Against the Unification: The Acceptance of Unsettled Self in J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951)

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Since J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* (*Catcher*) was first published in 1951, a number of his critics have situated it in relation to the Cold War, regarding the rebellious portrayal of the sixteen-year old Holden Caulfield, who wanders alone in Manhattan with a deep antipathy to the adult life, as prefiguring reality of youth mind in the early Cold War era. As Denis Jonnes has suggested, in the midst of the Cold War, Americans were demanded to show their sense of unity “through their activities in the community, public utterances and overall comportment” and thereby to play a role in appealing to the Soviet Union that America was not “internally divided or weak” (27). In the society intolerant of dissent, Holden, who spontaneously leaves his community and rejects to be its member, clearly lacks this sense; but the fact that his nonconformist telling struck many young readers of the time¹ can be said to reflect their criticism of the attempt by America to “integrate the young into the mainstream” (Jonnes 31), to suppress their uniqueness of self in the name of national security.

Contrary to its popularity among young people, *Catcher* was subjected to unjust treatment from the publisher, Harcourt, Brace and Company. When reading the novel, the chief editor, Eugene Reyna, has strongly asserted that “the kid [Holden] is disturbed” (Itzkoff), coming to a decision not to publish it in view of the conservative tilt. This shows a gap between the youth and the mainstream of American society, and to suggest that sharing a sense of unity among people, which was deemed to signify stability of the nation, was just an illusion.

In *Catcher*, it is Holden’s “self” barred from being stable that reveals this illusion. As the story develops, his self runs into clear contradiction to his
ideal: the more he hopes to “maintain a sense of the holy in the midst of obscenity” (Lundquist 49), the more he knows his own phoniness. Frankly speaking, his self is not unified into one but constantly shaken by the events and encounters he experiences. As opposed to the hysterical urge for the national unity and stability in the Cold War America, however, he gradually accepts his own unstableness as unavoidable — in other words, he changes his perception of self. This paper will discuss how this change occurs in the course of his conversations with the phonies. It will then demonstrate how the novel affirms the lack of stability in post-war America, in which one who is in a state of flux is regarded as deviant.

II

While Holden seemingly conducts himself as a seeker of innocence or a fighter against the adult world, in the novel, he is also a character who has a sexual desire in the same manner as Ward Stradlater, who is extremely vulgar and is only interested in “very sexy stuff” (34). Holden thinks himself “the biggest sex maniac” when he stays at the Edmont Hotel, where he looks through the window “a man and a woman squirting water out of their mouths at each other” (67) in a room opposite. He is fascinated by “that kind of junk,” which is reminiscent of eros, to such an extent that he says, “I wouldn't mind doing if the opportunity came up” (67). Even though, for him, the sexual desire is a threat that he “really [doesn't] understand” (68), it is no longer isolated from his own life. Driven by sexual desire, he is now on the verge of adulthood, almost dismissed from the innocence of his boyhood, just as Stradlater.

In sexual matters, Holden is likely to become Stradlater, but it is also the deviation from innocence that he seeks, hoping to come close. In his hotel room, he feels guilty about his sexual desire, the potential vulgarity that connects him to the corrupt world:

Sometimes I can think of very crumby stuff . . . I can even see how it might be quite a lot of fun, in crumby way, and if you were both sort of drunk and all, to get a girl and squirt water or something all over each other’s face. The thing is, though, I don’t like the idea. It stinks, if you analyze it . . . It’s really too bad that so much crumby stuff is a lot of fun
By asserting that he does not like the “crumby stuff,” despite his interest in it, Holden attempts to suppress his vulgarity, thereby keeping the world of sexuality at a distance. However, he does not meet with any success. Driven by his impulsion of which he cannot control, he calls Faith Cavendish, “a burlesque stripper or something” (69), soon after he denies himself sexual encounters. To ask her to have a cocktail that night, though he pulls back in the end, he even lies to her by saying that he is a friend of Eddie Birdsell, a student at Princeton who once told him that she “didn’t mind doing it once in a while” (69). He is an ambivalent adolescent, moving back and forth both in his moral cleanliness and in his physical desire.

Holden’s own contradiction also appears in the way that he deals with others. When he makes a contract with a prostitute named Sunny for a sexual encounter, he first thinks that “if she [Sunny] was a prostitute and all, I could get in some practice on her, in case I ever get married or anything” (101). He seems to regard her as just a product which he gets to consume. It is as if he can cope with the vulgarity of the world. But when the time comes to actually get to see her, his desire for her gradually disappears, for she looks more like “a regular girl” (104) than he expected: “The trouble was, I just didn’t want to do it. I felt more depressed than sexy, if you want to know the truth. She was depressing” (104). Although it was just a little while ago that he fancied “being pretty good at that stuff” (101), he now regrets having anticipated sexual contact with her because he is concerned that he will corrupt a modicum of her purity. He is, in fact, afraid of perverting himself. His ambivalence is thus found when he sets himself in relation to others around him; in other words, he has not yet found his solid self in the world.

III

In fact, Holden understands that his ambivalence, which he is unable to verbalize, is strange. When he meets with Carl Luce, his former student adviser, he shows his anxiety that weighs on his mind: “You know what the trouble with me is? I can never get really sexy — I mean really sexy — with a girl I don’t like a lot. If I don’t, I sort of lose my goddam desire for her and all”
(159). He has experienced puzzlement, a mismatch between physical and psychological desire at a moment of sexual pleasure, and now he thinks it is a problem that he needs someone’s help to solve.

Luce tells Holden to visit a psychoanalyst, for he thinks that Holden needs “to recognize the patterns of [his] mind” and “to adjust” (160) himself to the world. But Luce’s advice is completely irrelevant, for he mistakenly perceives Holden’s problem not as internal conflict but conflict with others, with the world he cannot cope with. Luce fails not only to understand Holden’s problem, but also to offer Holden an answer to the strangeness of Holden himself.

The way Luce understands little of Holden’s problem reflects their communication at a distance, and evokes Holden’s sense of loneliness. Holden says: “Please. I’m lonesome as hell. No kidding” (160). Holden needs a guide, a more familiar one to carry him where he can define himself.

Once Holden leaves Luce, this sense of loneliness drives him to seek a guide, and he decides to see Phoebe first, the sister he is close to: “So finally what I figured I’d do, I figured I’d better sneak home and see [Phoebe], in case I died and all” (168). Arriving at his home, he finds her sleeping in the room of D.B., their oldest brother. He looks at her for a while, praising her childlike quality which seems to be kept from eternal: “You take adults, they look lousy when they’re asleep and they have their mouths way open, but kids don’t. Kids look all right. They can even have spit all over the pillow and they still look all right” (171). For him, she is a living embodiment of innocence, an ideal self that he has lost.

Thinking about Phoebe, Holden seems to feel mentally and physically recovered: “I felt swell, for a change. I didn’t even feel like I was getting pneumonia or anything anymore. I just felt good, for a change” (171). It is a moment that he is freed from the self moving backward and forward.

After waking Phoebe up, however, Holden is shaken by her sudden act of violence. As soon as his expulsion from school comes out, she madly pounds his leg with her fist, persisting in saying that “Daddy’ll kill you” (177). At this moment, she shuts him out, pushing him out of the affinity he felt.

Holden confides Phoebe about his life at Pencey leading up to his expulsion. His experience at Pencey, according to him, filled him with a sense of phoniness. It is not simply because students at Pencey appeared to be phonies,
but because he found himself to be one of them. As he explains: “It[Pencey] was full of phonies. . . . And they had this goddam secret fraternity that I was too yellow not to join. . . . I don’t feel like talking about it. It was a stinking school. Take my word” (180). Entangled in the places, he was alienated from innocence and overwhelmed by phoniness. What Holden “just didn’t like” (182) in Pencey is, in fact, not the phonies around him but rather his own phony spirit that corrupts his integrity from inside.

Telling Phoebe about his story, Holden thinks she will fully understand his problem, the eruption of his wavering self: “And the funny part is she knows, half the time, what the hell you’re talking about. She really does” (180). However, it is his illusion; Phoebe says, “You don’t like anything that’s happening. . . . You don’t like any schools,” as if central to his problem is his relationship with the world or others, although he insists that “[t]hat’s exactly where you’re wrong!” (182). To Phoebe, what Holden says is barely understandable, and to Holden, she is “about a thousand miles away” (183). Clearly, there is a profound gap between them. Their relationship is similar to that of Holden and Luce, and it suggests that Phoebe, in spite of her quality of innocence, cannot be a guide for Holden, who is a lonely wanderer in pursuit of an answer, a way to find his solid self in the world.

After his quarrel with Phoebe, Holden is returned to loneliness, and that loneliness arouses in him an image of becoming a catcher in the rye standing on “the edge of some crazy cliff” (186) to keep little kids from falling. He offers this when Phoebe asks him to “[n]ame something you’d like to be” (185). To be a catcher in the rye is, for him, to protect the innocence of young children. If it is a fantasy, it is the kind of self-image, the identity that he is searching for. However, it is not realistic, and he admits that it is only a manifestation of his craziness. “I know it’s crazy,” he says, “but that’s the only thing I’d really like to be. I know it’s crazy” (186). He says this, as if he has given up his search for (or his creation of) a stable self in the real world.

Still looking for a guide, Holden next visits his old English teacher, Mr. Antolini. He was, according to Holden, “the one that finally picked up that boy [James Castle] that jumped out the window . . . and carried him all the way over to the infirmary” (188). For Holden, Mr. Antolini’s attribute, his moral superiority is reliable enough encourage:
The first thing he [Mr. Antolini] asked me was if anything was wrong, I said no. I said I’d flunked out of Pencey, though. I thought I might as well tell him. He said “Good, God,” when I said that. He had a good sense of humor and all. He told me to come right over if I felt like it. He was about the best teacher I ever had, Mr Antolini. (188)

While visiting, Holden tells Mr. Antolini about the phony named Mr. Vinson and his oral expression class at Pencey that he failed. According to Holden, he had no sense of how to keep in step with the accepted rules of the class, so that he was utterly unacceptable. After pouring out his pent-up feelings, Holden gets a lecture about life. Mr. Antolini at first says, “I have a feeling that you’re riding for some kind of a terrible, terrible fall. But I don’t honestly know what kind . . . Are you listening to me?” Holden responds, “Yes” (201), as if he hopes Mr. Antolini will be his guide to overcoming the impasse.

Mr. Antolini’s lecture, which is from the words of the psychoanalyst Wilhelm Stekel, seems to show Holden a way to orient his self to the world: “I think that one of these days . . . you’re going to have to find out where you want to go. . . I think that once you have a fair idea where you want to go, your first move will be to apply yourself in school” (203). It is the educational system, according to Mr. Antolini, that can give Holden’s life a direction, and let him know his “true measurements” (205). Holden needs to go to school to make his self from what he learns, Mr. Antolini suggests.

However, Mr. Antolini annoys Holden when he is “hot to have a discussion” (202), and Holden is “so damn sleepy all of sudden” (205). It is as if he wants to escape from Mr. Antolini’s attempt to fit him into the educational system. Actually, what Mr. Antolini offers him is not so much an answer, but a way of pandering to academicism, to the phonies having lost their uniqueness. After all, Mr. Antolini is basically the same as Mr. Vinson at Pencey, who would not allow any deviation, and Holden’s sudden sleepiness seems to be the moment that the affinity he has felt with Mr. Antolini is overturned.

However, it is not Mr. Antolini’s lecture that finally makes Holden anxious. It is his mysterious act of touching, his hand stroking Holden’s head while he falls asleep. Woken up by Mr. Antolini’s hand, Holden is “really scared” (206) because he feels a sense of homoerotism, and this reminds him of his school
life, his encounter with the bastards (like Stradlater) who adulterate one’s innocence: “[B]oy, was I nervous! . . . I know more damn perverts, at schools and all, than anybody you ever met, and they’re always being perverty when I’m around” (207). For Holden, now Mr. Antolini is equivalent to the perverts. “I have to go, anyway” (207), he says, leaving Mr. Antolini as if waking from the dream that Mr. Antolini might be his guide.

Going back to the streets of New York, Holden is still searching for possible ways but is at a loss “where the hell to go” (209), feeling that “all of a sudden, something very spooky started happening” (212–13). This seems to be an eruption of Holden’s high anxiety due to the lack of a guide to help find a way to live in the enigmatic world that he cannot grasp, and this sense of absence drives him to call on Allie, his dead brother, for help: “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’ . . . And then when I’d reach the other side of the street without disappearing, I’d thank him” (213). If Allie, the nonexistence, cannot be Holden’s guide in the visible world, he is a saviour who lets Holden’s crisis spin out for a while.

For Holden, Allie, who died from leukemia at the age of ten, symbolizes an irreversible past, a preserved and unchanged innocence that Holden is now frozen out of. At the same time, Holden seems to behave as if Allie is still alive when he says “thanks” (213) for Allie out loud, or says, “I like Allie” (184) by using the present tense. “Allie’s dead” (184), Phoebe says, but it is this kind of contradiction that connects Holden with Allie’s innocence, saving him from “a horrible fall” (201) and keeping him from a profound loneliness.

However, it is not that Holden adopts “the conservative alternative of wishing that things would remain static and trying to keep them that way” or that he is stuck in a fantasy about “keeping children from growing up” (French 120), but that he seeks his self kept from being destabilized (or corrupted).

Now Holden, still searching for his solid self, dreams of living as “a deaf-mute” in “a little cabin somewhere” (214), a place out West where “nobody’d know [him]” (213). This is his utopia, the antipode to the adult world, where phony things, the threats of confinement, are totally eliminated, and in such a place he hopes to get married to a girl who is also a deaf-mute, to have children and “hide them somewhere” (214).
Excited by thinking about this, however, Holden clearly understands that he is stuck in the reality, although he plans to go out West, attempting to meet Phoebe in order to say “good-by” (214), because Holden finds “Fuck you” (216) graffiti everywhere he goes; first, it is on the walls of Phoebe’s school and second, it is under the glass part of the wall in the museum. For him, Phoebe’s school, which he went to as a child, is a place that he was once an innocent boy, and the museum has always been “the only nice, dry, cozy place in the world . . . where everything always stayed right where it was” (130–31). These were places, in other words, to meet preserved innocence — until he noticed the graffiti. Now they are similar to Pencey, places of corruption. This depresses him:

That’s the whole trouble. You can’t ever find a place that’s nice and peaceful, because there isn’t any. You may think there is, but once you get there, when you’re not looking, somebody’ll sneak up and write “Fuck you” right under your nose. Try it sometimes. I think, even, if I ever die, and they stick me in a cemetery, and I have a tombstone and all, it’ll say “Holden Caulfield” on it, and then what year I was born and what year I died, and then right under that it’ll say “Fuck you.” I’m positive, in fact. (219–20)

Holden fully realizes that the stability seen in the world is an illusion, and that the threat of destabilization of the self is present everywhere. If he goes out West, it will be just temporary. Holden thus knows that there is really no place to stabilize his own self. Therefore, Holden says to Phoebe, “I’m not going away anywhere, I changed my mind” (223), instead of saying good bye.

That Holden has been changed is obvious when he goes with Phoebe to the carrousel, watching her almost fall off her horse. Holden does not “say anything or do anything,” thinking that “[t]he thing with kids is, if they want to grab for the gold ring, you have to let them do it, and not say anything. If they fall off, they fall off, but it’s bad if you say anything to them” (227). In other words, he thinks that if kids are on the verge of falling, there is no need to catch them, although he hoped to be “the catcher,” the guardian of innocence. Because he comes to the realization that it is impossible to avoid the falling, the corruption of his self.
In terms of Holden’s change, Warren French argues that “he has resigned himself to the realities of human behavior” (122), concluding that he “must learn about life for himself” (122). French sees the end of Holden’s search for a guide in his change and thinks of it as a development, of self-reliance.

However, French overlooks that there is in Holden a sense of distance from the world, and of difference from it, which is seen in his words directed to the adult in the last chapter: “A lot of people, especially this one psychoanalyst guy they have here, keeps asking me if I’m going to apply myself when I go back to school next September . . . I mean how do you know what you’re going to do till you do it? The answer is, you don’t” (230). It is obvious that Holden, who can neither make a judgement about his own life nor talk about a vision of his life, is by no means reconciled with the world, which means he is still in a kind of flow in which he needs to pursue a way to know himself. Surely Holden has changed in that he no longer hopes to be the catcher in the rye, but his journey itself has not ended yet. Holden just gives up on finding a guide in this real world.

IV

_Catcher_ comes to its climax in a mystical scene in which Holden is exposed to the rain, watching Phoebe “going around and around, in her blue coat and all” (229). What he feels at that time is an absolute happiness, because “[a]ll the parents and mothers and everybody” (228) go over and there is no one left but him and Phoebe. For a moment, Holden enters into an intimate space contrary to New York City, which is filled with the menace of phonies. He knows that it is just a place that accidentally occurs in the real world. But at this moment, the kind of dream of something that is not practical seems to shake him up out of the gloom of “Fuck you” graffiti, keeping him connected to the real world: “I was damn near bawling, I felt so damn happy, if you want to know the truth. I don’t know why” (229).

Regarding the carousel scene, Yasuhiro Takeuchi maintains that Holden re-creates the event when he visited Allie’s grave (96):

It rained on his [Allie’s] lousy tombstone, and it rained on the grass on his stomach. It rained all over the place. All of visitors that were visiting
the cemetery started running like hell over to their cars... 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. (167)

Takeuchi suggests that this scene is similar to that of the carousel in that they share a sudden rain, visitors taking shelter from the rain, and the only one left behind in the rain; that is, Holden exposed to the rain appears in the same location as Allie in the grave (97). Takeuchi points out the coincidence in the relationship between Holden and Allie, the living and the dead.

As Takeuchi mentions, Holden connects to Allie, by which he seems to keep alive in the real world, although Allie is not there to guide Holden now, nor does he convey anything that would give Holden an answer. In other words, *Catcher* comes off with an inversion where Allie/the dead revives Holden/the living as if to suggest that Holden can be saved by a metaphysical concept embodied by Allie, the ghostly other. The novel, in fact, leaves open the possibility that Holden will find an answer to who he is.

*Catcher* ends with a scene of the California rest home where Holden begins to talk about his “madman stuff that happened to [him] around last Christmas” (1). In the epilogue, Holden says that he still does not know “what the hell to say” or “what [he] thinks” (230) about his journey. What he knows is just to “go back to school next September” (230). However, it is not that Holden comes back to the very beginning, or that on his journey, nothing can bring him change. Connecting with Allie through his journey makes a difference to his life, and this can be seen in his nostalgia for the phonies:

> 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. (230)

This nostalgia arises from the change in the relationship of Holden to the phonies. Holden is now apathetic about the phonies, in contrast to the beginning, and this seems to show that his life no longer revolves around his relationship with them. Instead, that Allie is at its center, is obvious
from the carousel scene. Connecting with Allie thus ends Holden’s conflicted relationship with the phonies.

What Holden actually gains as he moves around Manhattan is not a clear-cut answer, a specific way to set his self in the real world, but a change in his perception of the phonies. Through the journey, in other words, Holden experiences the self changing in correlation with the phonies. Considering that he is not mentally defeated at the end, he probably comes to the realization that self, which he hopes is static, can never be made to stay still. He has accepted it, and the novel, as a result, breaks the illusion of unification.

Note
1 The youth of American society were favorable readers of Catcher. Holden was subject that they could feel sympathy and its popularity was reflected in the fact that Catcher spent seven months on New York Times bestseller list since its publication (Slawenski 204).

Works Cited