

Nihilism and Existential Angst in J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*

Muskan Aggarwal *
Spanish language trainer
Amity University Mumbai
&

Upasna Sinha
Assistant Professor
Mithibai College of Arts, Mumbai.

Abstract

Against the backdrop of post-war society, The Catcher in the Rye expresses the mood of the era that was the cause for the rise of existentialism and reflects the American society and the anxiety faced by the people in those times. It is a deep representation of teenage life and the psychological distress felt by them due to fitting in and fulfilling their expectations. Thus, the objective of the paper is to trace the plot of the novel and mark out elements of nihilism found in the protagonist, leading toward the interpretation of the end into a healthy approach to life or an existential continuation on the part of the protagonist. These interpretations will be based on theories of existentialism and the comments of critics on the novel.

Keywords: Existentialism, Nihilism, Postmodernism, Coming of age, American Literature

Introduction

The Catcher in the Rye by J.D. Salinger published in 1951 revolutionized the academic scenes of the time due to the representation of adolescent angst in the novel, evoking several responses ranging from positive praise for capturing their experiences of school life to negative responses evoking the dark and taboo adult themes not meant for young readers due to the potential influence. The backdrop of World War II and the evocation of existential thought leading up to post-modernism also played a major role in the development of the plot of the novel. Thus, the novel is a coming-of-age postmodernist text as the protagonist, Holden Caulfield struggles through his transition from the innocence of childhood to the reality of adulthood as a disillusioned teenager unable to accept the hypocrisy of adults. His struggle is reflected using postmodernist techniques like fragmentation and cyclicity, considering that over the span of three days he attempts to form a connection with people only to fail in the end roaming around

* Corresponding Author: Muskan Aggarwal

Email: muskan.aggarwal1999@gmail.com

Received 12 March. 2025; Accepted 20 March. 2025. Available online: 28 February. 2025.

Published by SAFE. (Society for Academic Facilitation and Extension)

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with no set purpose just to kill time, thereby also leading to his alienation and isolation from the society, which are the primary themes of a post-modernist text (Kheirkhah and Pishkar 29). Even the ending is unclear as to whether or not Holden recovers. In the age where people have lost their faith and have fallen into existential angst over the meaning and purpose of life, Salinger reflects the mood of the era in his protagonist and the focus of the paper covers the aspects of nihilism and existential angst found in the novel through defining the theoretical framework adopted by Edoh Sunday Odum and Tracy Llanera, followed by their identification in the novel to establish the text as an existential novel.

Nihilism in Existentialism

The extent of the violence of World War I and II led to the disillusionment and loss of faith in human goodness and the existence of God. The idea of sin was confounded and the moral foundation collapsed as people no longer believed in the protection of God from evil. This led to the questioning of the purpose of life and the meaning or futility of actions due to a lack of guidance. Existential theorists like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, influenced by Nietzsche came up with their answers to the existential questions thereby leading to both negative and positive existentialism. The positive strain of the theory gives the reins to Man over Nature, as according to Sartre existence precedes essence and a person finds their purpose while living and deciding for their self-exercising the freedom of their existence.

Since there are no guidelines which determine a path or a way to live, people are free to form their destiny and explore their existence and be responsible for themselves. The dictates of freedom further lead to a sense of authenticity in an individual's existence to ensure that they are being true to themselves instead of going with the flow of societal functioning without exercising their individuality. The crisis for authenticity is the central conflict for Holden Caulfield for whom the identity formation is ruptured due to a lack of authenticity in the adults around him who function merely as the cogs of the society. It is this freedom in itself which causes anxiety in people as they can't decide for themselves and the freedom ends up becoming a burden for them due to infinite possibilities (Odum 8). The institutions acted as a centre for the masses ensuring stability and a determined path, the destruction of which has led to the decentring and a collapse of institutions and meaning thus also involving post-structuralist thought as a base of existentialism.

The quest for authenticity and freedom leads to absurdity and anxiety in people due to its independent and individual nature, the uncertainty and lack of a pre-determined purpose led to

instability and chaos in the minds of people where anything can happen to them and not knowing when they will die, the inevitability of events and death leads to a sense of futility for some people (Odum 13). This brings the discussion to the negative strain of existential thought which manifests as nihilism. Nihilism has its base in a sense of futility which can be found in Albert Camus' Myth of Sisyphus where man is engaged in an endless struggle which has no purpose (Odum 12). For nihilists, coming to terms with the search for meaning and the inevitability of events leads to the conclusion that life is meaningless and not worth living causing them distress and an innate desire for death and destruction which can have adverse consequences for a post-war society (Llanera 82). Thus, it becomes imperative to guide nihilist thoughts towards the positive strain of existentialism where an individual takes charge of their own life to find their purpose and sense of being independent of the mechanical society.

The Catcher in the Rye as Holden's Existential Journey

Holden is a self-aware individual in a mechanical society where every individual works in a set formula, evoking the sense of stability of the institutions of family and school with the expectation of pursuing a higher goal to attain success in a career as an adult. Holden goes through the very crisis that an individual underwent after witnessing the horrors of war. His failure to adapt and conform to societal norms stems from the loss of faith in the morality of people. This is evident through his desire to protect and shield the innocence of children like his sister Phoebe and the preservation of his childhood places like the museum which becomes a symbol of stability for him. Especially after having been cheated by adults like Maurice out of his money.

As an adolescent stuck in the transition to adulthood, the lack of good role models has made him cling to childhood innocence. His father, who should have been the ideal role model has failed to fulfil his role as Holden realizes that as an adult, he is not true in his occupation as a lawyer, making him lose faith in adults. He doesn't want to become like other adults who are phony, even his schoolmates who are well adjusted in society have become hypocrites and phonies who are not being true to themselves like Stradlater and Sally Hayes whom he accuses of being typical phonies, bringing in the need for authenticity which Holden himself is not able to attain as he too ends up lying and creating fake identities with people when he visits the Bar or meets a schoolmate's parent (Bala 213). He indulges in the same movies he criticizes just to be with Sally despite accusing her of being phony.

Holden also brings in the idea of futility when dealing with people as he keeps repeating how ‘people don’t pass on your messages even if you tell them to’ and yet he keeps passing on his messages despite being aware of the futility. The sense of futility felt by him is heightened over the span of three days as he tries connecting with people, and interacts only to never meet them again or fail at meaningful connection with them, thereby having no sense of belonging, not even at his home or with his teacher. Every place had seemingly abandoned him, thus, his only choice is to retreat far away where no one will interrupt his way of life. Signalling a complete failure to form bonds, an isolated life seems attractive for an already alienated teen. The feelings are relayed through the following lines

I figured, I’d go down to the Holland Tunnel and bum a ride, and then I’d bum another one, and another one, and in a few days, I’d be somewhere out West where it was very pretty and sunny and where nobody’d know me and I’d get a job. I thought what I’d do was, I’d pretend I was one of those deaf-mutes. That way I wouldn’t have to have any goddam Stupid useless conversations with anybody. (Salinger 213-214)

The failure to form bonds stems from a deeply traumatic wound from which he has yet to heal. The ghost of his little brother Allie haunts him throughout the story as Holden keeps reminiscing about his baseball gloves and the poetry written on them, comparing the people around him to his brother. The inability to let go and move on reflects an unhealthy relationship with death which again connects to the idea of futility arising from the questioning of worth and purpose behind actions when it all amounts to nothing post-death (Sasani and Javidnejat 209). The death of his little brother impacted him deeply, making him unable to accept it as natural. Moreover, the suicide of his classmate led to his maladaptation in the school atmosphere. He witnessed firsthand the indifference with which the students reacted; only Mr Antolini rushed to pick up the student's dead body. This filled him with a sense of despair at the neutrality of death and how people can move on from death so quickly as if it didn’t happen leading him to be unable to adjust with his classmates ever since due to the awareness of the reality. Thus, when he meets his old professor Spencer, he gets creeped out and anxious at noticing the effects of old age wrecked upon him and flees his house, unable to come to terms with the eventuality of death. While existentialists look upon death positively as a regulator of an existential life since no one can escape it. However, it forces individuals to look back on their actions and life as it comes to an end. The unhealthy relationship with death combined with the sense of futility and lack of authenticity leads Holden to the brink of Nihilism as he considers ending his life at one point in the story.

The end of Holden's existential journey gets highlighted through the transition from negative to a positive sense of existentialism as Phoebe becomes his Catcher in the Rye and catches him before he is lost to the world forever, Phoebe becomes his guiding light who keeps him grounded in reality and makes him come to terms with the inevitability of events in life as he realizes he can't protect innocence forever as its bound to end. The question "what do you actually like?", asked by Phoebe shakes Holden from the inside as he reflects deeply on it unable to answer. Looking at his sister, who is an icon of innocence accepting reality as it is, he realizes that she is more mature than him and well-adjusted in society. Thus, His sister inspires him to come back and seek psychological treatment to improve his mental well-being and the end shows him on the path to recovery while maintaining his questions on purpose in life.

Conclusion

The three-day self-reflective journey of Holden is one to which many adolescents can relate as they too find themselves searching for a path they can follow. Eventually many get lost in following the mandates of society, unable to fully explore themselves. It is precisely why Holden's story becomes important to explore as he goes through his existential crisis, questioning the purpose of life, feeling a sense of futility as he roams around as a non-conforming individual, trying to overcome his past traumas and form meaningful bonds. Although his attempts fail, he eventually learns to accept reality as it is and continues to explore himself through the support of Phoebe, who pulls him out of his nihilistic views on life. Thus, the paper concludes with having explored the existential angst experienced by Holden leading to his nihilistic perspective of life with an eventual acceptance of the absurdity of life to become a well-adjusted individual in society post his psychological therapy.

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