

Exploring Physical and Psychological Spaces in J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951)

HussamTalibSalih

hussamtalib82@gmail.com

The Directorate General of Education in Kerbala Province

ABSTRACT

Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) is a novel that apparently recounts the experiences, views and life events of a depressed teenage boy named Holden Caulfield. However, ever since its publication, critics have been grappling with how and where to position this teenager in the fictional world; a threat to society, an archetype of adolescence or a psychological enigma. Accordingly, though a wide range of ideas and concepts have critically been addressed, read and examined in the novel, adolescence and Holden as a disturbed teenager has persisted as central issues in the novel. In that order, the current research paper intends to trace Holden's life, studies his experiences and encounters with people and analyzes his attitudes to figure out how this teenage boy perceives people and the world. It also aims to examine why Holden usually attempts to distance himself from his reality and from the people around him. The research paper at hand therefore argues that Holden in doing so establishes certain physical and psychological spaces. Thus the present research paper is eventually set to explore, study and negotiate such physical and psychological spaces in the novel as demonstrated through Holden.

Keywords: Salinger, The Catcher in the Rye, Explore, Physical and Psychological Spaces

استكشاف الفضاءات الجسدية والنفسية في رواية (الحارس في حقل الشوفان ١٩٥١) لجيه

دي سالينجر

م . حسام طالب صالح

الملخص

تسرد رواية (الحارس في حقل الشوفان ١٩٥١) لسالينجر على ما يبدو تجارب وآراء وأحداث حياة صبي مراهق مكتتب يُدعى هولدن كولفيلد. ومع ذلك، فمنذ نشرها، كان النقاد يواجهون صعوبة حول كيفية التعامل مع وتموضع هذا المراهق في العالم الخيالي؛ هل هو تهديد للمجتمع، أو نموذج مثالي للمراهقة أو لغز نفسي. ووفقاً لذلك، على الرغم من تناول مجموعة واسعة من الأفكار والمفاهيم وقراءتها وفحصها بشكل نقدي في الرواية، إلا أن المراهقة وهولدن كمراهق مضطرب استمر كقضايا مركزية للدراسة والتحليل في الرواية. وبناء على ذلك، تهدف ورقة البحث الحالية إلى تتبع حياة هولدن، ودراسة تجاربه ولقاءاته مع الناس وتحليل مواقفه لمعرفة كيف ينظر هذا الصبي المراهق إلى الناس والعالم. كما تهدف إلى دراسة وتحليل سبب محاولة هولدن عادةً إبعاد نفسه عن واقعه وعن الأشخاص من حوله. لذلك، تزعم ورقة البحث الحالية أن هولدن بذلك يؤسس مساحات مادية ونفسية معينة. وبالتالي، تهدف الورقة البحثية الحالية في النهاية إلى استكشاف ودراسة وتحليل مثل هذه المساحات المادية والنفسية في الرواية كما يتضح من خلال هولدن.

الكلمات المفتاحية: سالينجر، الحارس في حقل الشوفان، استكشاف، المساحات المادية والنفسية

Introduction

Jerome David Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) traces the life of a teenage boy named Holden Caulfield and recounts his experiences, encounters with and views of a diverse range of people. The people Holden comes upon vary in age, gender, backgrounds and even professions. It thus seems like the difference in people's age, gender, profession and background influences the way Holden perceives those people and deals with them. While dealing with those people, he apparently adapts and adjusts his own identity, manner, style, and performance to suit their differences.

Hence, the novel shows that Holden attempts to be scrupulous and thorough in terms of how he perceives and should deal with people around him. He not only observes the common psychological, emotional and behavioral states and attitudes of those people but also analyzes

them. In that order, the novel displays that Holden categorizes the people he comes across into two groupings; the 'authentic' and the 'phonies'. For Holden, qualities such as shallowness, hypocrisy and falsity make a person a phony because they are conventional qualities of compliance and acquiescence.

Still, Salinger's novel has sparked hot controversies; many appreciate it but equally as many run it down. For those who depreciate it, the novel seems to them to just be relating the story of a miserably unhappy teenager who is struggling with his own identity. It is quite apparent that the novel narrates the story of Holden the teenager; yet, it certainly is a narrative text of psychological depth and insights into it:

Being widely regarded as one of the most controversial novels of the 20th century, *The Catcher in the Rye* is about the adolescent Holden's four days of life. The narrative recounts the story of his leaving Pencey Prep and spending four days here and there in New York before facing his parent with the bad news. It is a psychological novel exploring the world of a seventeen-year-old adolescent, Holden Caulfield. (Bloom 25) In addition, those who appreciate the novel consider such an opinion as a shallow and banal oversimplification of it. For them, the novel touches upon more issues than just adolescence such as masculinity, violence, identity and others. As a voluminous novel of over two hundred pages, they perceive in it a deeper and more insightful meaning than just that of a struggling teenage boy. They also assign a particular importance to the emotional, psychological and other physical details of the lives and life events of all characters in the novel:

It deals with important subjects like psychological and mental issues, morality, loss of innocence, the credibility of religion, and search of oneself in an absurd reality. It is championed by critics for evoking the readers' feelings and engaging them in the story to sense the protagonist's troubles. (Hadjabi 2)

Above and beyond, Holden is regarded as an archetype of teenage boys; he symbolizes both “the 1950s American culture in which he lives and the cultural atmosphere of the country beyond his own time as well, serving as an example of what the extension of adolescence provides to youth: the opportunity to critique culture with a discerning eye,” (Thacker 76). As such, the novel through Holden provides its readers with the interesting opportunity of investigating how a teenager thinks and what the adolescence stage changes in such an individual, thus getting clues into even an entire stretch of time.

Through its main character, Holden, and his floating expeditions, it is assumed that the novel reflects the society’s cultural, psychological and communal predicaments. Holden is not just a wandering teenager; he is an archetypal example of a teenage generation who could symbolically be deemed a representation of the whole society. Through him, an attentive reader could get valuable insights into the “the psychological wounds, mental turmoil, depression, and alienation that results from living in a state of a post-traumatic war experience and experiencing the shortcomings of the conforming society,” (Hadjabi 4).

When the novel first introduces Holden to the readers, for instance, he seems to be engulfed by resentment and anger as he commences his speech with words like “crap, goddamn, lousy and hate,” (Salinger 5). As a teenage boy, Holden also seems to be rebelliously aggressive especially when it comes to his life; he clearly states that he is unwilling to tell people his “whole goddamn autobiography or anything,” (5). Through such vocabulary, readers could therefore sense how this teenage boy is consumed by indignation towards his people and milieu and should thus attempt to figure out why.

In that order, the current research paper intends to trace Holden’s life, studies his experiences and encounters with people and analyzes his attitudes to figure out how this teenage boy perceives people and the

world. It also aims to examine why Holden usually attempts to distance himself from his reality and from the people around him. The research paper at hand argues that Holden in doing so establishes certain physical and psychological spaces. Thus the present research paper is eventually set to study and negotiate such physical and psychological spaces in the novel as demonstrated through Holden.

Physical and Psychological Spaces in the Novel

Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* relates the story of a dejected teenage boy named Holden Caulfield who seems to have some adolescence-related psychological issues. Holden—as portrayed in the novel—seems like a psychologically disturbed teenager. He might have also certain psychological issues while growing up as a child. According to Erik Erikson, the child's psychological development goes through eight separate stages, and every child/individual would experience peculiar conflicts during such stages.

However, when the conflict or frustration occurs at the end of any random stage, the adolescence stage comes with melancholy and discontent: “when a stage comes to its end with a sense of dissatisfaction, the adolescent becomes disappointed and most probably the consequences of the previous stage would affect the next stage negatively,” (Erikson 223). In view of such theory, it could be assumed that Holden is a psychologically troubled adolescent.

In other words, a particular stage of his psychological development has apparently ended with a conflict, and that conflict has caused a saddening and disappointing adolescence for him. He on several occasions has, for instance, thought and acted in a way that seemingly contradicts his age; either younger or older than his age. Holden has also acted differently than expected and than that his age might dictate: “I don't give a damn, except that I get bored sometimes when people tell me to act my age. I was sixteen then, and I'm seventeen now, and

sometimes I act like I'm about thirteen. Sometimes I act a lot older than I am – I really do – but people never notice it. People never notice anything.” (Salinger 9)

Besides, the novel illustrates that Holden has attempted to be different than his peers and other people around him. Hence, acting in contrast to his age and acting/being different than others around him might suggest a psychological complication and a certain frustration in the stages of his psychological development. Such concluding assumption obviously complies with Erikson's theory as stated above.

Nevertheless, even though Holden might have an uneasy childhood and could feasibly be psychologically insecure according to Erikson's theory, he appears to be fully aware and understanding of the nature of life and people around him. He is no less informed of how life goes on and of how people lead their lives. More to that and in line with it, Holden seems to be equally cognizant and aware of what he is doing. He seems to be intentionally distancing himself. Conversing with his teacher, he chooses to distance himself from the real world and its people thus mindfully establishing his psychological and physical spaces:

“Life is a game, boy. Life is a game that one plays according to the rules.”

“Yes, sir. I know it is. I know it.”

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 get on the other side, where there aren't any hot-shots, then what's a game about it? Nothing. No game. (Salinger 8)

In that vein, the current argument proposes the assumption that such age-contradictory acting and being different coupled with such mindful awareness as demonstrated by Holden are supporting clues that eventually culminate in creating physical and psychological spaces. In

so doing, Holden seems through acting and being different and through sensible isolation, Holden distances himself from his immediate reality and people to establish physical and psychological spaces of his own.

The novel also presents Holden as an adolescent boy who has his own standards of evaluating people around him and the society as a whole. Perceiving most people around him and the society as phony, Holden feels that he does not fit with those people or belong to such society. Therefore, he separates himself from people and society, holds on to his innocuous and gullible qualities of adolescence and shuns entering into the adult world: “As a consequence of his repudiation of the adult world, Holden at last builds a cynical psychological armor around himself in order to protect himself from the complexities of the world,” (Aygül 14).

Holden creates a physical and psychological space between him and society thus assuming that he is protecting himself from the cunning and intricate world of adults. He apparently is a psychologically troubled teenage boy who seems to be unable to deal with adolescence, what it means and what changes it brings with. Holden keeps contradicting himself thus preserving a distance between him and his milieu. Yet, he remains a pivotal figure in the novel whose physical as well as psychological features are worth studying:

Holden Caulfield is a character of contradictions. Even his physical description displays the opposites that make up his personality. At 16, he is clearly caught between adolescence and adulthood, with the tumult of conflicting emotions. (Slawenski 201)

The age of adolescence could thus be assumed to represent a physical and psychological space in terms of experience, change and outcome. It is all at once the most exciting and perplexing stage of an individual's life. For one thing, the stage of adolescence seems to distance the individual from childhood but also keep them away from adulthood thus establishing a kind of an independently different space. During such a

stage of life, the individual lives particular experiences and goes through some changes that most likely bring about specific outcomes.

Entering into adolescence, the individual undergoes physical changes of the sort that move them away and distinguish them from a child and a child's physique. Yet, having physical features that are similar to those of an adult does not necessarily entail that a teenager is an adult, not yet to say the least. The teenager also starts experiencing certain emotional or psychological changes with relation to how they feel, perceive other people and understand the world around them:

Teenagers start noticing minute details of people's character and their behavior, and form their own views and opinions about their nature. They start seeing human beings for what they really are; and through this process they get their first taste of adulthood,". (Jena 54)

Once Holden is a teenager, he starts to see people, young and old, differently and shapes his own views on them. He thinks that for young beautiful girls all it takes a man to have sex with them is just to act out some physical contact such as kissing or hugging. And in the course of events Holden comes upon quite a plenty of such girls such as Sunny, Lillian Simmons and Sally Hayes. Sunny is a prostitute who takes money from him without his consent, Lillian Simmons is his brother's friend and is annoying, prying and "keeps you standing up for hours", and Sally Hayes is supposedly ugly and a girl who with others usually get away with their "very loud, embarrassing voices", for they are so "damn good-looking," (Salinger 81).

Nonetheless, Holden exhibits enough respect for women on the ground that they are equal humans. He respects their feelings and wishes that all men do the same: "I think if you don't really like a girl, you shouldn't horse around with her at all," (81). Holden also sympathizes with ugly girls because he supposes that for them the task of getting a man is quite challenging. Still, Holden seems to have a general opinion on the

entirety of women as essentially stupid, unripe, inconsistent, shallow and greedy: “I mean most girls are so dumb and all. After you neck them for a while you can really watch them lose their brains,” (Salinger 121). Thus, regarding his views on women, he “seems to have a contradicting view of women. He sees them as materialistic and simplistic for the majority but also has a respect for women that most people around his age, do not,” (Jena 57).

As for old people, for instance, Holden despite his sympathy perceives them as lacking in wisdom, true spirituality and that they are physically corrupted. He also assumes that they are “childish, they need pampering, and get offended easily when someone blames them for something. They get excited by small things and sometimes get irritated by the same things,” (Salinger 56). Hence, when he happens to meet a strange man around the age of sixty in a hotel he works at, he perceives the man as depressingly disheartening: “He was one of those bald guys that comb all their hair over from the side to cover up the baldness,” (80).

There are, however, two old people in Holden’s life about whom he harbors positive perceptions; his grandmother and his teacher Mr. Antolini. He thinks that his mother—who is rich—is a nice and cheerful sort of person. As for his teacher Mr. Antolini. Holden perceives him as too amusing and delightful for his age. In the light of all that, it seems like in terms of common interaction with the people around him in general, Holden appears to have always distanced himself from the people around him thus establishing either a physical, psychological or both spaces of his own.

Although he introduces himself as an exhibitionist: “All I need’s an audience. I’m an exhibitionist” (Salinger 33), Holden favors a state of being and acting that is noise-free, unmoving, foreseeable and unceasing, which in the real world is quite difficult or even far-fetched. It

thus seems that he prefers establishing a kind of physical space between him and his audience while performing his show. Therefore, through distancing himself physically from the people around him Holden crafts an emotional and psychological space between them as well.

According to Holden, physical and emotional contact are adult-related qualities that are also challenging and intricate. He, on the other hand, is a teenager who should not embrace or enact such traits: "The first thing I did when I got off at Penn Station, I went into this phone booth. I felt like giving somebody a buzz...but as soon as I was inside, I couldn't think of anybody to call up," (Salinger 53). This quote seemingly indicates that Holden prefers a physical and emotional space of his own. As an adolescent it seems like Holden needs his own physical and psychological space: "one finds, perhaps more importantly, that Holden's character shows adolescence is more than just a space between childhood and adulthood, but rather, a place in its own right," (Thacker 8). Though he is in a new place and needs the company of a friend, he hesitates in calling someone and distances himself from anyone thus eventually settling down on and resorting to his personal spaces; physical and psychological.

In that order, it could widely be recognized that Holden's disturbed state is mostly caused by the "peculiar dynamics of adolescent psychology," (Shaw 99). However, it remains equally valid that the death of Holden's brother has worsened his state; "no single act or expression of his stands out as inexplicable without reference to Allie. His brother's death exacerbates rather than constitutes Holden's adolescent crisis," (*ibid* 100). Apparently though, the death of his brother Allie has generated certain complications for Holden with regards to life, the world and the people around him.

After such personal tragedy, Holden perceives life as randomly fickle and contact with people as a detaining obstacle in the way of assessing

and achieving his true worth and personal assurance: “Holden Caulfield is haunted by the death of his brother, his trauma ever-present with him. But he also believes that his childhood innocence is fleeting – that the past is escaping him and once he falls, he can no longer access his childhood self,” (Hopkins 1).

Accordingly, he detaches himself from all around him thus establishing a physical as well as psychological space of his own: “Despite the fact that people around him make attempts to be close to him, he refuses to let his guard down and chooses to surrender himself with a skeptical defensive layer. But he keeps looking for new connections and retreating to himself when he achieves it,” (Hadjabi 57). So, in addition to the tragedy of his brother’s death, Holden demonstrates signs of other issues like self-contradiction, naivety and a preference of solitude. Nevertheless, despite being a teenager and apparently suffering from certain psychological issues, Holden turns out to be a major character in the novel and is widely recognized as such. Hence, it seems like understanding the novel necessarily entails careful reading and close observation of Holden, his life, experiences and even the details of his clothing. For one thing, it seems like that Holden’s hat has drawn much attention and inspired much criticism into understanding him and the novel as a whole:

Holden’s hat not only represents his psychology, but simultaneously gives readers a glimpse into what Salinger is trying to do with clothing in his literature. Characters who dress differently than others in Salinger’s pieces are usually psychologically different than those that surround them. (Howe 35)

It could therefore be argued that the hunting hat Holden purchases symbolizes a kind of physical space that, on one hand, separates him from childhood, and, on the other, keeps him away from the adult world. The hunting hat seems to create for him an independent physical space

that is positioned between “childlike immaturity and an adult responsibility,” (Howe 17). Getting the hat the day on which “the mad man stuff” (Salinger 1), begins taking place would further consolidate such an argument. It is the day Holden visits Mr. Spencer, and it is the exact same day he puts the hat on: “I took off my coat and my tie and unbuttoned my shirt collar, and then I put on this hat that I’d bought in New York that morning,” (Salinger 17). Moreover, the day of getting the hat and putting it on coincides with the starting point of Holden’s narration, which could arguably indicate a psychological space as well.

Holden’s hat hence could assumingly be connected to the physical and psychological spaces he seems to establish. In literature—and in the real world as well—the clothes someone wears are perceived to convey clues into who that person is, what they might believe and what their disposition is. Thus, clothes have frequently been linked to someone’s psychology, state of mind and probably state of being, too. Holden of *The Catcher of the Rye*, or the contemporary teenage generation of his time would thus be no exception:

Apart from the face and hands [. . .] what we actually see and react to are, not the bodies, but the clothes of those about us [. . .] indeed, the very word “personality,” as we have been reminded by recent writers, implies a “mask,” which is itself an article of clothing. Clothes, in fact, though seemingly mere extraneous appendages, have entered into the very core of our existence as social beings. (Flugel 15–6)

After all, we might all agree that people wearing outmoded and out-of-fashion clothes might be an indication of their personal individuation and non-conforming attitude. However, it remains valid to assume that people—including Salinger’s characters—wearing different clothes that are against the line of popular currency would be different and might also think and act differently. Then, the attempt made at finding out what particular clues and insights a peculiar style of clothing might tell is still

worthwhile. In view of that, Holden's hunting hat would serve as a symbolic gesture of him being different, being isolated and thus as being positioned on and drawn to particular physical and psychological spaces.

In addition, Holden's pastoral dream could perceptibly be argued as a sort of a physical space through which he wishes to move away from the life of the city. It might also be considered a psychological space for he wants to distance himself from any and all places that would remind him of his trauma. Holden might be thinking that such assumed physical and psychological spaces he establishes and resorts to could be what he really desires. For one thing, it seems like he "wants to be free to be himself. He wants to create an adolescent-friendly space," (Hopkins 19). Likewise, the physical landscape in the novel—more particularly as adolescent literature—where Holden journeys could typically provide a further example of such an established physical space.

Though his brother Allie dies in Maine, Holden seems like unwilling and unable to settle and stay in any other particular place, so he keeps moving purposelessly around:

Anywhere seems to be better than wherever he is at any moment, so he moves aimlessly. He rants to Sally on their date about wanting to get married and live on the road for as long as their money will hold them over. And he shouts plans of living as a simple manual laborer for the rest of his life. (Hopkins 220)

It might thus be suggested that Holden's acts of purchasing a particular hat and wearing it on a specific day or moving pointlessly around are all attempts at creating certain physical and psychological spaces. It also seems like the physical space he creates—landscape and places—help him not only forget about his painful trauma but also assist him in constructing himself and in performing his identity: Holden "continuously

dissents from the world he has already chosen to move to the other part of his identity,” (Abdulbaqi 122).

In addition to wearing his red hat, Holden’s use of slang language could be assumed as yet another method through which he distances himself and establishes a kind of physical space. In speaking a colloquial language, Holden seemingly moves to a particular physical space; that is of the poor classes and slum communities. He moves to such physical space assumingly to distance himself from the upper-class rich people because he apparently desires to side with the segregated poor: With urban development comes urban pollution, and the 19th century wealthy populations fled urbanity in New York to become starkly segregated from lower classes, creating a physical, spatial difference between class hierarchies. ... 19th century behavioral performance is more defined through the physical and transient transgression of boundaries from the higher classes into the lower. (Lentini 10–11)

Some have suggested that Holden has demonstrated in hesitating to leave childhood and move to adults’ world his preference to remain in midway; to remain in adolescence. As an adolescent, Holden apparently looks for passing in into adulthood but at the same time seems to try to uphold his sparkling craving for childhood. Despite all that, the current research paper persistently argues that though he might have done that, he has done it to create his own world, his own spaces; physical and psychological:

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

that's the only thing I'd really like to be. I know it's crazy. (Salinger 191)

It is quite apparent and perceptible that Holden hesitates between leaving childhood and moving to adulthood. It is equally obvious that he has the knowledge and awareness of his fickleness. It could thus be arguably concluded that his apparent vacillation coupled with his awareness and cognition of the same are further and consolidating instances of Holden's desire to establish his personal spaces; physical and psychological alike.

It is also apparent in Holden's indecisive attitude to sex that though he craves for sex like any teenager would, he does not get himself fully immersed in it. Throughout the novel, Holden seems to be fixated upon women and the prospect of having sex with them. Yet, it also seems like he is not taken any action to fulfil his desire. For illustration, Holden has always liked his childhood friend, Jane Gallagher, but has never gone beyond holding hands with her. He even once orders for a prostitute to a hotel room but then chooses to just converse with her. He also manages to arrange for a date with Sally Hayes but then categorizes her as a classic phony thus blowing the date and causing her to burst into tears and ditch him. All these instances arguably indicate that even sex cannot lure Holden into leaving his physical and psychological spaces.

It therefore seems that sexuality is also one of the things that Holden distances himself from. Despite the temptation of and desire for sex, Holden favors creating his physical and psychological spaces and resorting to them than engaging into sexual activities. When he, for example, finds out that Stradlater is about to go out on a date with his childhood's friend, Jane, he becomes consumed by the projected scene of them having sex. Therefore, he keeps "thinking about Jane, and about Stradlater having a date with her and all. It made me so nervous I

nearly went crazy. I already told you what a sexy bastard Stradlater was,” (Salinger 34). Parallel to that, however, he gets immensely disturbed by the prospect of Stradlater and Jane having sex though he desires to have sex himself with Jane.

It gives the impression as if Jane’s sexual maturity has challenged “his concepts of childhood innocence and authenticity,” (Sanford 46). Yet, Holden emphasizes his preference of personally physical and emotional distance by stating that he “really got to know her quite intimately. I don’t mean it was anything physical or anything—it wasn’t...you don’t have to get too sexy to get to know a girl,” (Salinger 76). Saying so further demonstrates his distressingly nervous approach to sexual activities as he does to personal relationships, which points to his preference of isolating himself and his mindful desire of creating his personal physical and psychological spaces in all cases discussed thus far.

Conclusion

The argument and analysis of the novel provided earlier have revealed that Holden is eventually isolated from the world and people around him; physically as well as psychologically. Yet, such isolation seems more of an intentional activity than a compelled one. That is to say, Holden has sought through distancing himself to establish his personal physical and psychological spaces. It has thus been demonstrated that even though several chances of intimately physical and emotional contact have been thrown in his way, Holden has preferred distancing himself from people and from such pleasant encounters despite his sometimes craving for them. He might have been traumatized and lost trust in people preferring not to call them even if he needed them, thus fearing people and the adult world especially after his brother’s death. Still, whatever the reasons might have been, Holden has as a result distanced himself

from the society and people around him. He has therefore established his own physical and psychological spaces.

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