is about to take place. Caulfield’s tone is dismissive and his diction is that of an individual who is being imposed upon and inconvenienced. Despite his feigned hesitance, Holden wants the reader to know his story, but only on his terms. This carefully constructed persona allows Holden to do precisely the thing he says he has no interest in doing—telling his whole story, but telling it in a way that makes him seem a disinterested third party:

If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you’ll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don’t feel like getting into it, if you want to know the truth. . .I’ll just
tell you this madman stuff that happened to me around last Christmas. . . (Salinger 3)

The vital connection between J.D. Salinger and Holden Caulfield lies not in the similarities of their lives, rather it lies in how their experiences as young men coming of age in a turbulent world led to a deep sense that phoniness was rampant. Phoniness was, for Holden, "[o]ne of the biggest reasons I left Elkton Hills was because I was surrounded by phonies. That's all. They were coming in the goddam window. . .I can't stand that stuff. It drives me crazy. It makes me so depressed I go crazy. I hated goddam Elkton Hills" (17). For Salinger himself, it was one of the reasons that he shut himself away from the world (Salinger). Though Holden Caulfield is not biographically linked to J.D. Salinger, he is the voice of Salinger’s pain. Similarly, the narcissistic narrator of *The Cather in the Rye* is a creation of Holden Caulfield. He is the disinterested façade of a seventeen year boy trying to find his true self. Uncovering this persona allows the reader to more fully understand Holden Caulfield and his overwhelming drive to shirk the expectations of authority without suffering the consequences of his rebellion.

There is no mistaking Holden’s disdain for the world in which he lives, nor is it difficult to determine what motivates him to seek out ways of distancing himself from it. Holden Caulfield is, more than anything else, lonely. This loneliness and the resulting struggle to find his true identity can be traced to the death of his younger brother, Allie, who died of leukemia when Holden was thirteen years old. Holden’s description of Allie offers crucial insight into his current state: “He got leukemia and died when we were up in Maine, on July 18, 1946. He was two years younger than I was, but he was about fifty times as intelligent. He was terrifically intelligent” (43). Holden lost the person who, to him, represented goodness in the world, explaining further, “[b]ut it wasn’t just that he was the most intelligent member of the family. He was also the
nicest, in lots of ways. He never got mad at anybody” (43). As with the rest of the narrative, Holden is nonchalant about his brother’s tragic death, distancing himself from the actual occurrence, making him only an observer of events. Regardless of the manner in which he describes the event, Allie’s death is the event which triggered Holden’s troubles. In his thesis, Whitney Thacker observes that Allie’s death, “challenges what [Holden] believes of the world. In discussing this traumatic event, Holden appears incredibly casual, indicating that perhaps Holden himself is unaware of the impact the event made on him” (35). Whether or not Holden was aware of the impact Allie’s death made on him is debatable. What is not, however, is that Holden’s casual attitude and description of it are a means of self-preservation and protection. He cannot rationalize Allie’s goodness and intelligence with the tragedy of his death at such a young age. His attempt to escape that irreconcilable juxtaposition through dispassionate observation is explained by applying Leon Festinger’s theory of cognitive dissonance. Festinger writes, “cognitive dissonance can be seen as an antecedent condition which leads to activity oriented toward dissonance reduction just as hunger leads to activity oriented toward hunger reduction” (3). As long as he can speak in a way that keeps the traumatic events of his past at a distance, he does not have to address them and they cannot hurt him. Ultimately, this is also the manner in which he deals with the societal power structure of which he is so suspicious.

A postmodern interpretation of Holden’s narrative relies on the notion that he is “‘controlled’ . . . by the ideologically motivated discourses of power which predominate in the society which [he inhabits]” and further that his goal is to break free of that predominate discourse (Butler 50). The late 1940’s and early 1950’s witnessed the first quiet rumblings of a burgeoning counter-culture which pushed back against those power structures and questioned traditional values and belief systems. However, these decades also witnessed a strengthening (at
least temporarily) of the “predominate discourse.” Post-war America was a time of extreme cultural contradiction. On the one hand, there existed a generation of adults who had experienced the incredible hardships of both the Great Depression and World War II. Having overcome those challenges that generation gravitated to a more traditional view of acceptable societal norms. They did not readily question the authority or validity of deep-rooted institutions: family, government, or the church. On the other was a generation of adolescents who were coming of age during a time of economic, scientific, and cultural expansion. They had been, to some extent, insulated from the hardships of war and depression. Though members of the post-war generation were not necessarily revolutionary in their questioning of authority, they also did not accept the traditional cultural, political, or moral narratives wholesale. Citing David Halberstam’s book *The Fifties*, Thacker writes:

> Halberstam argues that “the pace of the fifties seemed slower, almost languid” compared to those of later decades, adding, “Social ferment, however, was beginning just beneath this placid surface” (1). The start of basic research for the birth control pill, changes in the nature of previously conservative sexual practices, the popularity of the television—all are examples of the brewing changes in 1950s society, changes that showed their true impact only later (1). (64)

In Salinger’s novel, Holden Caulfield assumes (or perhaps commandeers) the role of spokesperson for the disaffected American youth. Moreover, he attempts to claim an identity which is uniquely his and not one chosen for him. This is critical in a postmodern reading of the novel. Butler explains, “[w]e don’t just play roles in such cases, but our very identity, the notion we have of ourselves, is at issue when we are affected by discourses of power” (50). Holden is quite literally driven insane by the hypocrisy he sees in post-war culture—a hypocrisy that is
propped up by the generation which is responsible for his present circumstances and which he fears will dictate his future. He is “an adolescent figure who transcends his own particular time and place in history by representing social unease, demonstrated both in his language as well as his attitudes towards his culture” (Thacker 64). Through the language of his second self, Holden creates a new predominate discourse in which he engages the reader in conversation directly, using the second person “you” repeatedly. Through this conversation, he seeks to unravel what he believes to be a power structure that is bent on his failure.

Holden begins his story with his preparations to leave Pencey Prep. He has been “kicked out” of the school because he is “flunking four subjects and not applying [him]self and all” and he is going to visit “old Spencer” his history teacher (6). During this visit, Holden listens as Mr. Spencer lectures him about his failure to live up to Pencey standards and expectations. Holden is respectful and answers Mr. Spencer when he is questioned; however, his conversation with the reader reveals Holden’s true feelings. When Spencer echoes Dr. Thurmer’s belief that life is a game that must be played by the rules, Holden responds affirmatively, but at the same time addresses the reader: “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’re on the other side, where there aren’t any hot-shots, then what’s a game about it? Nothing. No game” (11). Holden views himself as being on the “other side” without the help of any “hot-shots.” He believes that his shortcomings and failures are not solely his responsibility but are predetermined because of who he is. This belief and the language he uses to express it are indicative of his desire to either refuse to play the “game” at all, or more likely, to create for himself a new game with new rules—one where he takes control by imposing his interpretation of society on the reader.
The catch-22 of Holden’s insistence on controlling his story and setting himself apart from all the “phonies” leads to isolation, not inclusion. In his book *J.D. Salinger, Revisited*, Warren French describes Holden as “an outsider rather than just another clone. [His] problems stem from an inner-directed resistance to the regulations of an influential segment of American society whose “keeping-up-with-the-Joneses” life-style has already fossilized into a debilitating tradition” (58). Holden identifies and emphasizes the negative attributes of those people who represent regulation and tradition. In his conversation with Mr. Spencer, a teacher whom he obviously admired and who cared enough about him to try to help, Holden calls attention to everything he disliked about his teacher. He observes, "he was all stooped over, and he had very terrible posture, and in class, whenever he dropped a piece of chalk at the blackboard, some guy in the first row always had to get up and pick it up and hand it to him" (10). Likewise, Holden’s entire adventure in New York is an exercise in resisting regulations—of resisting the phony world of adults who cause him so much angst. Even what should have been a relaxing evening in a piano bar was ruined by the phoniness of the people who were there. He was surrounded by “prep school jerks and college jerks. . .three couples, besides me, [who] were waiting for tables. . .all shoving and standing on their tiptoes to get a look at old Ernie while he played” (94). Even “old Ernie” was not safe from Holden’s scorn:

He had a big damn mirror in front of the piano, with a big spotlight on him, so that everybody could watch his face while he played. You couldn’t see his fingers while he played—just his big old face. Big deal. I’m not too sure what the name of the song was that he was playing when I came in, but whatever it was, he was really stinking it up. He was putting all these dumb, show-offy ripples in the high notes, and a lot of other very tricky stuff that gives me a pain in the ass. You
should’ve heard the crowd though when he was finished. You would’ve puked.

They went mad. (94)

Caulfield’s constant criticism of virtually everyone but himself is not arbitrary and can be of use when analyzing his search for his own identity. Thacker explains, “Holden’s demonization of the society that surrounds him and his resulting fight against joining that society reveals his adolescent struggle to form a unique identity as distinct from his own culture” (34). The loss of his brother Allie, the person he described as the “nicest,” during his early adolescence derailed his maturation and removed his touchstone for goodness. Having lost that reference point, Holden is forced to form his own identity seeing only the negative. Renowned psychologist Erik Erikson observes: “[W]here man does not have enemies he often must invent them in order to create boundaries against which he can assert the leeway of the new man he must become” (qtd. in Thacker 34). Holden’s efforts toward finding that leeway are accompanied by an ironic and narcissistic refusal to see his own faults and phoniness.

Caulfield’s narcissism is not an arrogant disregard of the reality that he cannot dictate ethics, integrity, and morality for the entire human race. Instead it is a coping mechanism he employs to put distance between the person he is and the person he wants to be, and to put distance between his fantasy about how the world should be and how it is. It is a quixotic attempt by a young man who feels “so damn lonesome” to establish himself as a unique and relevant individual (Salinger 54). His shattered sense of self is poignantly revealed when he describes waiting to leave Pencey: “What I was really hanging around for, I was trying to feel some kind of good-by. I mean I’ve left schools and places I didn't even know I was leaving them. I hate that. I don't care if it's a sad good-by or a bad good-by, but when I leave a place I like to know I'm
leaving it. If you don't, you feel even worse” (6-7). It is precisely because of his nearly non-existent self-esteem that Holden adopts the narcissistic persona of the *Catcher* narrator.

Ralf-Peter Behrendt defines narcissism as “a need—indeed an automatic tendency that is expressed in behaviour and cognition—to maintain self-esteem, that is, to be loved and to be loveable, to be approved and to be approvable, and to be generally accepted by and thus to feel connected to one's social surround” (1). Holden’s search for love, approval, acceptance, and a strong sense of self manifests itself in behavior which is both hypocritical and dangerous. He is deeply disturbed by the “Fuck you” signs on the wall and worried that “Phoebe and all the other little kids would see it, an how they’d wonder what the hell it meant, and then finally some dirty kid would tell them—all cockeyed, naturally—what it meant and how they’d all think about it and maybe even worry about it for a couple of days” (221). All the while Holden’s entire narrative is riddled with curse words, and he fully understands what the word means. Holden tells his story as if his entire raison d’être is to call attention to the dishonesty—the “phoniness”—of the adult world while at the same time being dishonest and deceitful. When a woman on the train notices the Pencey Prep sticker on his suitcase and engages him in conversation about her son Ernest Morrow, whom Holden refers to as “the biggest bastard that ever went to Pencey,” he lies when she asks his name:

> “Oh, how nice!” the lady said. But not corny. She was just nice and all. “I must tell Ernest we met,” she said. “May I ask your name, dear?”

> “Rudolph Schmidt,” I told her. I didn’t feel like giving her my whole life history. Rudolph Schmidt was the name of the janitor of our dorm (61).

Holden admits that there was no good reason for lying to the woman—he just “didn’t feel like” telling the truth. Holden does not seem to notice the hypocrisy that is rampant in his words
and actions, but the hypocrites in the world around him are never far from his eyes. As long as he can see them and call them out for their disingenuousness, there is no need for him to deal with his own, thus protecting himself from the pain that would likely cause. Holden’s hypocrisy is not an appealing trait, but the self-destructive nature of much of his narcissistic behavior makes him a pitiful figure worthy of empathy despite his many flaws. Behrendt notes that there is both “healthy” and “pathological” narcissism, the latter being characterized by “inappropriate, maladaptive, and hence ultimately self-defeating behaviours in an attempt to maintain a precarious self-esteem” (1-2). Rather than seeking out the love and attention he is lacking by developing healthy relationships with other people, Holden engages in unhealthy and sometimes dangerous behavior. He smokes “quite heav[ily]” and, although his attempt to order an alcoholic beverage at Ernie’s is unsuccessful, the reader can infer that this is not the first time Holden has been in such an establishment, nor is it the first time he has had a drink. Perhaps his most self-destructive act is hiring a prostitute, Sunny, in the hopes of relieving his depression. Ultimately, he does not have sex with her, telling her that he cannot because he had surgery on his “clavichord” (108). Although he pays her five dollars for coming to his room, she claims that he owes her ten. After leaving without being paid, she complains to Maurice, the elevator operator (most likely her pimp), who comes to demand the rest of the money from Holden. When Holden refused to pay anymore, Maurice pinned him against the door and “snapped his finger” on Holden’s groin while Sunny took the money from his wallet (113-115). Rather than simply paying the additional five dollars, Holden’s narcissistic attitude toward two more phonies put him in a situation which could have resulted in significant physical harm. The experience only deepens his need to push people away and to separate himself from events which have tremendous impacts on his life and health. Holden’s convictions about the adult world are
continuously confirmed, so he disengages from his own life in the hopes of finding himself outside of the chaos.

Who is Holden Caulfield? It is a question which has been on the minds of readers for over six decades since *The Catcher in the Rye* was first published. There are as many answers as there are readers. J.D. Salinger, the reclusive genius, created a protagonist so enigmatic as to be both unrecognizable and familiar at the same time. He is certainly a piece of Salinger and his experiences. In the end, however, Holden is his own person; although, he has no idea who that person is. In his epic search for a genuine and unique identity, he rails against the culture which he clearly despises, he rebels against the predominate power structure of society, and he adopts a narcissistic persona meant to shield him from pain, accountability, and the consequences of his actions. In the end, Holden’s fate is uncertain. Salinger does not provide readers with any sort of closure to the Caulfield story. True to form, Holden concludes by separating himself from his own story:

> I don’t know what the hell to say. If you want to know the truth. I don’t *know* what I think about it. I’m sorry I told so many people about it. About all I know is, I sort of *miss* everybody I told about. Even old Stradlater and Ackley, for instance. I think I even miss that goddam Maurice. It’s funny. Don’t ever tell anybody anything. If you do, you start missing everybody. (234)

It is safe to assume that Holden Caulfield never finds his authentic identity, so his story ends because he stops telling it. Like Salinger, Caulfield finds it easier to separate himself from a world filled with pain and heartache rather than engaging with it through healthy human relationships.
Works Cited


J.D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* is one of the most enduring works in all of American Literature and, arguably, one of the most influential—for good and/or bad. Holden Caulfield, the protagonist and narrator, chronicles his efforts not so much to understand himself or other people, but to ridicule their “phoniness” and insulate himself from becoming one of them. He attempts to accomplish this goal in his role as a not-so-reluctant and profoundly narcissistic narrator. His unique voice and diction render him simultaneously involved in and removed from events and interactions with which he is not only engaged, but which deeply impact his fragile sense of self. Telling his story in this manner is a desperate attempt at self-preservation and protection, as well as (what he believes to be) a secure approach to restoring his sanity and connection to himself. Caulfield’s language of contempt for what he sees as the phoniness of virtually every one of the power figures around him wrests control away from those people whom he believes are responsible for his life not being what he thinks it should be. I will show that just as J.D. Salinger did with Holden Caulfield the character, Caulfield the narrator (author) creates an alter ego or “second self” through whom he engages the reader in his story. In doing so, he attempts to insulate himself from both responsibility and consequence, an inherently narcissistic goal, but a uniquely necessary one for Holden in his search for an authentic individual, relational, and collective self.
In order to fully understand Holden Caulfield, it is important to first understand his relationship to his creator, J.D. Salinger. There are many theories regarding the possible connections between Caulfield and Salinger—some more credible than others. While Salinger would likely eschew the idea of analyzing Holden Caulfield the character as a fictionalized autobiographical incarnation of himself, noting genuine comparisons between the two is both informative and instructional for the reader to see the full spectrum of who Holden Caulfield is and what motivates him. Like Caulfield, Salinger was not a good student and was expelled from prep school. According to one commentator, he would likely encourage students not to believe everything their professors told them (Salinger). Determining how connected the author and his text are, however, is not a simple proposition. In the case of Salinger and Caulfield, it is important to identify likenesses which go beyond similarities in their lives and personalities. In his theory of the Author Function, Michel Foucault writes:

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Following his unceremonious exit from the McBurney School, Salinger’s parents enrolled him in the Valley Forge Military Academy. Despite his successful completion of his education there, he did not continue on with a military career. However, like millions of other young men of his generation, he was drafted into the army upon the entrance of the United States into World War II (Salinger). In June of 1944, J.D. Salinger stepped off an armored personnel
transport and onto Utah Beach during the Allied invasion of Normandy on D-Day. He was carrying six pages of the manuscript from *The Catcher in the Rye* in the pocket of his uniform, and he worked on the novel while the army worked its way across Western Europe. As a member of the Counter-Intelligence Division, Salinger was one of the first Americans to see the horrors of the holocaust, entering an abandoned Nazi death camp in the spring of 1945. After the conclusion of the war, Salinger suffered a nervous breakdown and was admitted to a military psychiatric hospital for treatment. Holden Caulfield made his debut in the short story “I’m Crazy” published by *Collier’s* in 1945 and later reworked into the novel almost immediately after Salinger’s release from the hospital (*Salinger*). Given the atrocities which Salinger witnessed first-hand during the war, and while writing the novel, it is clear that to at least some degree, Holden Caulfield is a manifestation of Salinger’s distrust of his world, and in particular its power structures. Caulfield gives a voice to the anger, frustration, and bitterness which Salinger himself could not speak. He allows the author to tell his story—the portions of it he is willing to share—without reliving it.

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> If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you’ll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don’t feel like getting into it, if you want to know the truth...I’ll just
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Caulfield’s tone is dismissive and his diction is that of an individual who is being imposed upon and inconvenienced. Despite his feigned hesitance, however, Holden wants the reader to know his story, but only on his terms. This carefully constructed persona allows Holden to do precisely the thing he says he has no interest in doing—telling his whole story, but telling it through the filter of what equates to a disinterested third party. Answering Foucault’s questions reveals that the vital connection between J.D. Salinger and Holden Caulfield lies not in the similarities of their lives, rather it lies in how their experiences as young men coming of age in a turbulent world led to a deep sense that phoniness was rampant. Phoniness was, for Holden, "[o]ne of the biggest reasons I left Elkton Hills was because I was surrounded by phonies. That's all. They were coming in the goddam window. . .I can't stand that stuff. It drives me crazy. It makes me so depressed I go crazy. I hated goddam Elkton Hills" (17). For Salinger himself, it was one of the reasons that he shut himself away from the world (Salinger). While Holden Caulfield is not biographically linked to J.D. Salinger, he is the voice—the author—Holden is the voice of Salinger’s pain. Similarly, the narcissistic narrator of The Cather in the Rye is a creation of Holden Caulfield. He is the disinterested façade for a seventeen year old man trying to find his true self. Uncovering this “author” persona allows the reader to more fully understand Holden Caulfield and his overwhelming drive to shirk the expectations of authority without suffering the consequences of his rebellion.

There is no mistaking Holden’s disdain for the world in which he lives, nor is it difficult to determine what motivates him to seek out ways of distancing himself from it. Holden Caulfield is, more than anything else, lonely. That loneliness and the resulting struggle to find his
true identity can be traced to the death of his younger brother, Allie, who died of leukemia when Holden was thirteen years old. Holden’s description of Allie offers crucial insight into his current state: “He got leukemia and died when we were up in Maine, on July 18, 1946. He was two years younger than I was, but he was about fifty times as intelligent. He was terrifically intelligent” (43). Holden lost the person who, to him, represented goodness in the world, explaining further, “[b]ut it wasn’t just that he was the most intelligent member of the family. He was also the nicest, in lots of ways. He never got mad at anybody” (43). As with the rest of the narrative, Holden is casual and nonchalant about his brother’s tragic death, thus separating himself from the actual occurrence, making him only a casual observer of events. Regardless of the manner in which he describes the event, however, Allie’s death is the event which triggered Holden’s troubles. In his thesis, “You can’t ever find a place that’s nice and peaceful”: The Adolescent Identity in J. D. Salinger’s The Catcher in the Rye, Whitney Thacker observes that Allie’s death, “For Holden, this identity crisis comes with the death of his younger brother Allie, an event that challenges what he [Holden] believes of the world. In discussing this traumatic event, Holden appears incredibly casual, indicating that perhaps Holden himself is unaware of the impact the event made on him” (35). Whether or not Holden was aware of the impact Allie’s death made on him is debatable. What is not, however, is that Holden’s casual attitude and description of it are a means of self-preservation and protection. As long as he can speak in a way that keeps the traumatic events of his past at a distance, he does not have to address them and they cannot hurt him. Ultimately, this is also the manner in which he deals with the societal power structure of which he is so suspicious.

A postmodern interpretation of Holden’s narrative relies on the notion that he is “’controlled’ . . . by the ideologically motivated discourses of power which predominate in the
society which [he inhabits]” (Butler 50) and further that his goal is to break free of that predominate discourse (Butler 50). He creates, through the language of his second self, a new predominate discourse in which he engages the reader in conversation directly, using the second person “you” repeatedly. Through this conversation, he seeks empathy and validation thereby unraveling what he believes to be a power structure that is bent on his failure.

Holden chooses to begin telling his story as he prepares to leave Pencey Prep. He has been “kicked out” of the school because he is “flunking four subjects and not applying [him]self and all” and he is going to visit “old Spencer” his history teacher (6). During this visit, Holden listens as Mr. Spencer lectures him about his failure to live up to Pencey standards and expectations. Holden is respectful and answers Mr. Spencer when he is questioned, however, there is a continual silent dialog which reveals Holden’s true feelings to the reader. When Spencer echoes his Headmaster, Dr. Thurmer’s—belief that life is a game that much be played by the rules, Holden responds affirmatively, but at the same time speaks to the reader: “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’re on the other side, where there aren’t any hot-shots, then what’s a game about it? Nothing. No game” (11). Holden views himself as being on the “other side” without the help of any “hot-shots.” His He believes that his shortcomings and failures are not solely his responsibility, but were almost predestined are predetermined because of who he is. This belief and the language he uses to express it are indicative of his desire to either refuse to play the “game” at all, or more likely, to create for himself a new game with new rules.

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regulations of an influential segment of American society whose “keeping-up-with-the-Joneses” life-style has already fossilized into a debilitating tradition” (58). Holden identifies and emphasizes the negatives in those people who represent regulation and tradition. In his conversation with Mr. Spencer, a teacher whom he obviously admired and who cared enough about him to try to help, Holden called attention to everything he disliked about his teacher. "I mean he was all stooped over, and he had very terrible posture, and in class, whenever he dropped a piece of chalk at the blackboard, some guy in the first row always had to get up and pick it up and hand it to him" (10). Likewise, Holden’s entire adventure in New York is an exercise in resisting regulations—of resisting the phony world of adults who cause him so much angst. Even What should have been a relaxing evening in a piano bar was even ruined by the phoniness of the people who were there. He was surrounded by “prep school jerks and college jerks. . .three couples, besides me, [who] were waiting for tables. . .all shoving and standing on their tiptoes to get a look at old Ernie while he played” (94). Even “old Ernie” was not safe from Holden’s scorn:

He had a big damn mirror in front of the piano, with a big spotlight on him, so that everybody could watch his face while he played. You couldn’t see his fingers while he played—just his big old face. Big deal. I’m not too sure what the name of the song was that he was playing when I came in, but whatever it was, he was really stinking it up. He was putting all these dumb, show-offy ripples in the high notes, and a lot of other very tricky stuff that gives me a pain in the ass. You should’ve heard the crowd though when he was finished. You would’ve puked. They went mad. (94)
Caulfield’s constant criticism of virtually everyone but himself is not arbitrary and can be of use when analyzing his search for his own identity. Thacker explains, ““Holden’s demonization of the society that surrounds him and his resulting fight against joining that society reveals his adolescent struggle to form a unique identity as distinct from his own culture” (34). The loss of his brother Allie, the person he described as the “nicest,” during his early adolescence derailed his maturation and removed his touchstone for goodness. Having lost that reference point, Holden was forced to form his own identity seeing only the negative. Thacker quotes noted psychologist Erik Erikson: “[W]here man does not have enemies he often must invent them in order to create boundaries against which he can assert the leeway of the new man he must become” (34). In Holden Caulfield’s case, his efforts toward that leeway is accompanied by an ironic and narcissistic refusal to see his own faults and phoniness.

Works Cited


Overall remarks from Ashlie Contos:

I know that you are still working on the essay, so I tried to limit my suggestions toward grammar and clarity edits because I did not want to distract you with too many content suggestions.

However, if you are still working on length for the essay, consider mentioning the culture of the U.S. at the time and why Holden feels as though everything is “phony.” The rise of American consumerism/consumption began after WWWII – I think in the 1950s. With the rise of the Cold War, the nation’s fear of communism stimulated an entrenchment of conservativism. If you talk about this, it might be easier to bring in the post-modern theory because postmodernist theorists – especially Foucault and Butler – were pushing against systematic power and ideological structures. I think this will help lengthen and strengthen your essay.
J.D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* is one of the most enduring works in all of American Literature and, arguably, one of the most influential—for good and/or bad. Holden Caulfield, the protagonist and narrator, chronicles his efforts not so much to understand himself or other people, but to ridicule their “phoniness” and insulate himself from becoming one of them. He attempts to accomplish this goal in his role as a not-so-reluctant and profoundly narcissistic narrator. His unique voice and diction render him simultaneously involved in and removed from events and interactions with which he is not only engaged, but which deeply impact his fragile sense of self. Telling his story in this manner is a desperate attempt at self-preservation and protection, as well as (what he believes to be) a secure approach to restoring his sanity and connection to himself. Caulfield’s language of contempt for what he sees as the phoniness of virtually every one of the power figures around him wrests control away from those people whom he believes are responsible for his life not being what he thinks it should be. I will show that just as J.D. Salinger did with Holden Caulfield the character, Caulfield the narrator (author) creates an alter ego or “second self” through whom he engages the reader in his story. In doing so, he attempts to insulate himself from both responsibility and consequence, an inherently narcissistic goal, but a uniquely necessary one for Holden in his search for an authentic individual, collective, and relational self.
In order to fully understand Holden Caulfield, it is important to first understand his relationship to his creator, J.D. Salinger. There are many theories regarding the possible connections between Caulfield and Salinger—some more credible than others. While Salinger would likely eschew the idea of analyzing Holden Caulfield the character as a fictionalized autobiographical incarnation of himself, noting genuine comparisons between the two is both informative and instructional for the reader to see the full spectrum of who Holden Caulfield is and what motivates him. Like Caulfield, Salinger was not a good student and was kicked out of prep school. According to one commentator, he would likely encourage students not to believe everything their professors told them (Salinger). Determining how connected the author and his text are, however, is not a simple proposition. In the case of Salinger and Caulfield, it is important to identify likenesses which go beyond similarities in their lives and personalities. In his theory of the Author Function, Michel Foucault writes:

> We now ask of each fictional text: from where does it come, who wrote it, when, under what circumstance, or beginning with what design? The meaning ascribed to it and the status or value accorded it depend on the manner in which we answer these questions. And if a text should be discovered in a state of anonymity - whether as a consequence of an accident or the author's explicit wish – the game becomes one of rediscovering the author (109).

Following his unceremonious exit from the McBurney School, Salinger’s parents enrolled him in the Valley Forge Military Academy. Despite his successful completion of his education there, he did not continue on with a military career. However, like millions of other young men of his generation, he was drafted into the army upon the entrance of the United States into World War II (Salinger). In June of 1944, J.D. Salinger stepped off an armored personnel
transport and onto Utah Beach during the Allied invasion of Normandy on D-Day. He was carrying six pages of the manuscript from *The Catcher in the Rye* in the pocket of his uniform and he worked on the novel while the army worked its way across Western Europe. As a member of the Counter-Intelligence Division, Salinger was one of the first Americans to see the horrors of the holocaust, entering an abandoned Nazi death camp in the spring of 1945. After the conclusion of the war, Salinger suffered a nervous breakdown and was admitted to a military psychiatric hospital for treatment. Holden Caulfield made his debut in the short story “I’m Crazy” published by *Collier’s* in 1945 and later reworked into the novel almost immediately after Salinger’s release from the hospital (*Salinger*). Given the atrocities which Salinger witnessed first-hand during the war, and while writing the novel, it is clear that to at least some degree, Holden Caulfield is a manifestation of Salinger’s distrust of his world, and in particular its power structures. Caulfield gives a voice to the anger, frustration, and bitterness which Salinger himself cannot speak. He allows the author to tell his story—the portions of it he is willing to share—without reliving it.

From the beginning of the novel, it is clear that young Holden fancies himself a participant in his own story only by sheer happenstance. As such, he is a mere observer and reporter of the events which surround, involve, and impact him; and he is only willing to provide the reader information which he deems relevant to the conversation that is about to take place:

> If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you’ll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don’t feel like getting into it, if you want to know the truth. . .I’ll just
tell you this madman stuff that happened to me around last Christmas. . . (Salinger 3)

Caulfield’s tone is dismissive and his diction is that of an individual who is being imposed upon and inconvenienced. Despite his feigned hesitance, however, Holden wants the reader to know his story, but only on his terms. This carefully constructed persona allows Holden to do precisely the thing he says he has no interest in doing—telling his whole story, but telling it through the filter of what equates to a disinterested third party. Answering Foucault’s questions reveals that the vital connection between J.D. Salinger and Holden Caulfield lies not in the similarities of their lives, rather it lies in how their experiences as young men coming of age in a turbulent world led to a deep sense that phoniness was rampant. Phoniness was, for Holden, "[o]ne of the biggest reasons I left Elkton Hills was because I was surrounded by phonies. That's all. They were coming in the goddam window. . .I can't stand that stuff. It drives me crazy. It makes me so depressed I go crazy. I hated goddam Elkton Hills" (17). For Salinger himself, it was one of the reasons that he shut himself away from the world (Salinger). While Holden Caulfield is not biographically linked to J.D. Salinger, he is the voice—the author—of Salinger’s pain. In like manner, the narcissistic narrator of *The Cather in the Rye* is a creation of Holden Caulfield. He is the disinterested façade for a seventeen year old man trying to find his true self. Uncovering this “author” allows the reader to more fully understand Holden Caulfield and his overwhelming drive to shirk the expectations of authority without suffering the consequences of his rebellion.

There is no mistaking Holden’s disdain for the world in which he lives, nor is it difficult to determine what motivates him to seek out ways of distancing himself from it. Holden Caulfield is, more than anything else, lonely. That loneliness and the resulting struggle to find his
true identity can be traced to the death of his younger brother, Allie, who died of leukemia when Holden was thirteen years old. Holden’s description of Allie offers crucial insight into his current state: “He got leukemia and died when we were up in Maine, on July 18, 1946. He was two years younger than I was, but he was about fifty times as intelligent. He was terrifically intelligent” (43). Holden lost the person who, to him, represented goodness in the world, explaining further, “[b]ut it wasn’t just that he was the most intelligent member of the family. He was also the nicest, in lots of ways. He never got mad at anybody” (43). As with the rest of the narrative, Holden is casual and nonchalant about his brother’s tragic death, thus separating himself from the actual occurrence, making him only a casual observer of events. Regardless of the manner in which he describes the event, however, Allie’s death is the event which triggered Holden’s troubles. In his thesis, “You can’t ever find a place that’s nice and peaceful”: The Adolescent Identity in J. D. Salinger’s The Catcher in the Rye, Whitney Thacker observes, “For Holden, this identity crisis comes with the death of his younger brother Allie, an event that challenges what he believes of the world. In discussing this traumatic event, Holden appears incredibly casual, indicating that perhaps Holden himself is unaware of the impact the event made on him” (35). Whether or not Holden was aware of the impact Allie’s death made on him is debatable. What is not, however, is that Holden’s casual attitude and description of it are a means of self-preservation and protection. As long as he can speak in a way that keeps the traumatic events of his past at a distance, he does not have to address them and they cannot hurt him. Ultimately, this is also the manner in which he deals with the societal power structure of which he is so suspicious.

A postmodern interpretation of Holden’s narrative relies on the notion that he is “’controlled’ . . . by the ideologically motivated discourses of power which predominate in the
society which [he inhabits]” (Butler 50) and further that his goal is to break free of that predominate discourse. He creates, through the language of his second self, a new predominate discourse in which he engages the reader in conversation directly, using the second person “you” repeatedly. Through this conversation, he seeks empathy and validation thereby unraveling what he believes to be a power structure that is bent on his failure.

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Jason,

You have a great start to your paper. There are several areas where you can expand and draw attention to the connections between the author trying to narrate his life through his character and the character trying to do the same thing. This is an interesting idea that both are seeking a resolution to issues inside and outside themselves. You seem to have covered the individual self, but need more information on the collective and relation selves. These can also be applied to Salinger as he controls the collective and relations selves until the end of his life.
Works Cited


*Salinger*. Dir. Shane Salerno. Story Factory, 2013. Film.