

The Picaresque Tradition in J. D. Salinger's *The
Catcher in the Rye* between Generic Conventions
and Aesthetic Transformation
Al-Anbar University
College of Education for Women

**The Picaresque Tradition in J.D.Salinger's *The Catcher in the
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The Catcher in the Rye (1951) is J.D.Salinger's only novel to date and his most important work so far. The significance of this novel stem from Salinger's genuine critical insights into the socio-cultural making of the America of the nineteen fifties from the perspective of the adolescent hero. Although the exploration of adolescent experience for socio-cultural criticism is a well established tradition in American novel ever since the publication of Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in 1884, Salinger was able to endue this tradition with a vividly concretized sense of hypercritical social realism through his skillful manipulation of the received convention of the picaresque novel. Salinger used many of the protean convention of picaresque fiction such as biting satire of contemporary mores and values, loosely connected episodic structure to reflect the fragmentary experience and awareness of his picaresque hero, alienation of the self as a result of the picaro's spiritual rift with his social environment, spatial drifting in the form of aimless three-day journeying in New York, Pseudoautobiographical first-person narrative style colored with epiphanies and flashbacks, and subjective and self-critical point of view.(1) All of these are colored with a distinctively mid-twentieth century American sensibility.

Like his contemporaries, Salinger's incorporation of the picaresque mode in *The Catcher in The Rye* tends to favor unorthodox literary approaches and narratives that are meant to jar a reader's sensibilities into a realization of new perspectives, a multiplicity of views and a fuller

understanding of how unstable American life can be. Hence, the strong sense of fluidity and experimentation that inform his selective application of the picaresque conventions in this novel.

Salinger has succeeded to transform these conventions into a unique aesthetic form which functions to highlight meaningful patterns of societal experience in the personal narrative of the sixteen-year old Holden Caulfield. Salinger, however, was so subversive in his use of the picaresque conventions that critics find it increasingly difficult to categorize *The Catcher in The Rye* as a pure picaresque novel. Two alternative designations are currently suggested to account for Salinger's special usage of the picaresque mode in *The Catcher in the Rye*: "spiritual picaresque" and "neo- picaresque". An exploration of the premises underlying each of these designations would undoubtedly give a better understanding of the creative nature of Salinger's aesthetic transformation of the generic conventions of the classic picaresque novel to give the reader of *The Catcher in The Rye* a multiplicity of perspectives and insights into the darker aspects of contemporary American society.

Critics who propose the designation "spiritual picaresque" make departure over the matter of the picaro's journey or wandering that constitutes the bulk of the novel. The apparently aimless drifting of the picaro from one place to another characteristic of the traditional picaresque novel is transformed into a spiritual quest, mainly for self-discovery, in the chaotic world of modern American novel. John Aldrige, who was among the first critics to apply this designation to *The Catcher in the Rye*, believes that this novel is a "study in the spiritual picaresque, the journey that for the young is all one way, from holy innocence to such knowledge as the world offers, from the reality which illusion demands and thinks it sees to the illusion which reality insists, at the point of madness, we settle for" (2). So it is Holden's childhood innocence and his refusal to lose it as a prerequisite to join the adult world, that distinguish him from his picaresque predecessors. His three-day drifting in the nightmarish underworld of New York is really a

quixotic quest to fulfil the urges of his idealistic innocence.

The Catcher in the Rye, in this respect, is nearer to Miguel Cervantes's *Don Quixote* (1605,1615) than, say, to the anonymously written *Lazarillo De Tormes* (1554). Far from the vulgarity of *Lazaro*, Holden is in line with Quixote's disillusioned idealism, noble aims, and questive knight errantry. But Holden has no concrete Quixotic Dulcinea del Toboso for an ideal .He lacks "a concrete embodiment; for the ideal against which he judges, and finds wanting. He has objects for his contempt but no object other than his little sister for his love." (3) Yet Holden is a far complex character who is aware of his limitations and the failure of his society. Unlike Quixote's externally, and essentially allegorically, oriented quest. Holden's is both psychologically and spiritually intemalized in the form of self-fashioning. This aspect of Holden's picaresque quest is basically reflected in his problems of achieving an easy and a successful initiation into the world of adulthood. True that Holden as picaro is contaminated by vulgarity, lies, lust, temptations, recklessness, and cynicism, yet,"these" according to an early reviewer of the novel,"are merely the devils that try him externally....inside, his spirit is intact".This spiritual intactness derives from Holden's innate childhood innocence.Holden's problems of social maladjustment are basically psychologically manifested as consequences of his rejection of the phony logic of adulthood ,that stands symbolically for the established social order of his environment .

Indeed, Holden tells the story of three crucial days in his life from a psychiatrist clinic where he receives psychotherapy for his problems of social and personal maladjustment. He has been expelled from three schools and is about to be expelled from Pencey Prep school for flunking all his subjects and for general irresponsibility. He can not relate to anyone except his little sister Phoebe.He is not able to mature into adulthood normally because of the traumatic experience of his childhood via the immature death of his brother Allie whose memories are a haunting presence to him. This trauma of the dead brother is responsible for fashioning Holden's hysterical responses to the world of

social reality that the adult world represents so negatively. This is carefully shown at the beginning of the novel through Holden's experience with his history teacher at Pencey Prep school and his roommates there Stradlater and Ackley. In this prologue to his final fling in New York Holden's relations with the people surrounding him are colored by misunderstanding, uncommunicability, and a strong sense of picaresque rootlessness.

Having this as a motivation, Holden's seemingly aimless picaresque wanderings in the urban city becomes really a quest inside, in search of spiritual and psychic relief, as much as it is a quest outside to seek his sister Phoebe. After a number of loosely connected picaresque adventures in the nightmarish world of New York Holden comes to the awareness that he is caught in a spiritual waste land that is dominated by phoniness, an idea under which he lumps insincerity, snobbery, injustice, callousness, and a lot more. Holden's subsequent flight to his parents' apartment to his spiritual and psychological outlet, Phoebe, is in one way or another a subconscious return to the womb in the Freudian symbolism. Holden's unconscious exercise of his instinct of self-preservation to protect his spiritual existence is based on the assumption of Phoebe's metaphorical rather than physical significance as a castration of a desire in Holden's symbolic order of things. Holden's confession to his sister of this dream to be a "catcher in the rye" works for the same effect:

I keep picturing all these little kids playing some game in this big 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 are running and they don't look where they are going, I have to come out from somewhere, and catch them. I'd just be the catcher in the rye and all(5)

This is, indeed, a projection of an acute need of self-protection on the part of Holden. His desire to be a catcher, i.e., defender or protector of the innocents, i.e., children is a projection of a wounded psyche rather

than an expression of an idealistic mentality. Uttered at the apex of his frustration with society and itself being a misconception of a poem by the English poet Robert Burns as his sister later indicates, Holden's desire to be a catcher in the rye betrays traces of day dreaming as an escape from a gloomy reality that threaten his sense of selfhood/innocence with disintegration. The infusion of the Biblical imagery of the fall from the garden of Eden and the idea of the savior in a characteristically American context works to highlight the same effect. Holden, the nebulous picaresque figure, in this view, becomes .according to Harold Bloom , "an alienated American Adam dreaming of a Jesus-like role as a savior of children". Hence, he can save himself by saving others in his vision of things by becoming "the catcher in the rye." (6)

It is, therefore, the unequal conflict between personal desire as conceptualized by Holden's innocence, and the usually negative forms of social power that results in the alienation of that desire with the "Other" of his society. Because the relegation to the "other" is but a form of social repression, Holden is forced, here, to promote mechanism of psychic defense to protect his ego, notably, the castration of the catcher's desire.

Taken in its simplest term, the whole process ushers the painful positioning of Holden at the threshold of disillusionment. This disillusionment and its correlative acceptance of spiritual phoniness as a condition of existence, takes place after the failure of his attempt to escape to the symbolic West a fact that denotes the failure of American cultural promise to nourish its ideals. Disillusionment, whether personal or cultural , comes to a focal point during the final carousel scene. Holden comes significantly under the spiritually purifying rain, to the gloomy conclusion that: "if they fall off, they fall off, but it is bad if you say anything to them." (p.211) This acceptance of the fall from innocence as an inevitable fact of social existence indicates, according to Warren French, that "Holden no longer sees himself as a catcher in the rye." (7) Critics, therefore, tend to regard this episode as Holden's transition into adulthood, for although the future is uncertain, his

severed ties with the dead past have enabled him at the end to accept maturity. This capability at spiritual illumination and drastic reorientation adds a new dimension to Holden's picaresque character that is unhitherto available in the basically static character of the classic picaro. It precisely gives Holden's character the depth that distinguishes him from his classic predecessors.

Nevertheless, the last emergent voice at the close of the novel is not that of the disillusioned Holden of the quest narrative. It is indeed that of Holden the frame narrator who is recovering from his mental breakdown in the mental hospital in California. He is still cynical, defiant, and compassionate: "Don't ever tell anybody anything. If you do, you start missing everybody." (p.214) This "vision, the compassion, and the humor of the narrator", according to James Bryan, "reveal a psyche far healthier than that of the boy who endured the events of the narrative. Through the telling of the story. Holden has given shape to, and thus achieved control of, his troubled past." (8) This therapeutic function of Holden's picaresque narrative is actually a substantial contribution to the spiritual making of the picaresque dimension of this narrative. The critic Helen Weinburg confirms this connection when she points out that:

The emergent vision in the whole of Salinger's work is one of the potential of the spiritual self, and the elusiveness of that self which is always ahead of the movement of the particular moment. He sees the inner self as potentially loving, compassionate, in touch with world; in this sense it is a vision of hope and carries with it a celebration of life. (9) But this domain of selfhood, which the "spiritual picaresque" advocates take to be the distinguishing feature of *The Catcher in the Rye* as a picaresque novel, is charted against a social, rather than psychological or spiritual, environment. Hence the promising possibilities of a socio-cultural significance of the picaresque framing of Holden's adolescence experience. This is indeed what the "Neo-picaresque" advocates claim to purport in their application of this designation to *The Catcher in the Rye*. This designation as applied to the

fiction of Salinger and his contemporaries during the 1950s and 1960s is based on a description of the technical rather than the thematic aspect of the fictional work as it is the case with the "spiritual picaresque" designation. But even here the advocates of the neo-picaresque do not make any substantial departure with the received conventions of the classic picaresque fiction. They rather update these conventions and their rhetorical application in the process of literary composition in such a way as to cope with the radicalism of the modern worldview of contemporary American life-style and fictional techniques.

There are two premises that underlie the making of this generic designation as specifically applied to *The Catcher in the Rye*. First of all, there is a prominent stress on the sociological function of the classic picaresque novel through the implementation of the picaro as a social observer. Thus, while retaining its quixotic spirit, *The Catcher in the Rye* maintains more affinities with the novels of Henry Fielding and Tobias Smollett than with the classic Spanish picaresque narratives of the golden age. Indeed, Holden is in many ways a mid-twentieth century American Joseph Andrew or Tom Jones. Like them, his interactions and comic adventures in a wide ranging spectrum of modern American society function to highlight the actual, and usually negative, patterns of social experience that dominate the projected societal milieu. But unlike them, the critical projection of Holden in his social environment lacks the satiric posture characteristic of his picaresque predecessors. "The moving, even stabbing qualities of the novel," says one critic, "derives, to some extent, from Salinger's refusal to adopt a satirical stance. The work, instead, confirms the saving grace of vulnerability; its protest, debunking, and indictments presupposes a willing responsiveness on the part of its hero. (10) Instead, there is a marked naturalistic tendency in the critical exposure of the cultural failure of Holden's society.

This is further intensified by the trait of self-criticism that is predominant in Holden's character. He is very self-critical as he often refers to himself as a terrible liar, a madman, and a moron. This serves to add reliability to Holden's first-person narration, as he is the only

center of consciousness through which the events are filtered to the reader.

This aspect seems to stem from his high sense of moral idealism. Although the classic picaresque, especially that of the eighteenth-century novel, can be at times moralist, his moralism is not altogether ethical or socially defined. It is usually motivated by his highly romantic loyalty and fidelity to some woman he is in love with. Holden's morality, on the other hand, has to do with social, rather than religious, ethics. It is natural, and hence, an essential and integral part of his ethical make-up. Consequently, Holden figures throughout the narrative as a true moral idealist whose attitudes come from an intense hatred of social hypocrisy and phoniness. Even at times of his amoral escapades Holden's moral sense is very intense because they are projections of his deep desire to be socially accepted in the adult world. Yet, these escapades fail even before they materialize because of Holden's strong and inherent moral sense. The episode of the elevator guy's girl and his anger at the obscene writings on the walls of his sister's school shows that his morality is engendered by his innocence and virginity which he fears to lose as the price for his initiation into the world of adulthood.

Holden's morality, however, skirts at times the religious as in his benevolent donation to the two nuns or in his many reflections on Catholicism and his desire for a hermitic seclusion. While moralism and religion are never seriously invoked in the comic world of the classic picaresque, they collaborate to add a semi-philosophical and a pessimistic perspective to the character of Holden Caulfield as the modern version of the traditional picaresque. Indeed, laughter, in Holden's world, becomes a bitter cynicism as his agonized Hamlet-like ego suffers in a world he refuses to join but is badly in need of its sympathy. But regardless of its marked tragic nature, *The Catcher in the Rye* retains much of the humor, wit, and even wickedness characteristic of the traditional picaresque genre. Some critics, like David Stevenson, noted that "the use of Chaplin-like incidents serves to keep the story hovering in ambivalence between comedy and tragedy. Whenever a character is nearing the point of no return in a Salinger piece, it is usually done by

route of the comic." (11) The elements of burlesque and farce, that Stevenson identifies here, lie to the heart of the "Carnavalesque" discourse that the novel furnishes as its subversive logic of the negative patterns of social experience. (12)

A fundamental aspect of the Carnavalesque in *The Catcher in the Rye* is that it stems from the literalness and innocence of Holden's point of view in the face of complicated and depriving social reality. Holden, here, is in line with his picaresque predecessors. He shares with them the basic principles of the Carnavalesque discourse as identified by Mikhail Bakhtin. These principles, which offer liberation from conventional social values, include: "a peculiar festive character without any piousness, [and] complete liberation from seriousness... free and familiar contact among people... behavior, gesture, and discourse... freed from the authority of all hierarchical positions (social estate, rank, age property) and disguise that is: carnivalistic shifts of clothing and positions and destinies in life." (13)

Holden fulfills these principles in his behavior: his picaresque adventure is set in the festive Christmas season, the many burlesque and farcical scenes during the school alumnus, in cabs, and the surrealistic acting scenes of dying because of a bullet-wounded side after each fight in Pencey Prep school and the hotel in New York. Holden also enjoys free and unrestricted contacts with a widening range of social types in New York such as school kids, elder men and women, taxi-driver, prostitute, nuns...etc. Furthermore, Holden is caught in a web of clothes exchanges that signifies shifts of social positions and identities. These include lending and borrowings of his hand's tooth jacket, his turtleneck sweater, and his famous hunting hat. These strategies that make up the concept of the Carnavalesque in *The Catcher in the Rye* are disruptive of the social status quo. They are often manipulated by the socially marginalized, such as the picaresque types in fiction, to signify their rejection of the received conventions of their social milieu. Holden's Carnavalesque is, more or less, constructed alongside these lines but with an important departure. His Carnavalesque rejection of the norms

of his society is not due to an economically imposed social marginalization as is the case with the traditional picaresque. It rather arises from his willful rejection to conform to the dictates of his social environment.

This brings us to the second premises of *The Catcher in the Rye* as a neo-picaresque novel. Which is the thematization of the picaresque around the native American tradition of individualism. Holden, in this view, is an Emersonian individualist caught in the grip of a drab social conformity. His pilgrimage to preserve his individualizing ideals becomes a signifier of the failure of the cultural promise of modern American society. The critic Ihab Hassan confirms this aspect when he says that: "as a neo-picaresque, the book shows itself to be concerned far less with the education and initiation of an adolescent than with the dramatic exposure of the manner in which ideals are denied access to our lives and of the modes which mendacity assumes in our urban culture." (15) It is interesting to note that the word "dramatic" here is not a reference to the complexity and depth of Holden's quixotic character by virtue of his strong sense of individualism.

Holden's awareness of the failure of his immediate social environment to nourish his individualistic pretensions motivates him, though unconsciously, to intensify these pretensions to such an extent that they become obsessive to Holden's ego-centered personality. This, in effect, is a new departure with the essentially undeveloping character of the classic picaresque. Another important corollary of this view is that Holden's picaresque wanderings are not questive. He is actually "in flight from mendacity rather than in search of truth." (16) Indeed, Holden's failure in several schools signifies his failure to compromise with his society because schools are the social institutions responsible for the rehabilitation of unconforming individuals. Holden's rejection of the system is critical enough to be justified:

It's full of phonies, and all you do is study so That you can learn enough to be smart enough To be able to buy a goddam Cadillac some day, And you have to keep making believe you give a Damn if football

team loses, and all you do is Talk about girls and liquor and sex all day, and Everyday sticks together in these dirty little Goddam cliques (p.131)

This gloomy picture of a morally rotten and commercially consumptive social system is powerfully displayed in Holden's picaresque drifting in New York. His indulgence in the actual world of the adults helps to intensify his disgust of his society. By the third and last day of his drift in New York, Holden's desperation starts to manifest itself. Holden comes to the realization that there is no hope of redemption in his fallen world: "That's the whole trouble. You can't ever find a place that's nice and peaceful, because there isn't any." (p.204) Consequently, Holden's flight acquires its full significance as a cultural criticism of the failure of the American promise when he plans, at a moment of utter despair, an escape to the western frontier of transcendental individualism. There he dreams of the bliss of social limbo by pretending to be a deaf-mute (17) so he "wouldn't have to have any goddam stupid useless conversation with anybody." (p.198) Holden's obsession with rejecting all modes of communication with his social environment indicates that his rift with his society is beyond redemption. Hence the necessity of psychopathy to curb the dangerous individualism of Holden. Consequently, the process of psychotherapy in this context becomes a repression of the picaresque aspects of Holden's character because the psychological adjustment to social conformity that Holden undergoes is no more than a rehabilitation of Holden the picaro into Holden the social conformist.

Although an interpretive crux, this issue of character transformation at the end of the novel seems to be functional for both of these two critical approaches to *The Catcher in the Rye* as a picaresque narrative. They both see the difference to lie in the making of Holden as a picaro more than in any other generic convention of the picaresque novel. This means that these critical approaches define the peculiarity of Salinger's incorporation of the picaresque mode in this novel on the assumption that the strong sense of subversion and transcendence in the picaresque making here result from Holden's thoughts, behavior, and

actions as a picaro. Hence the centrality of this character for any precise definition of Salinger's genuine aesthetic transformation of the generic conventions of the picaresque mode which stands as an exemplary instance of the technical originality of a whole generation of contemporary American novelists.

I Notes

The Catcher in the Rye seems to respond wonderfully to almost all the eight essential characteristics of the original Spanish picaresque as listed in Claudio Guillen, *Literature as System: Essays Toward the Theory of Literature* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1971), pp. 7 \ - \ 0.

2

John W. Aldridge, *In Search of Heresy: American Literature in an Age of Conformity* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1956), P.129.

3

John W. Aldridge, "The Society of Three Novels," in *Holden Caulfield*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1990), p.9.

4

Virgilia Peterson, "Three Days in the Bewildering World of an Adolescent," Rev. of *The Catcher in the Rye*, *New York Herald Tribune Book Review* 15 July, 1951,3.

5

J.D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1951), p.173. Subsequent references to *The Catcher in the Rye* made in this study are to this edition of the novel unless otherwise indicated.

6

Harold Bloom, "Introduction" to *Holden Caulfield* (New York: Chelsea House, 1990), p.2.

7

Warren French, *J.D. Salinger* (Boston: Twayne, 1976), p.121.

8

Quoted in Eric Lomazoff, "The Praises and Criticisms of J.D.Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*" (1996) at lommie@Ix.netcom.com

9

Helen Weinburg, *The New Novel in America* (New York: Cornell UP, 1970), p.143.

10

Ihab Hassan, *Radical Innocence: Studies in the Contemporary American Novel* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1973), p.272.

11

Quoted in Lomazoff, "The Praises and Criticisms of J.D.Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*"

12

This issue received a full treatment in Yasuhiro Takeuchi, "The Burning Carousel and the Carnavalesque: Subversion and Transcendence at the Close of *The Catcher in the Rye*," *Studies in the Novel*, vol.34, issue 3 (fall 2002), 320-37.

13

Quoted in Takeuchi, p.321.

14

However, the economic motive is subtly displayed in Holden's picaresque wanderings. This is fully analyzed in Michel Pearlman, "The Role of Socioeconomic Status in Adolescent Literature," *Adolescence*, Vol. 3, No. 117 (spring 1995), 223-29.

15

Hassan, *The Radical Innocence*, p.272.

16

Ibid.

17

Holden's explanation of his plan of escape to his sister Phoebe is an accurate charting of selfhood at the point of disintegration. The escape into the seclusion of a phantasmagoric West is symptomatic of Holden's subconscious acceptance of utter alienation of the self as the only

possible recoil into the domain of selfhood. The emulation of Thoreau's cabin on the Walden Bond, here, works for an ironic effect. The emulation is not designed as a signifying cultural practice because it is done in terms of Hollywood vision of going back to nature, of becoming a farm hand in the Western frontier. This shows the great extent to which Holden is caught in the logos of his culture, and, hence, the impossibility of escaping its process of social repression of his individualism.

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