

SOME FEATURES OF J. D. SALINGER'S STYLE  
IN RELATION TO HIS FICTIONAL WORLD

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B. A. Soochow University, Taiwan, 1974

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A MASTER'S REPORT

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY  
Manhattan, Kansas

1977

Approved by:

Robert Grindell R. G.

Major Professor

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Some Features of J. D. Salinger's Style  
in Relation to His Fictional World

The impact, especially on young people, of J. D. Salinger's fiction is one of the interesting phenomena of post-war American literary history. Though not the only post-war American writer to reflect the psychology of adolescence and youth, Salinger's hold on young readers of his time seems to have been unique. In a symposium in the March 9, 1957 issue of The Nation, a symposium which sought to identify the major influence upon college students of that time, many professors claimed Salinger as the principal influence. For example, Stanley Kunitz said that "The only young novelist I have heard praised vociferously is J. D. Salinger. . . ." <sup>1</sup> R. J. Kaufmann considered The Catcher in the Rye "a book which has complexly aroused nearly all of them." <sup>2</sup> Despite the fact that Salinger has not published any signed fiction since June 19, 1965, in The New Yorker, his characteristic matter and manner has continually remained fresh in readers' memories. This was evidenced in the sixties in a J. D. Salinger special number in Modern Fiction Studies, wherein many scholars looked at Salinger's fiction from different angles. <sup>3</sup> In the seventies critics' enthusiasm has hardly been on the wane. <sup>4</sup> It is indeed proper for Henry A. Grunwald to note that "Salinger has spoken with more magic, particularly to the young, than any other writer since World

War II."<sup>5</sup> Salinger's fictional world, in which youthful sensitivity typically opposes itself to adult and institutional phoniness, of course contributes to his success. But, more interestingly, his popularity seems to be due largely to the peculiarly effective style with which he evokes his fictional world and at the same time creates a bond of intimacy with his reader. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that "Salinger depends more than most prose writers on the fine shading of his style to convey his meaning."<sup>6</sup> This paper will survey some of the salient features of Salinger's fictional world and then attempt to show how the famous Salinger style serves to enhance the depiction of that world.

First among the elements of Salinger's fictional world are the characters, typically youthful (in outlook if not always in years), sensitive, and alienated from the world of adults. Perhaps the most typical of them is the protagonist of The Catcher in the Rye, Holden Caulfield. Throughout the book, Holden feels, more often than not, that he is alienated from the insensitive "phony" world. His school, Pencey, is "full of crooks" (p. 7) such as Dr. Thurmer and Mr. Spencer, who are in one way or another phonies, although they are his teachers. Holden also has trouble getting along well with his schoolmates, because they often demean themselves by doing something dishonorable or immoral. For example, his roommate, Stradlater, "a secret slob" (p. 35), not only at least "gave the time to" two girls with whom Holden is personally acquainted but also beat Holden

black-and-blue. Ackley, whom Holden tries to help, remains entirely unsympathetic with him after he is beaten by Stradlater. These persons represent in varying degrees the evils and inhumanity of school life Holden stands against.

But, Holden's sense of separation is not limited to his life on campus. In his four-day wandering after leaving Pencey, his sense of tension between himself and the world is deepened more and more. The social evil and phoniness culminate perhaps in the incident of Maurice, the pimp in the hotel. When introducing a prostitute Maurice tells Holden that he will charge "five bucks a throw. Fifteen bucks the whole night" (p. 119). However, he comes back later on to ask Holden for five more dollars although Holden has already paid the prostitute five dollars and retained his virginity. Holden's justifiable argument results in Maurice's inhuman brutality: he punches Holden's abdomen. In addition to Maurice, such minor characters as the waiters in the club, taxi drivers, hotel perverts, club entertainers, his brother's old lover Lillian, Sally's acquaintance George, his former Student Adviser Luce, and even Mr. Antolini all serve to express Holden's alienation, because these people are more or less like Maurice, insensitive, phony, and corrupt.

In like manner, tension between the young and their world is to be found in Salinger's other stories. The other youth-heroes or -heroines, like Holden, suffer from the world as it is, and find themselves isolated.

In "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," Seymour divorces him-

self from the adult world. He cannot get along very well with his young wife, Muriel, whom he calls "Miss Spiritual Tramp of 1948"<sup>7</sup> and he does not stay in the hotel with her. On his way back to the hotel room, he shows his incompatibility with the adult, sophisticated world by suspiciously accusing a strange woman of staring at his feet, which is plainly untrue.

In "Uncle Wiggily in Connecticut," Elcise, who "was a nice girl" (p. 56) in the past, finds herself isolated from her insensitive friend, Mary Jane, because Mary cannot really understand her; from her husband, because she does not love him; from her daughter, Ramona, because she does not like her own marriage; and from her servant, because she has become entirely careless of anybody else.

Little Lionel in "Down at the Dinghy" runs away from home many times, probably because he feels isolated from the adult world. The latest running away, which is the main concern of the story, has to do with the servants' criticism of his father. To Lionel, the adult world is too complicated to live in securely.

Other characters such as Sergeant X in "For Esmé--with Love and Squalor," Arthur in "Pretty Mouth and Green My Eyes," the young man in "De Dauzier-Smith's Blue Period," the title character of "Teddy," and Jameston in "The Young Folks" are in varying degrees alienated from and victimized by the corrupt, phony world in which they live.

Cut off from their parents and family, teachers, friends, society, these characters are, of course, apt to feel lonely.

And indeed loneliness is the overwhelming theme of J. D. Salinger's fiction. He particularly implies that the causes of the characters' loneliness are lack of love, lack of friends, lack of communication. This subject matter was easily recognized by the readers of the 40's and 50's, because loneliness is "a deformation, and a malady . . . in America"<sup>8</sup> and particularly "the spiritual malady of the age."<sup>9</sup> Salinger's fiction, as David L. Stevenson points out, "convicts us, as readers, of being deeply aware of a haunting inconclusiveness in our own, and in contemporary, emotional relationships-- members all of the lonely crowd."<sup>10</sup>

As we have already seen, throughout The Catcher in the Rye Holden is always isolated from society. He has difficulty identifying with people around him. His teachers do not understand him; his friends are unsympathetic; the people he meets are either perverts or phonies. In the book his parents never talk face to face with him; either they don't understand Holden or they don't care for him. Holden's best teacher, Mr. Antolini, is, in the long run, "a pretty sophisticated guy . . . a pretty heavy drinker . . . [and even] a little oiled up" (p. 236). His favorite author-- his brother, D. B. is now "cut in Hollywood . . . being a prostitute" (p. 4). In this wide world he has no confidant to whom he can speak his mind. His brother, Allie, and his sister, Phoebe, are the only two persons he really loves, yet Allie "got leukemia and [already] died" (p. 49), and Phoebe is still too young to understand him. The whole



situation being so desperate, Holden daydreams of "joining a monastery" (p. 65) to lead a secluded life. He also fantasizes about becoming a gas station worker, deaf and mute, somewhere in the West. He is so very lonely that he cries out quite frequently: "I felt so lonesome . . . I almost wished I was dead" (p. 62), "I had no place to go" (p. 139), "No home to go to" (p. 198).

In addition to Holden, many characters in Salinger's short stories, alienated also from the world, find themselves in the plight of loneliness. Sergeant X in "For Esme-- with Love and Squalor" suffers from a world without love. After reading the words in Goebbels' book, "'Dear God, life is hell'" he comments: "Fathers and teachers, I ponder 'What is hell?' I maintain that it is the suffering of being unable to love" (pp. 159-160). In "The Young Folks," Edna Phillips feels lonesome because, "[She] . . . since eight o'clock had been sitting in the big red chair, smoking cigarettes and yodeling hellos and wearing a very bright eye which young men were not bothering to catch" (p. 26).<sup>11</sup> In the same story, William Jameson, Jr., is lonely because of lack of companionship. For instance, though admiring Doris Liggett, a small blonde, he can merely put "the fingers of his left hand in or close to his mouth . . . sitting a few men away from the small blonde" (p. 30). A number of Salinger's characters, such as Seymour in "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," Eloise in "Uncle Wiggily in Connecticut," the title character of "Teddy," Lionel in "Down at the Dinghy," and the

young husband in "Once a Week Won't Kill You," to mention only a few of them, all suffer in one way or another from being unable to communicate successfully with people around them. It seems proper to say that, as the young hero of "De Daumier-Smith's Blue Period" puts it, everything these characters, "touched turned to loneliness" (p. 201).

To help present effectively the loneliness of his alienated characters, Salinger utilizes recurrently in his fiction such activities as cigarette smoking, telephoning, movie-going, and listening to the radio. Smoking is the most pervasive of these activities. Very frequently we find a character smoking when he is frustrated and feels lonely.

In The Catcher in the Rye Holden, feeling bored and upset, smokes two cigarettes in succession in the hotel on Sunday morning. Later in his home, when Phoebe, his only confidante, puts her pillow over her head and refuses to talk to him, Holden just "got up and went out in the living room and got some cigarettes out of the box on the table" (p. 215). Other characters in Salinger's short stories also resort to cigarettes during their time of solitude and ennui. For example, bored with her nagging mother, Muriel, in "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," interrupts her mother's telephone conversation to go for cigarettes. Finding their mutual communication impossible, Clay, in "For Esme-- with Love and Squalor," "took a cigarette from a pack on the table and lit it" (p. 158), and Sergeant X, likewise, "reached for his cigarettes" (p. 168). Lee, "the

gray-haired man" in "Pretty Mouth and Green My Eyes," smokes incessantly throughout his pointless and monotonous conversation with Arthur. In like manner, the lonely husband in "Once a Week Won't Kill You" and the friendless Edna in "The Young Folks" smoke. Hence, a cigarette becomes a sign of boredom and loneliness.

Similarly Salinger frequently uses the telephone to imply the impersonality of modern life and the isolation of his characters one from another. Salinger's characters always resort to the telephone to communicate with others. And to intensify their loneliness, he occasionally makes use of the device of uncompleted calls. In The Catcher in the Rye Holden over and over again thinks of "giving old Jane a buzz" so that he may speak his mind to her. He needs Jane's companionship to console his loneliness. However, he never gets his calls through to her. These uncompleted telephone calls, as Charles H. Kegel points out, may represent "Holden Caulfield's inability to communicate satisfactorily with others."<sup>12</sup>

In Salinger's other short stories the telephone also plays an important role in helping to convey the sense of loneliness of those characters alienated from society. By telephone, instead of talking face to face, Muriel in "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" chats idly with her mother, Elcise in "Uncle Wiggily in Connecticut" speaks coldly to her husband, and Arthur in "Pretty Mouth and Green My Eyes" tries in vain to communicate with Lee, a man who cuckolds him.

The other two recurring activities which serve as signs of characters' lonely plight are attending the movies and listening to the radio.

The reason why Salinger's people go to the movies is that they feel lonely and frustrated in their real life and because "there's nothing else to do" (p. 151), as Holden puts it. "The goddam movies," he calls them, "They can ruin you. I'm not kidding" (p. 136). Yet he himself goes to the movies many times because he "couldn't think of anything else [to do]" (p. 177).

Attending movies as an expression of the loneliness of the characters isolated from the real world can also be found in Salinger's short stories. For example, the lonely young hero in "De Daumier-Smith's Blue Period," finding himself unable to communicate successfully with people around him, every Tuesday evening "took a bus into Montreal proper and sat through a Cartoon Festival Week program at a third-rate movie house" (p. 240). In "Once a Week Won't Kill You," the departing soldier asks his wife to take his lonely, feeble-minded aunt out to the movies "once a week" (pp. 23-24, 27).

Similarly, listening to the radio is a consolation to Salinger's lonesome people. In The Catcher in the Rye, Jane's lonely stepfather does nothing but "booze all the time and listen to every single goddam mystery program on the radio" (p. 42). In "The Young Folks," Edna, divorced from the gleeful party, cries out: "Hey, Lu! Bobby! See if you can't get something

better on the radio! I mean who can dance to that stuff?" (p. 50).

Thus, listening to the radio, as well as the smoking of cigarettes, making or attempting phone calls, and attending the movies, is an activity of the lonely in Salinger's fictional world.

Salinger also employs his setting in such a way as to underscore his characters' alienation and inevitable loneliness. The time of the action of the stories is almost always pinpointed as during or right after World War II, when everything was in a turmoil, and the place of the action is frequently identified as the urban environment, impersonal and morally corrupt.

For example, in The Catcher in the Rye, the site of the most important action is New York City; the time must be some month in 1949, because Holden, sixteen at the time, mentions that when Allie "got leukemia and died . . . on July 18, 1946 . . ., I was only thirteen" (pp. 49-50). Holden's four-day wandering in New York City turns out to be an uncomfortable experience for him, because no matter where he goes, he meets either perverts or phonies. In "that hotel [which] was lousy with perverts" (p. 81), for instance, he sees a transvestite and "a man and a woman squirting water out of their mouths at each other" (p. 80). Wherever we find him, whether it is on the train, or in the theatre, New York's Penn Station, the club, the taxicab, Central Park, The American Museum of Natural History, Radio City Music Hall-- all symbolizing transient places, not home-- Holden is never able to identify with people around him. The

element of time here serves primarily to show the horrible aftermath of war. After a major war, not only is society fractured, but people's values are altered. A woman sheds tears for the actress and actor's plight, but remains nonchalant towards her own son's discomfort, to mention only one of the countless examples. The situation being thus at that time, Holden's ideal to be "the catcher in the rye," standing on the edge of the cliff to prevent young children from falling off it, seems utopian. Therefore, Holden, although he himself "lived in New York all my life" (p. 200), tells Sally, "I hate living in New York and all" (p. 169).

As in The Catcher in the Rye, the settings in the short stories are likewise utilized to account for the characters' alienation and loneliness. Explicitly or implicitly, the action of "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," "Uncle Wiggily in Connecticut," "For Esmé-- with Love and Squalor," "De Daumier-Smith's Blue Period," and "Once a Week Won't Kill You" takes place during or shortly after World War II. The settings of these stories are located, without exception, in the loveless, urban districts, in which all vices take root and the characters find themselves socially isolated.

As I mentioned above, Salinger singles out sensitive youths as the protagonists of most of his fiction, puts them in an impersonal, urban environment during or right after World War II, and spares no effort to reveal and emphasize their loneliness and alienation. All these elements constitute

Salinger's fictional world, a world which is conducive to his popularity to a certain degree, because it is so familiar to the readers, particularly the young readers, of the 40's and 50's, that they can easily identify with it. However, in my judgment, Salinger's success does not rest merely on the familiarity of his fictional world; rather, what makes Salinger able "to speak to the adolescent soul with urgent but reassuring intimacy,"<sup>13</sup> and makes his hold on the readers of his time unique, is "his intense, his almost compulsive need to fill in each inch of his canvas, each moment of his scene . . . [and to keep] everything humming [with life],"<sup>14</sup> through his well-handled style. The following discussion is an effort to demonstrate how Salinger manipulates his style to reflect and reinforce his fictional world.

As many students have discovered before me, the word "style" has long proved difficult of stringent definition. "A discussion of the word style," comments John Middleton Murry, "if it were pursued with only a fraction of the rigour of a scientific investigation, would inevitably cover the whole of literary aesthetics and the theory of criticism. Six books would not suffice for the attempt."<sup>15</sup> David L. Allen and Jane C. Parks list the elements of style as "word choice (diction), sentence structure, and sentence rhythm."<sup>16</sup> In Understanding Fiction, Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren use style "merely to refer to the selection and ordering of language."<sup>17</sup> Marlies K. Danziger and W. Stacy Johnson declare in An Introduction to Literary Criticism, "When we speak of style . . . we are concerned

specifically with what might be called the texture of writing, with such matters of verbal detail as diction, imagery, syntax, and sound."<sup>18</sup> So, as the examples show, there is still general agreement that style resides in linguistic choices: choice of diction and choice of syntactic structures. My discussion of Salinger's fictional style is generally based on these similar definitions with only very few exceptions.

For all intents and purposes, there is no hard-and-fast rule to follow as to what style a writer should use. The choice of style can be right or wrong, solely depending upon what effect is to be sought. Salinger's style, to a remarkable extent, seems designed to achieve both aural and visual effects. Although Salinger has never become a playwright, one avowed goal of his youthful ambition,<sup>19</sup> like a good dramatist he employs such stylistic elements as colloquialism (slang, "after-thought" tags, deletion of some elements in spoken language, reduced spoken forms, abusive language), hyperbole, repetitive expressions, clichés, "filler" expressions, and italics and dashes to help represent inflection and rhythm, and to capture the sound of speech. Moreover, he gives particular attention to the depiction of the characters' gestures. Thus, Salinger the stylist wants his reader not only to hear the recognizable "turn of (the characters') . . . speech,"<sup>20</sup> but also to see the gestures of the characters and further perceive their implications. Let me discuss one by one how these various elements of Salinger's style contribute to the portrayal of his fictional world and the creation of a bond of familiarity with his reader.



Salinger's use of colloquialism in his fiction constitutes the first of his stylistic features. It is to vitalize his characters, to show that they are not puppets, their speech not merely printed words, thus enabling his reader to easily recognize them as actual, contemporary types.

Throughout The Catcher in the Rye, Holden Caulfield's speech is primarily slangy. Hence, instead of saying "He has a lot of money," "I was dismissed," "I talked idly for a while," he says "He's got a lot of dough" (p. 4), "I got the ax" (p. 6), "I shot the bull for a while" (p. 17). The other teenage characters in the book also speak the same language. For example, Stradlater, Holden's roommate, says "I'll be up the creek . . ." (p. 37) rather than "I'll be in trouble . . ."

The short stories are also pervaded by the same slangy expressions. In "The Young Folks," to cite only some good specimens from Salinger's first published short story, we find that the young characters say "She's swell," "The shank of the evening," "You're in for it," "I hate to put my two cents in . . .," "Didn't you and Bill hit it off?" (pp. 26-27, 29-30) instead of "She's excellent," "It's still early in the evening," "You're in trouble," "I hate to express my opinion . . .," "Didn't you and Bill like each other?"

Besides slangy expressions, there are other devices which Salinger uses to mimic spoken speech. In The Catcher in the Rye, Holden says, "They give guys the ax quite frequently at Pencey. It has a very good academic rating, Pencey" (pp. 6-7).

The last word "Fencey" is apparently the product of Holden's afterthought and would be considered a redundant one in written English. But here, spoken by Holden, it sounds not only natural, but also effective in ironically praising the school. The same is true of Holden's comment on his mother: "She's no good at buying ice skates or anything like that, but clothes, she's perfect" (p. 207). In written English, "when it comes to" would be inserted after "but" to make the whole sentence grammatically correct. However, in spoken English, this omission is allowable and even desirable, because it can vivify the sentence by spotlighting the key word "clothes."

The use of statement-like questions also appears not infrequently in Salinger's fictional dialogues. The following are typical ones: in "Pretty Mouth and Green My Eyes," Arthur says to Lee, "You know who I'm married to? You want to know who I'm married to?" (p. 182) and Lee says to Arthur, "You know who was on the bench?" (p. 184). This use of rising tone alone to change a statement into a question is common only in speech.

There are many striking examples in Salinger's fiction of transcribed speech, such as in The Catcher in the Rye, "And now we like to geeve you our impresson of Vooly Voo Fransay. Eet ees the story of a leetle Fransh girl who comes to a beeg ceety . . . and falls een love wees a leetle boy from Brockleem. We hope you like eet" (p. 184); in "Uncle Wiggily in Connecticut," "I got plentya rocm in my rocm, and he don't

have to be back in New York till tomorrow mornin', and it's so bad out" (p. 53); and in "Just Before the War with the Eskimos," "We're gonna fight the Eskimos next. Know that?" (p. 72).

Instances of reduced spoken forms, also intended to imitate everyday language, are too numerous to be listed inclusively. Examples are: "What the hell ya reading?" (p. 28), "Ya got 'em handy?" (p. 30), "Say he had a tie on that you liked a helluva lot" (p. 33), "That screwabitch Hartzell . . ." (p. 37), "Innarested in a little tail t'night?" (p. 118), "C'mon, let's get outa here" (p. 173) in The Catcher in the Rye; "Wuddayacallit swore up and down it was blend" (p. 29), "Wuddaya think she's doing out there?" (p. 32) in "Uncle Wiggily in Connecticut"; "This time all the old guys're gonna go" (p. 72) in "Just Before the War with the Eskimos"; "a helluvan intelligent guy" (p. 183) in "Pretty Mouth and Green My Eyes"; "Go t'college?" and "Aren'tcha coming?" (p. 29) in "The Young Folks."

Because Salinger represents the spoken language so very well and inclusively, his works, especially The Catcher in the Rye, have been considered "a significant historical linguistic record of a type of speech rarely made available in permanent form."<sup>21</sup> They really can serve as good examples of teenage and youngsters' vernacular of the 1940s and 1950s.<sup>22</sup>

The second of Salinger's salient stylistic features is some characters' conscious or unconscious use of abusive language. This type of language serves primarily to show the socially alienated characters' aversion to or incommunicability

with people around them. It also implies the naiveté and helplessness of the characters, for, beyond vocal protest, they really can do nothing to improve their surroundings. These observations can be readily confirmed in Salinger's stories.

In The Catcher in the Rye, as I have noted when discussing Salinger's fictional world, Holden almost always finds himself standing against the phony, adult world. He, more often than not, gives vent to his protest and dissatisfaction in fierce, crude language. For example, he considers Ackley "one of these very, very tall, round-shouldered guys . . . with lousy teeth"; Mr. Haas, headmaster of Elkton Hills, "the phoniest bastard I ever met in my life" (p. 19); and Stradlater "a goddam stupid moron" (p. 57). Holden's naiveté and helplessness are attested to by his merely using the abusive language to vent his anger instead of counterattacking Stradlater and Maurice when he is beaten by them. He is, nevertheless, not unconscious of his crude language. For instance, after he says "You give me a royal pain in the ass" to Sally Hayes and she cries, Holden knows "I shouldn't've said it" (p. 173). The point is, the world around him is so very impersonal and phony that he is driven to use a "sometimes raucous and jarring [speech] . . . to rail and condemn."<sup>23</sup>

Abusive terms also abound in Salinger's short stories. The unhappy Elcise in "Uncle Wiggily in Connecticut," to cite only one of the numerous instances, tells her friend, Mary Jane, about "That dopey maid" (p. 29), refers to her daughter, Ramona,

as "lousy with secrets" (p. 56), and finally asks Mary Jane to "call up and say you were killed" (p. 40). Like Holden's in The Catcher in the Rye, Elcise's abusive words reflect both her loneliness and the degenerate world she inhabits.

The third of Salinger's stylistic characteristics noted here is the use of hyperbole. Traditionally, hyperbole is mainly used to heighten dramatic effect. Salinger's hyperbole achieves a dual effect: it gives his young characters an ironic, exaggerated way to attack and criticize the phony persons and impersonal world and, because of this, it evokes a sense of shared viewpoint and response on the part of his reader.

Instances of hyperbole in Holden's speech throughout The Catcher in the Rye are so skillfully manipulated that they seem to be typical expressions of his age group. When Holden says Stradlater "spent around half his goddam life in front of the mirror" (p. 43) and "thought he was the handsomest guy in the Western Hemisphere" (p. 36), he is finding fault with Stradlater's phoriness, because Stradlater the dude attends to his superficial appearance much more than his inner life. Other hyperbolic expressions used in the novel have to do with age: "It was about five hundred thousand years in the life of this one old couple" (p. 163), "They have this day . . . that all the jerks that graduated from Pencey around 1776 core back and walk all over the place . . ." (p. 218), and ". . . some old lady around a hundred years old was sitting