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Lost in Translation — Holden Caulfield, Sinner or Saint?

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The central character [of J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*], Holden Caulfield, relates in an authentic, teen-age idiom his flight from the hypocrisies of the adult world, his search for innocence and truth, and his final collapse on a psychiatrist's couch. The novel's language and humour placed it in the native tradition of Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*.

Introduction

This brief description of J.D. Salinger's novel, *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), appeared in *Encyclopedia Britannica* in 1967. The article goes on to report that "From the beginning it attracted devoted admirers and serious critics....Salinger appears at his best in his dramatization of children; all of his work seems haunted with the lost innocence of childhood." Sixty years after its publication, this novel remains one of the most controversial works of twentieth-century American literature, due in large part to its shocking language. The purpose of this paper is to examine the language used in *The Catcher in the Rye*, to determine whether it is indeed written in "an authentic, teen-age idiom," and to examine reactions to the novel. An ancillary objective is to evaluate the claim that it should be placed "in the native tradition of Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*."

I. Language

The common deception leads us to believe that this novel tells the story of a sensitive young boy searching for the lost innocence of his childhood. However, in its original (American) English version, the novel gives a quite different impression, a very disturbing impression. Noting this difference, I began to wonder whether some of the book's donegality* had been

lost in translation, or whether the river of time had simply smoothed over some of the edges of its rocky lining. In order to answer this question, I looked at both the external and internal evidence regarding language.

People reading the book in a language other than English might ask, “What’s so bad about it?” Shortly after the publication of *The Catcher* in 1951, a review in *The Christian Science Monitor* (a respectable mainstream newspaper) found the novel “unfit for children to read,” citing its “immorality and perversion.” Riley Hughes, of *Catholic World*, claimed it contained an “excessive amount of amateur swearing and coarse language.” These claims are not unfounded. *The Catcher* contains 237 instances of the vulgar expression “g-d,” 58 mentions of illegitimacy, 31 cases of taking the Savior’s name in vain, and 6 instances of “unclean carnal knowledge.” Most of these words cannot be translated well into all other languages, so the tone of the book is often lost in translation.

Not only does this novel have problems with translations into other languages. Before *The Catcher in the Rye* could be published in England, it *had to be translated into English*! That is, its language had to be modified in order to make it acceptable to a very conservative British audience. Perhaps this is the reason that *Encyclopedia Britannica* lauded the language of the book as being “an authentic teen-age idiom.”

Internal evidence suggests that Salinger knew what he was doing when he wrote *The Catcher*. Holden Caulfield changes his language noticeably when talking to adults. His language towards his teacher Mr. Spencer in Chapter 2 is very respectful. His language towards his classmate Ernest Morrow’s mother in Chapter 8 is likewise polite. The content of what he says to them is not altogether respectful or polite, but his *language* masks his true feelings toward them.

On the other hand, when he talks to girls he does not modify his behavior. His language is truly coarse and vulgar. The three office ladies from Seattle whom he meets in the Lavender Room in Chapter 10 protest his bad language. “Watch your language, if you don’t mind,” one of them tells him. “Listen. I toleja about that. I don’t like that type of language. If you’re gonna use that type of language, I can go sit down with my girl friends, you know.” Then again his ten-year-old sister Phoebe tells him, in Chapter 22, “Don’t swear so much.” “Stop swearing,” she tells him, but he doesn’t stop. Most translations of this book do not convey the subtle changes that occur in Holden’s language depending on his audience.

* Donegality is a term coined by Michael Ward, referring to the holistic effect of a work of art. It conveys a sense of the overall atmosphere of the work, making the analogy with the “London-ness” of London, and the “donegality” of Donegal.

Indeed *The Catcher in the Rye* does not depict the angelic spirit of an innocent teen-aged boy, but rather the troubled soul of a grown man (J.D. Salinger, autobiographically) who had recently returned from the trenches of World War II, having acquired a generous taste for what we would call “salty language.” As *Britannica* stated, from the beginning this novel attracted serious critics. Remember, this book came out in the 1950s, when swearing was strictly taboo. Coarse language was simply not acceptable in the U.S. in that day and age. Society’s tolerance of coarse language has increased many-fold during those sixty years, but the protests continue almost up to the present day. What is it about this novel that so radically divides American society?

II. Reactions

In the U.S. there are at least two ideological points of view. The liberal point of view asks us to ignore Holden Caulfield’s bad language and focus on his psychological condition. The conservative point of view asks us to treat his bad language and his psychological condition as one unified whole, and to reject them both as potentially having a bad effect on young readers. Which point of view should be translated into foreign languages?

Some progressives ask us to look beneath the surface to find a psychological truth which may or may not really be present in the character. “Beneath the surface of Holden’s tone and behavior runs a more idealistic, emotional current... despite his bitter tone, Holden is an innocent searching desperately for a way to connect with the world around him that will not cause him pain....Holden despises ‘phonies’ – people whose surface behavior distorts or disguises their inner feelings.” (Sparknotes)

Michael Cooper is another defender of *The Catcher*. In his essay, “Use of Language in *The Catcher in the Rye*,” he urges us to overlook Holden Caulfield’s bad language and focus instead on his (Holden’s) sensitive nature. It is not clear from the article exactly who Michael Cooper is. It appears that he is a student, perhaps at the secondary or possibly tertiary level. By his attitude we infer that he is trying to please his English teacher, who (also by inference) has been pressing the issue in his/her class. Michael (and/or his teacher) defend Holden Caulfield as one of their own, one of the “innocents” (ironic, given the conservative theme of rejecting insincere intimacy), urging us to ignore his foul language.

The divisive nature of *The Catcher* reflects the nature of American society itself. Since its publication, this book has provoked a constant stream of protests from parents who object to schools’ placing the book on required reading lists. In the 1960s-1970s several teachers who assigned it to their classes were either fired or forced to resign from their jobs (although

most were later reinstated). Moreover, from 1960 to 2005 there have been at least twenty instances of parental protests over this book being placed on required reading lists in public schools or in public libraries. Challenges have come from these districts:

1960 – Tulsa, OK	1988 – Linton-Stockton, IN
1963 – Columbus, OH	1989 – Boron, CA
1977 – Pittsgrove Township, NJ	1991 – Grayslake, IL
1978 – Issaquah, WA	1992 – Sidell, IL
1979 – Middleville, Mich.	– Duval County, FL
1980 – Jacksonville-Milton, OH	1993 –Corona-Norco, CA
1982 – Anniston, AL	1994 – New Richmond, WI
1983 – Libby, Mont	– Goffstown, NH
1985 – DeFuniak Springs, FL	2002 – SC, GA
1986 – Medicine Bow, WY	2005 – North Berwick, ME
1987 – Napoleon, ND	

From the conservative point of view, Holden's bad language is not so much a mask of his psychological condition as it is a symptom of it. If Holden "despises phonies," he should despise himself most of all, if he is as innocent as pro-critics suggest. His own shift in language (for example, vis a vis adults, girls, or the Reader) implicates him. However the problem which parents have with the novel was not foreseen by Salinger when he wrote it: that the disease is contagious, and Holden's bad language helps to spread it to the young minds of children who read the book.

III. Comparison with *Huckleberry Finn* (1884)

Encyclopedia Britannica not only states that *The Catcher* was written in an "authentic teen-age idiom," but also asserts that "the novel's language and humour placed it in the native tradition of Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*." The same *Britannica* (Vol. 22, page 425) writes of Mark Twain: "his style... gives the impression of carelessly recorded vernacular speech, but... is admirably adapted to detailed and poetic descriptions of scenes, vivid representations of characters, renditions of actions or emotions and exploitations of comedy both broad and subtly ironic. The style gives the book a certain unity; so does the character whom it expresses."

Huckleberry Finn is significant in American literature for its masterly use of the vernacular

style to illustrate character and examine society. Here is an excerpt from Chapter 17:

It was a mighty nice family, and a mighty fine house, too. I hadn't seen no house out in the country before that was so nice and had so much style. It didn't have an iron latch on the front door, nor a wooden one with a buckskin string, but a brass knob to turn, the same as houses in a town. There warn't no bed in the parlor, not a sign of a bed; but heaps of parlors in towns has beds in them. There was a big fireplace that was bricked on the bottom, and the bricks was kept clean and red by pouring water on them and scrubbing them with another brick; sometimes they washed them over with red water-paint that they call Spanish-brown, same as they do in town. They had big brass dog-irons that could hold up a saw-log. There was a clock on the middle of the mantelpiece, with a picture of a town painted on the bottom half of the glass front, and a round place in the middle of it for the sun, and you could see the pendulum swing behind it. It was beautiful to hear that clock tick; and sometimes when one of these peddlers had been along and scoured her up and got her in good shape, she would start in and strike a hundred and fifty before she got tuckered out. They wouldn't took any money for her.

Contrast this description with Holden Caulfield's story about Mr. Spencer's Navajo blanket (Chapter 2), in which he ridicules the sick old man's taste and rails on his touristy outlook on life.

... one Sunday when some other guys and I were over there for hot chocolate, he showed us this old beat-up Navajo blanket that he and Mrs. Spencer'd bought off some Indian in Yellowstone Park. You could tell old Spencer'd got a big bang out of buying it. That's what I mean. You take somebody old as hell, like old Spencer, and they can get a big bang out of buying a blanket.

His door was open, but I sort of knocked on it anyway, just to be polite and all. I could see where he was sitting. He was sitting in a big leather chair, all wrapped up in that blanket I just told you about. He looked over at me when I knocked. "Who's that?" he yelled. "Caulfield? Come in, boy." He was always yelling, outside class. It got on your nerves sometimes.

The minute I went in, I was sort of sorry I'd come. He was reading the *Atlantic Monthly*, and there were pills and medicine all over the place, and everything smelled like Vicks Nose Drops. It was pretty depressing. I'm not too crazy about sick people, anyway. What made it even more depressing, old Spencer had on this very sad, ratty

old bathrobe that he was probably born in or something. I don't much like to see old guys in their pajamas and bathrobes anyway. Their bumpy old chests are always showing. And their legs. Old guys' legs, at beaches and places, always look so white and unhairly. "Hello, sir," I said. "I got your note. Thanks a lot." He'd written me this note asking me to stop by and say good-by before vacation started, on account of I wasn't coming back. "You didn't have to do all that. I'd have come over to say good-by anyway."

Salinger, typical of many East-Coast writers, had a very foggy impression of life west of the Hudson. He imagined the rest of the country as one big space, all of which can be clumped into the category "other-than-New York." This insular attitude generally manifests itself, for example, in the name of the Dakota Apartments on 72nd Avenue in Manhattan, which is perceived as being "way out there, as far away as the Dakotas." Holden mentions the Navajo blanket that Mr. Spencer and his wife bought in Yellowstone Park, but Yellowstone Park is a thousand miles away from Navajo country, in Arizona. There are no Navaho Indians in Yellowstone Park. There are no Indians of any tribe there, as far as I know; it is not an Indian reservation. Mr. Spencer could not have bought a Navajo blanket in Yellowstone park.

Contrast the tone of voice used in *Huckleberry Finn* with that used in *The Catcher*. Huck's observations are simple and direct. He contrasts details of this room with rooms he has seen in other country houses. There is none of the cynicism that Holden Caulfield uses when he visits Mr. Spencer's house; no disgust, no wanting to "puke." These passages are representative of the tone and style of *Huckleberry Finn* and *The Catcher*. From these examples we see that nothing could be farther from the truth than *Britannica's* attempt to place the *The Catcher* in the native tradition of *Huckleberry Finn*.

Conclusion

Is Holden Caulfield a sinner or a saint? The saints would have us believe he is a sinner; the sinners would have us believe he is a saint. Which is correct? The fact of the matter is this: Holden Caulfield is a prematurely gray, junior-varsity basket case with a foul mouth and a Peter Pan complex. There is certainly unity in the style of *The Catcher*, and probably (in a schizophrenic sort of way) there is unity in its central character, Holden Caulfield. However, neither should rightly be cast in the same category as *Huckleberry Finn*. Have the years been kind to Holden? Yes, but only in the sense that American society has degenerated to the point of accepting his verbal wallowing.

Many of the criticisms of *The Catcher in the Rye* result from its negative effect on readers. It makes them tend to “Holdenize” everything they see, that is, to cast the world in a bitter light. Holden’s repeated cursing is infectious; the reader finds himself cursing bitterly after reading this book, and denigrating everything that he sees in the world around him. Is it any wonder that parents voice objections to public schools’ placing this book on required reading lists?

Translation, of course, fails to evoke the same responses in other societies as the original evoked (and continues to evoke) in American society. American vernacular has changed somewhat, but that doesn’t excuse Salinger’s use of profanity. Furthermore, translators convey certain images about the book, but they cannot convey its effects on society. They convey the interpretation that Holden Caulfield is merely a sensitive youth searching for a return to innocence, but they ignore the underlying canker that grows on his soul, evidenced in his use of vulgar language. They convey the descriptive elements of the novel, but not its prescriptive intent.

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