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# The Personal Narrative and Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*

DANIELLE M. ROEMER

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Nowadays, J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* is often overlooked by American critics, though it does receive considerable attention from German and Japanese scholars. In the twenty years following the novel's publications in 1951, however, the debate among American scholars was sharply honed. During that debate, some complained of the novel's pedestrian content. Rather than being a flaw, however, *Catcher's* links to everyday acts make available issues that can be usefully explored. The novel encourages readers to consider some of the emergent yet expectable dimensions of everyday identity. It does so by referencing dynamics of personal storytelling. As Sandra Stahl (1989) has explained, stories can be used in accomplishing and displaying a sense of one's self. Personal storytelling then is what it is about: the making of identity across separation.

Telling stories requires telling about. In the case of personal narration, the speaking self is necessarily separate from the self that is spoken of. The narrator creates a sense of some other, typically past identity, framing it as an object of attention. As a result, personal storytelling can be said to function as a mode of separation. Making and marking a sense of distance, it is developed in the gap between agent and object, between sign and referent. On the other hand, we should also remember that meaning can be achieved *only* across a gap of difference. Meaning depends on association. In what Stahl (1989) has called allusive narration, the relationship between agent and object selves is evocative; the present and the past are reflexively

transformed. However, the self this storytelling suggests is a stable and discrete self, grounded in the past, needing only to be referenced to re-emerge in the present. Across the gap in which meaning emerges, allusive narration proposes an identity that is continuous through time.

Storytelling involves acts of both separation and contextualization: of plot and description and, in the case of personal stories, of self as well. In allusive narration, the self spoken of is not an inheritance but a reconstruction. Stewart (1980:1128) has reminded us that the “impossibility of repetition precludes an authentic engagement with the [context of origin]. We move, therefore, from the authentic to the aesthetic.” The search for grounds of origin, on the one hand, and acts of contemporaneous manufacture, on the other, are emphasized in allusive narration. And these emphases are relevant to a discussion of Holden Caulfield’s story of self.

Like most of us, Holden Caulfield continuously reconstructs himself. Where Holden outdoes most of us, however, is in the number of foci of the identities he attempts during only a few days. He is obsessed with his capacity to manufacture identities, personas he produces as defense and consumes as spectacle. His story suggests an uneasy plenitude of selves, an accumulation of “I’s” that is both a surplus and a deficit of meaning. Holden describes himself as a politely contrite student who failed miserably at Mr. Spencer’s history exam; an assertive indignant who tears up an essay plagiarized for his roommate Stradlater; a light eater named Holden Vitamin Caulfield; a Pency student named Rudolph Schmidt who has “this tiny little tumor in the brain” and who is on his way to South America to visit his grandmother; a Governor’s son turned dancer in a movie musical; a more or less straightforward confidant with his sister Phoebe; a frightened young man who wakes to find a teacher, Mr. Antolini, stroking his head—etc. Of the role of the Governor’s son, Holden makes a comment that seems to be applicable to them all: “I hate the movies like poison, but I get a bang imitating them . . . All I need’s an audience. I’m an exhibitionist” (29).

Considering how much he has lost to the insensitivity, incompetence, or disappearance of relevant others, Holden’s intensity is perhaps understandable. His parents are ineffective (at least as he portrays them), and he is reluctant to trust other authority figures. He is separated geographically from his brother D. B. and by death from

his brother Allie. He is drawn by the sense of connection available in social relationships, but he is made uneasy by the ties of involvement.

Because he has situated himself within a space of separation and alterity, Holden replays past losses. And he fears future ones and thus the involvement that would preface them. Holden has become caught up in issues of repeatability:

“One thing I like a lot you mean?” I asked her

.....

“All right,” I said. But the trouble was, I couldn’t concentrate . . . There was this one boy at Elkton Hills, named James Castle, that wouldn’t take back something he said about this very conceited boy, Phil Stabile . . . Finally, what he did, instead of taking back what he said, he jumped out the window . . . He was dead, and his teeth, and blood, were all over the place, and nobody would even go near him. He had on this turtleneck sweater I’d lent him (170).

It is not coincidence that Holden’s speaking of the lost suicidal James Castle precedes one of his memories of Allie. Holden even fears losing himself and begs Allie to help him stay within the world of materiality. In consequence, he tries to reduce the threat of circumstantial repetition by storying his own and others’ lives:

“Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Jim Steele,” I said.

“Ya got a watch on ya?” [Sunny] said. She didn’t care what the hell my name was, naturally. “Hey, how old are you, anyways?”

“Me? Twenty-two.”

“Like fun you are.”

“It was a funny thing to say. It sounded like a real kid. You’d think a prostitute and all would say “Like hell you are” or “Cut the crap” instead of “Like fun you are.” (94)

To Holden, what can be reified into drama and story can be controlled, buffered against, or at least slanted into mitigation.

The root of the problem is not in Holden’s commitment to others in the daily life world. Rather, it has developed over time. It stems from his sense of the appropriate ground, the baseline of significance, on which he should depend in generating identities. A comment of Stewart’s is instructive here. She has explained: “As experience is increasingly mediated and abstracted, the lived relation of the body to the phenomenological world is replaced by a nostalgic myth of contact and presence . . . In this process of distancing, the memory of the

body is replaced by the memory of the object . . . (1984:133). Metaphoric remakings of the past rather than metonymic relations in the present characterize Holden's life.

Much of Holden's trust in others and in himself was lost to the past with Allie's death. Since, it has become a focus of avoidance and desire. As one consequence, Holden moves now within coordinates of otherness. His is a world of things lost before they can be gained, of nostalgia that precedes involvement. And, again in defense, he tried to focus himself within frames of metaphoric and literal corporeality. For example, unmoored from his identity by Allie's death and other familial disjunctures, Holden has identified and sensitized himself to others' territories of self (Goffman 1974): Dick Slater's suitcases, Mr. Spencer's old sick body, Ackley's fingernails and mossy teeth, the nun's smile, the rotting mummy faces. He has keyed into self-conscious dramas and narrations various material signs of his own personhood (e.g., his red hunting cap and his prematurely grey hair). Oftentimes, he gives up material signs to others: his coat to Stradlater, his sweater to James Castle, his typewriter to the guy down the hall. And finally, separating himself from the social body, Holden has refracted involvement into values of disengagement and idealization. For example, he tries to avoid confrontations, sidestepping encounters, such as those with Stradlater and Maurice, that might leave physical traces of contact.

In addition, remaking physicality into its contrary, Holden idealizes the other. As perhaps the most significant instance, he places himself in the transcendent role of the catcher in the rye. Here, nature is not grotesque but miniature. This is the domain of the child and other innocents—Phoebe, Ernest Morrow's mother, the ducks in Central Park. Storied into vulnerability by Holden, they function as evocative foci in his nostalgic reconstructions. He uses his perceptions of them to recontextualize memory, questing in the present for a lost assuagement and relation. We see this drive as well when Holden places himself in the role of the buffered child. In this identity, he imagines an Eden in the woods and appreciates the museum for encasing its objects behind protective glass. He echoes it further in his identity as the abandoned child, the mourner of a lost brother. And because the personas of protector and innocent mean so much, because he uses them to draw into membership so many of the details of his life, Holden tries to dampen his awareness of their pervasive manifestations. As he says lightly at one point: "I think maybe I'm just

partly yellow and partly the type that doesn't give much of a damn if they lose their gloves. One of my troubles is I never care too much when I lose something—it used to drive my mother crazy when I was a kid" (89).

Situating the genuine outside of himself, he no longer lives as an originator of himself. Rather, he plays out that capacity as a role. His concern with authenticity and its contrary—what he calls phoniness—stems from his felt need for a context of origin. He searches for who he was rather than for who he is. Plotted into artificiality by Holden, those people he calls phonies remind him of his own exaggerated need to achieve a sense of self. Phoebe is one of the few people who can significantly interrupt Holden's penchant for story. As critic Gerald Rosen (1987:107) has put it, what Phoebe does is "to pull Holden out of his obsession with the sorrows of the past and direct his attention to the existential situation he is in at present." In one of his conversations with Phoebe, Holden tries to spin a story on her about what he will do now that he's been kicked out of Pency Prep. He says he will go to Colorado and work on a ranch. Phoebe replies, "Don't make me laugh. You can't even ride a horse" (166). And when Holden admits that he still thinks of Allie in the present tense, she counters "Allie's *dead*" (171). Phoebe is the most commonsensical and emotionally honest appraisors of the past and the present Holden has access to. She is the one who most effectively reveals the artifice, helping Holden sense how he oversignifies his acts of story. Most importantly, Salinger allows Holden to reconsider one of his major allusive identities—that of the catcher in the rye—as he watches Phoebe on the carousel. As she plays, Phoebe unselfconsciously enjoys one of the privileges of life which Holden tends to skew into obsessive pastness. Phoebe enjoys the presentness to the present.

Routinely, people attempt a sense of continuity in their everyday life. And that desire for continuity begins perhaps with a concern for one's sense of self. Who people were in the past depends to a considerable extent on who now in the present they take themselves to have been. Storytellers use allusive narration in reflexively transforming present and past identities. It is simultaneously a mode of invention and of concealment. A past, which exists only during its present time manufacture, becomes as the locus of one's traditions of self. In everyday experience, allusive narrators may well deny, overlook, or be strategically ignorant of the fact and mechanisms of their making of self. Or, selfconsciously, they may mutually transform past and

present identities for the purpose of explicit artistic performance (Bauman 1977). Holden cannot be fitted easily into either of these social roles, yet we can see him as both a strange and a sympathetic figure. On the one hand, he is a storer of souvenirs, a retrospective remaker of the ongoing moment. He is out of control in his penchant for control, excessively reifying nostalgia through the allusive object. On the other hand, Holden is representative in that he does engage in acts of self-construction. As we can achieve with our-selves, his personas are emergent constructions. Through Holden, Salinger suggests the fictive status of identity. Yet, he reminds us that the fact of self-making is something we all share.

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