



## ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

English

### BANALITY AND PHONINESS IN J.D.SALINGER'S THE CATCHER IN THE RYE

KEY WORDS:

K. Kalavathi

M. Phil., English, Sakthi college for Arts and Science for Women, Oddanchatram.

The term 'Banality' is one of a group of words including 'trivial' and 'mundane', whose modern history inscribes the disintegration of old ideals about the common people, the common place, and the common culture. It is only in the late eighteenth century that these words begin to accumulate their modern sense of the trite, the platitudinous, and the unoriginal. So it is a banal observation that if banality, like triviality, is an irritant that returns again and again to trouble cultural theory, it is because the very concept is part of the modern history of taste, value, and critique of judgment, that constitutes the polemical field within which cultural studies takes issue with classical aesthetics.

The term 'Phoniness' is often used in American society and this is exemplified by the use of phony languages. A phony society gives credence to games of confidence, with language used not to illuminate but to convince. The theory and practice of confidence-making, and ingrained use of the languages of confidence, make for the creation of the conditions of phoniness. Thus, the 'human condition' in America becomes ripe for the ascendancy of the phony person, the 'operator' whose triumph has been one of the most important developments in America.

In the novel *The Catcher in the Rye*, Salinger captures the essence of his teenage narrator's feelings of alienation and confusion along with his profound mistrust of the adult world. Holden is the quintessential upper-middle-class adolescent and he is typically and heartbreakingly lonely and unsure. His wry cynicism and often dark humor work to underscore his emotional instability. He has recently been expelled from a New England preparatory-school-not the first and spends two hilarious but tragic days looking for love and truth in all the wrong places in New York City. Holden has grown up in New York and his family is still firmly ensconced in a large Upper East Side apartment. But he is suddenly a street kid, confronted with the isolation of one cut off from help in the city where he should most feel at home. Recurring themes in Salinger's stories also connect to the ideas of innocence and adolescence, including the corrupting influence of Hollywood and the world at large, and to disconnect between teenagers and 'phony' adults, and the perceptive, precocious intelligence of children.

Holden is a very interesting character, who has a lot to say about the world that surrounds him. He is pretty much against the whole society, in particular against the people that are in it. He considers most of them like phonies. But more than this, he does not fit in this world, in how it is so unidirectional concerning the path one may take and inevitably fake. Salinger has a way of writing that gets the reader to be a part of Holden's story, while making this reader feel and understand all of Holden's points of views and emotions. It is due to the way that Salinger writes, to how during the entire book the reader is literally in Holden's head, not missing any one of his thoughts. But Holden also has a sensitive side, and the way that Salinger makes those two very strong and opposite sides of the main character be present is very interesting. The reader can see in Holden's toughness, cynicism, carelessness and critical view of society, a very sensitive and compassionate character. Holden points out some banal things and phony people that are very touching, and that are very representative of some feelings that any human being may have. For example, Holden's date with Sally Hayes reiterates several of the basic problems from which Holden suffers. He has intensely contradictory feelings for Sally, which even he realizes. Although he dislikes her, when he first sees her he feels that like marrying her. The confrontation between Holden and Sally in the restaurant demonstrates Holden's unreliability as a narrator. He does not realize that he is

shouting at Sally Hayes through their conversation and denies it repeatedly to both the reader and to himself. Holden says,

"If a girl looks swell when she meets you, who gives a damn if she's late? Nobody". (TCR 135)

Holden told about his roommate Stradlater, who is also a 'phony'. Holden said that Stradlater is a 'Year Book kind of handsome guy'. He has superficial good looks and is extremely photogenic, but he is arrogant and vain. He is also a secret slob. Stradlater may be well groomed, because he is in love with himself, but he lives like a pig. His razor, for example, is rusty and full of hair. He never cleans anything. He is a user of women and of friends. Stradlater wants Holden to compose a descriptive English theme for him because he knows that Holden writes well. Too lazy and incompetent to be a decent writer himself, Stradlater aggravates Holden by pretending that the only reason he can't write is that he puts the commas in the wrong places. He asks Holden to write an English essay for him, but he gets angry after finding the essay too off-topic. Holden gets into a fight with Stradlater after he suspects that Stradlater seduced Jane Gallagher, with whom Holden is in love. At his core, Holden seems to want to be Stradlater and thus to command power over men and women alike.

Holden understands on some level, one of the most profound truths of mortal life is the superficial matters because it will not last, yet it is made to seem so much more important. Meanwhile, all around him, he must watch superficial people win honors through their artifice. The words 'phony' and 'banal' are used many times by Holden. In fact, the book is full of this words usage which really touches upon a deeper meaning than is first seen. On one level, we see a young boy, Holden Caulfield, confused about life and cutting down things that exist around him. But on a deeper level we find that we are really reading a story about a boy's struggle with adolescence and his transition into adulthood.

Holden is a very perceptive boy. He is almost beyond his years in his ability to recognize what he sees around him – but he is still just a boy. So his thoughts on life are simple. Either something is good or bad, true or false and real or 'phony'. When Holden uses the words 'phony' and 'banal', he seems to be describing people that are prejudice, hypocrites or insincere. It seems to be a way for Holden to justify how the world is a bad place and to grow up and leave adolescents behind is a very bad thing.

The final touching scene of Holden's long flashback, his story, takes place at the carousel in the park outside of the zoo. The great thing about a carousel, for Holden, is that it has beauty and music and even motion, but it does not go anywhere. Nothing really changes. However, not everyone wants things to stay the way they are. Symbolically, Phoebe and the other kids want to grab the gold ring hanging just beyond reach on each rotation. If they can grab the gold ring, they can win the prize, whatever that might be. In life, too, it is natural for young people to want to take a risk and try for something beyond what they have.

In the end of the novel, Salinger leaves the actual events of Holden's presumed suicide attempt and hospitalization ambiguous; Holden only uses euphemisms such as "getting sick" (TCR 230) to describe what has happened to him, but the implications are clear. Yet even more ambiguous than what happened to Holden is whether or not Holden will recover from his difficulties. Holden seems to harbor some sense of regret over what has happened; he claims that he even misses Stradlater and

Ackley, and has used the telling of his story as a form of penitence for his behavior.

### Conclusion

It can be said that J.D Salinger is one of the writers in American literature who wants to expose the youngster's life and their sufferings in American society at 1950s. With the help of Holden, the protagonist of the novel, Salinger wanted to show people that childhood is the best period in our life, not because it is careless and because children have no worries. It is the time when we have dreams. When we are kids we tend to see only the bright side of things, we live the moment and do not trouble about the future. When we grow up, we lose this childish authenticity; we became blind to the feelings of others thinking only about how to fulfill the demands of reality. Life is about choosing. There are two ways out: we may conform to the rules imposed on us or remain faithful our own values. Holden chose the latter and lost his youth. He lost the game named life, but at the same time he maintained dignity and good reputation that he never found in others.

### References

1. Salinger, Jerome David. *The Catcher in the Rye*. UK: Penguin Fiction, 1951.
2. Batra, Shakti. *A Critical Study of J. D. Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye*. New Delhi: Surjeet Publications, 2014.
3. French, Warren G. *J.D. Salinger*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1963.
4. Hamilton, Ian: *In Search of J.D. Salinger*, United States: Random House, 1988.
5. Karl, Frederick R. *American Fictions, 1940 -1980: A Comprehensive History and Critical Evaluation* India Ltd: HarperCollins, 1983.
6. Kaul, A.N. *The American Vision: Actual and Ideal Society in Nineteenth-Century Fiction*. New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1963.
7. Paul, Alexander. *Salinger: A Biography*. California: Los Angeles, 1999.