

# A Study of *The Catcher in the Rye*, part I

— From the viewpoints of *time* and *space* —

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## ( I )

*The Catcher in the Rye* is the story about "this madman stuff"<sup>(1)</sup> that happened to the hero Holden Caulfield from Saturday through Monday around last Christmas in New York before he "got pretty run-down".<sup>(2)</sup> He is in a hospital in the west and tells a psychoanalyst about "this madman stuff". Holden, sixteen years old, is partly a child and partly an adult, as symbolically shown in the following words: "I have grey hair. I really do. The one side of my head — the right side — is full of millions of grey hairs."<sup>(3)</sup> Although he has a father who is a lawyer at a wealthy corporation and an innocent and kind-hearted sister Phoebe, he leaves the Whooton School, Elkton Hills School and now Pencey Preparatory School, and decides to go to the woods of the west and to live an anti-phoney life. The reason is that the sensitive and immature boy is surrounded by so many phonies and lousy bastards in the large city of New York and feels so depressed and lonesome that he goes crazy. In the end, however, he is saved by Phoebe's innocent love and feels "so damn happy all of sudden"<sup>(4)</sup> that he stops going west.

In this above-mentioned story of *The Catcher in the Rye*, I want to focus my attention on the following points: the hero's age of sixteen, New York and the west, and his ten-year-old and affectionate sister Phoebe. That is to say, *time*, *space* and *love*. *Time* is perpendicular and consists of the adult world in the upper part and the child world in the lower part with sixteen years of age as the approximate boundary, because the sixteen-year-old hero is partly a child and partly an adult. *Space* is plane and consists of the east (New York) and the west. *Love* is classified into two categories; one is the adult's love and the other is Phoebe's love.

To be concrete. First, from the viewpoint of *time*, the adult world in the upper part is phoney, but on the contrary the child world in the lower part is innocent. Secondly, from the viewpoint of *space*, New York is a civilized city where "so many phonies"<sup>(5)</sup> live that Holden hates living: it is the world of inhuman civilization and "lousy" phoniness. Quite the contrary, however, the west is the "very pretty and sunny"<sup>(6)</sup> woods where Holden wishes to live and also "If anybody tried to do anything phoney, they couldn't stay"<sup>(7)</sup>: it is the world of beneficent nature and "nice" innocence. Thirdly, from the viewpoint of *love*, adults' love is phoney and lousy: selfish, materialistic and carnal. On the other hand, however, Phoebe's love is innocent: altruistic and spiritual. Phoebe is the only one who loves her sensitive and crazy brother Holden with her whole innocent heart. She is only a ten-year-old child who lives in the world of nice innocence, and also "she's quite affectionate, for a child."<sup>(8)</sup> Therefore, Phoebe embodies an innocent love.

It is impossible for this sensitive and immature hero to feel very happy both in *time*

and in *space* without *love*. The reason is that first<sup>9</sup> in *time*, he can neither stand the phoney adult world nor can he go back into his innocent childhood any more; secondly, in *space*, there is no frontier of the west except in the Americans' hearts, however strongly he wishes to go. Therefore, Holden is saved by Phoebe's innocent love and feels so happy that he stops running away to the west. Now, I want to comment on *The Catcher in the Rye* from these three viewpoints: *time*, *space* and *love*.

## (II)

In *The Catcher in the Rye*, the children, especially the little ones, are thought to be nice and innocent, as shown in Phoebe, Selma Thurmer, the headmaster's daughter, and in the about six-year-old child who sings "If a body catch a body coming through the rye"; oppositely, however, the adults in general are thought to be lousy and phoney, as shown in Mr. Haas, the headmaster of Elkton Hills School, Dr. Thurmer, the headmaster of Pency Preparatory School, Mr. Spencer, Holden's teacher in Pency Preparatory School and a mother in a movie house.

As judged from Holden who "still act sometimes like I was only about twelve",<sup>(9)</sup> but on another occasion "showed her my goddam grey hair and told her I was forty-two",<sup>(10)</sup> Holden is partly a child and partly an adult. Therefore, he has two selves clearly divided within himself: one is his innocent child self, and the other is his crazy adult self. This means that Holden has the child innocence, and at the same time he is in a position to recognize the phoney adult world. Therefore, when Holden faces the phoney adult world in the upper part of *time*, his innocent child self violently clashes with the phoniness and he feels so depressed and lonesome that he goes crazy, and he is at the mercy of his crazy adult self; for example, he smokes and drinks to be a madman or he tries to buy a prostitute. On the contrary, when he faces the innocent child in the lower part of *time*, both his child self and adult one completely sympathize with the innocence and he wishes to be the catcher in the rye to save every child from falling over the cliff into the phoney adult world, because he is standing on the boundary between the two worlds.

In the first place, I want to think about the upper part of *time* which Holden recognizes. The adult world is full of "so many phonies", as judged from Mr. Haas who changes his attitude according to the clothes of his student's parents, Dr. Thurmer who tells Holden "Life is a game",<sup>(11)</sup> Mr. Spencer who yells 'Good Luck!' at Holden, a plucked student, without his whole heart and a mother who cries her eyes out over phoney movies, but keeps telling her child to sit still and behave himself and would not take him to the bathroom.

First, let me quote the reason why Holden left Elkton Hills School, of which the headmaster is Mr. Haas.

One of the biggest reasons I left Elkton Hills was because I was surrounded by phonies. That's all. They were coming in the goddam window. For instance, they had this headmaster, Mr. Haas, that was the phoniest bastard I ever met in my life. Ten times worse than old Thurmer. On Sundays, for instance, old Haas went around shaking hands with everybody's parents when they drove up to school.

He'd be charming as hell and all. Except if some boy had little old funny-looking parents. You should've seen the way he did with my room-mate's parents. I mean if a boy's mother was sort of fat or corny-looking or something, and if somebody's father was one of those guys that wear those suits with very big shoulders and corny black-and-white shoes, then old Haas would just shake hands with them and give them a phoney smile and then he'd go talk, for maybe a half an *hour*, with somebody else's parents. I can't stand that stuff. It drives me crazy. It makes me so depressed I go crazy. I hated that goddam Elkton Hills.<sup>(12)</sup>

Holden's sense of child sharply observes the phoney headmaster of Elkton Hills School, who changes his attitude according to the clothes of his student's parents. This is the very reason why he left Elkton Hills School. He could not stand "that stuff." Holden was "confused and frightened and even sickened by human behaviour"<sup>(13)</sup> and felt so depressed and lonesome that he went crazy.

Secondly, let me refer to Mr. Thurmer, the headmaster of Pency Preparatory School. This headmaster says to Holden "Life is a game", on the day he was flunked out of the School. "Life is a game", this is a theory of the wealthy and strong, not the poor and weak people. Dr. Thurmer is wanting in his altruistic love for the poor in goods and spiritual matters. Therefore, Holden thinks as follows: "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."<sup>(14)</sup>

Thirdly, let me mention Mr. Spencer, Holden's phoney teacher. Holden calls on him to say good-bye after he was flunked out of Pency Preparatory School, but soon he has such a feeling that he "couldn't've sat there another ten minutes to save my life."<sup>(15)</sup> As shown in Holden's words: "I don't think I'll ever forgive him for reading me that crap out loud. I wouldn't've read it out loud to *him* if *he'd* written it — I really wouldn't",<sup>(16)</sup> Holden can no longer stand the insensibility of Mr. Spencer who reads Holden's bad paper in front of him, a plucked student, and he leaves when Mr. Spencer yells 'Good Luck!' at him and he feels very depressed at Mr. Spencer's phoniness. The reason is that it is not yelled at him with Mr. Spencer's whole heart, like 'Good Luck!' of adults' letters in their everyday life. Therefore, Holden thinks "I'd never yell 'Good Luck' at anybody. It sounds terrible, when you think about it."<sup>(17)</sup>

Last, let me quote one more good example to show clearly what phoniness is: "The part that got me was, there was a lady sitting next to me that cried all through the goddam picture. The phonier it got, the more she cried. You'd have thought she did it because she was kind-hearted as hell, but I was sitting right next to her, and she wasn't. She had this little kid with her that was bored as hell and had to go to the bathroom, but she wouldn't take him. She kept telling him to sit still and behave himself."<sup>(18)</sup>

The more she cries her eyes out over some sad scenes in the movies, the more kind-hearted she might seem to be. In reality, however, she will not take her child to the bathroom and keeps scolding him. She is phoney. That makes him say: "She was about as kind-hearted as a goddam wolf. You take somebody that cries their goddam eyes out over phoney stuff in the movies, and nine times out of ten they're mean bastards at heart. I'm not

kidding.”<sup>(19)</sup>

These sharp observations of Holden have the power to appeal to us moderners in general, young or old. Therein lies one great attraction of *The Catcher in the Rye* because we can read much about ourselves in this novel and “In an age of nuclear terror, adolescents everywhere - despite cultural differences - are perplexed by the same problems.”<sup>(20)</sup> But it is of great importance that no matter how sharp his observations on the phoney adult world are, Holden feels himself so depressed and lonesome that he becomes crazy in the violent collision between his innocence and adult phoniness. Therefore, there is no other way for Holden, half a child and half an adult, except to run away from the phoney adult world like he left Elkton Hills School and Pencey Preparatory School or to pretend to compromise with the phoniness of adult society, as shown in his words: “I’m always saying ‘Glad to’ve met you’ to somebody I’m not at all glad I met. If you want to stay alive, you have to say that stuff, though”.<sup>(21)</sup> These prove that Holden can not feel happy as long as he faces the phoney adult in the upper part of *time*.

Next, let’s think about what Holden feels and wishes when he faces the innocent child world in the lower part of *time*. As stated before, when Holden faces the innocent child world, his two selves completely sympathize with the innocence and he wishes to be the catcher in the rye.

Let me quote the passage to prove it.

Anyway, 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’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.<sup>(22)</sup>

After he heard an about six-year-old child sing “If a body catch a body coming through the rye” on his way to Broadway, Holden feels “not so depressed any more”,<sup>(23)</sup> and wishes that he could be the catcher in the rye to save every child from falling over the cliff into the phoney adult world. The big field of the rye, where there are playing “Thousands of little kids, and nobody’s around - nobody big”, shows the innocent child world, and under the cliff is the phoney adult world. Holden is standing on the cliff between the two worlds, because he is a sixteen-year-old boy with half grey hair who is on the boundary between the two worlds. Because he is in a position to recognize the nice child innocence and the lousy adult phoniness, he wishes to be the catcher in the rye all the more.

Holden’s above-quoted wish shows his deepest love for the unspoiled children that his child self and adult one can give, but as shown in his words “I know it’s crazy”, the reality of his wish is a completely unrealizable dream, because it is very innocent. First of all, the more Holden wishes to be the catcher in the rye, the more he learns from the actual phases around him that he is not at all in a position to do it. Nowhere in the highly civilized city of New York can Holden find the rye where thousands of little children are playing and nobody

is around - nobody big, but he can find so many phonies and lousy bastards that he thinks he is "the only normal bastard in the whole place".<sup>(24)</sup>

Secondly, it is impossible to stop *time*. Holden wishes to stop *time*: to keep standing on the edge of the cliff all his life, and to catch every innocent child if he starts to go over the cliff. Therefore, he thinks "Certain things they should stay the way they are."<sup>(25)</sup> Nevertheless, he knows "that's impossible, but it's too bad anyway"<sup>(26)</sup>; he can not keep standing on the cliff for ever and every innocent child, sooner or later, falls over the cliff into the phoney adult world. If Holden realizes it is impossible to stop *time* at all, it is natural that he should try to run away in *space*.

To return to the text. In order to relieve him from his depression and lonesomeness, Holden visits Mr. Antolini as his only resort. Holden says about Mr. Antolini: "He was about the best teacher I ever had, Mr. Antolini. . . . You could kid around with him without losing your respect for him."<sup>(27)</sup> Mr. Antolini tries to help Holden out of his terrible, terrible fall, saying to him: "This fall I think you're riding for - it's a special kind of fall, a horrible kind. The man falling isn't permitted to feel or hear himself hit the bottom. He just keeps falling and falling. . . The whole arrangement's designed for men who, at some time or other in their lives, were looking for something their own environment couldn't supply them with. Or they thought their own environment couldn't supply them with. So they gave up looking. They gave it up before they ever really even got started"<sup>(28)</sup> and "Among other things, you'll find that you're not the first person who was ever confused and frightened and even sickened by human behaviour. You're by no means alone on that score".<sup>(29)</sup> Nevertheless, Mr. Antolini is also a phoney pervert, because he made a flitty pass at Holden in bed. It leads to the result that Holden is disgusted with everything in New York and he decides to go west after he meets Phoebe and pretends to be a deaf mute and lives an anti-phoney life near the woods.

### (III)

I stated in Chapter II of this thesis that as long as Holden was confronted by the phoney adult world in the upper part of *time*, he felt so depressed and lonesome that he went crazy and could not be happy, but reversely when he touched an innocent child in the lower part of *time*, Holden felt better and he was very innocent and human, but he was greatly troubled with the discontinuity between his innocent vision and the inhuman realities around him and decided to escape into the west.

Next, is it possible that the farther Holden moves to the west, the happier he is? The answer is 'No'. He is not destined to be happy in *space*, even if he escaped into the west. The reason is that the Americans lost every frontier of the west in eighteen nineties which was "a land of rebirth, of beginning again, of exuberant hope".<sup>(30)</sup> Steinbeck says in his *The Red Pony*: "There's no place to go. There's the ocean to stop you. There's a line of old men along the shore hating the ocean because it stopped them."<sup>(31)</sup> It is needless to say that Holden knows this fact in his heart. Nevertheless, we must not overlook the fact that Holden has lived in New York all his life. It is natural that the more he hates living in

this inhuman civilized city, the more the west seems to be an alluring haven of his innocent vision.

Let me refer to what Holden thinks about New York: "New York's terrible when somebody laughs on the street very late at night. You can hear it for miles. It makes you feel so lonesome and depressed."<sup>(32)</sup> New York is the largest city in the Western hemisphere and it symbolizes American material civilization. People feel deep melancholy and lonesome in the midst of this too advanced civilization. God made nature, but men conquered it and changed it into civilization; but today for the first time in the history of the world, men have lost touch with nature and they are slaves of inhuman material civilization which they made themselves. The Americans experienced this process in the shortest time all over the world. In New York, descendants of pioneers are robbed of touch with nature and their breaths are stifled in this artificial and civilized city.

New York where Holden lives is entirely different from the woods where David Thoreau lived. Thoreau says in his *Walden; or Life in the Woods*: "I experienced sometimes that the most sweet and tender, the most innocent and encouraging society may be found in any natural object, even for the poor misanthrope and most melancholy man. *There can be no very black melancholy to him who lives in the midst of nature and has his senses still*"<sup>(33)</sup> (italics added). Thoreau belonged to the world of nature, but Holden belongs to the world of civilization. Therefore, Thoreau "never felt lonesome, or in the least oppressed by a solitude",<sup>(34)</sup> all alone on the shore of Walden Pond. Oppositely, Holden feels so depressed and lonesome that he becomes crazy among a great many people in New York, because he does not live in the midst of nature and does not have his senses. Holden is completely town-bred and does not have any 'nature', except the Central Park which is surrounded by skyscrapers in New York. New York is such an abnormal and inhuman city that Holden hates living in it. People are subject to what they made themselves; they can not and will not act the way they should do. Therefore, he criticizes New York as follows:

I hate living in New York and all. Taxi-cabs, and Madison Avenue buses, with the drivers and all always yelling at you to get out at the rear door, and being introduced to phoney guys that call the Lunts angels, and going up and down in elevators when you just want to go outside, and guys fitting your pants all the time at Brooks', and people always—' . . . . 'Take most people, they're crazy about cars. They worry if they get a little scratch on them, and they're always talking about how many miles they get to a gallon, and if they get a brand-new car already they start thinking about trading it in for one that's even newer. I don't even like *old* cars. I mean they don't even interest me. I'd rather have a goddam horse. A horse is at least *human*, for God's sake.<sup>(35)</sup>

In nature Thoreau thought that "the object of clothing is, first, to retain the vital heat, and secondly, in this state of society, to cover nakedness".<sup>(36)</sup> On the contrary, in this highly civilized city people are subject to their clothing. One of the examples is Holden's phoney aunt who is very charitable but does nothing for charity if she has to wear black clothes like those two nuns. The other example is a "very distinguished-looking" abnormal pervert who puts on women's clothes and looks at himself in the mirror. As shown in Holden's aunt

who is always very well dressed when she does anything charitable, some of them are phoney and will not act the way they should in the midst of New York ; as shown in the old pervert who pretends to be a woman, some of them are abnormal and they can not act the way they should. They are dominated by what they made themselves and they are not permitted to be human among inhuman modern conveniences. New York consists of such an inhuman material civilization and the phoney and abnormal adult world. Therefore, Holden hates living in New York and wishes to "live somewhere with a brook"<sup>(37)</sup> in the west for the rest of his life, in order to live with nature and make his own innocent world.

Let me quote the passage to show what Holden's wish in the west is.

Finally, what I decided I'd do, I decided I'd go away. I decided I'd never go home again and I'd never go away to another school again. I decided I'd just see old Phoebe and sort of say good-bye to her and all, and give her back her Christmas dough, and then I'd start hitch-hiking my way out west. I'd do, 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 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 figured I could get a job at a filling station somewhere, putting gas and oil in people's cars. I didn't care what kind of a job it was, though. Just so people didn't know me and I didn't know anybody. 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. If anybody wanted to tell me something, they'd have to write it on a piece of paper and shove it over to me. They'd get bored as hell doing that after a while, and then I'd be through with having conversations for the rest of my life. Everybody'd think I was just a poor deaf mute bastard and they'd leave me alone. They'd let me put gas and oil in their stupid cars, and they'd pay me a salary and all for it, and I'd build me a little cabin somewhere with the dough I made and live there for the rest of my life. I'd build it right near the woods, but not right *in* them, because I'd want it to be sunny as hell all the time. I'd cook all my own food, and later on, if I wanted to get married or something, I'd meet this beautiful girl that was also a deaf mute and we'd get married. She'd come and live in my cabin with me, and if she wanted to say anything to me, she'd have to write it on a goddam piece of paper, like everybody else. If we had any children, we'd hide them somewhere. We could buy them a lot of books and teach them how to read and write by ourselves.<sup>(38)</sup>

Holden thinks that he will build a little cabin by himself right near the woods of the west and pretend to be a deaf mute in order to cut off conversations with the adults and get married to a deaf-mute girl and hide his children somewhere and teach them how to read and write by themselves. This shows the childish anti-civilization and anti-phoney adult world. Holden decides to go to the woods of the west, not because he wishes "to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived",<sup>(39)</sup> but because he wishes to escape from inhuman civilization and the phoney and abnormal adult world and

make his own world which consists of nature and innocence.

Holden is such an unbalanced sixteen-year-old boy who does not know how to fight against the real world that he can have the above-quoted childish vision. Holden very frequently has to confront inhuman civilization and the phoney adult world in New York, but after all he tries to escape from them into his own childish world, because he is not old enough to know how to fight against them; Holden is not so old and strong as Thoreau who "wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world".<sup>(40)</sup>

Nevertheless, finally Holden feels very happy all of a sudden because of Phoebe's innocent love and stops going west, but if he had gone west, his childish vision would have been shattered to pieces and he would have been severely disillusioned. The reason is that it is already impossible in America of the twentieth century for anybody to escape from inhuman civilization and the phoney and lousy adult world and make his innocent world in the west; which is proved in Willa Cather's sorrowful words: "The Old West had been settled by dreamers, great-hearted adventurers who were unpractical to the point of magnificence; a courteous brotherhood, strong in attack but weak in defence, who could conquer but could not hold. Now all the vast territory they had won was to be at the mercy of men like Ivy Peters, who had never dared anything, never risked anything. They would drink up the mirage, dispel the morning freshness, root out the great brooding spirit of freedom, the generous, easy life of the great land-holders. The space, the colour, the princely carelessness of the pioneer they would destroy and cut up into profitable bits, as the match factory splinters the primeval forest."<sup>(41)</sup>

Therefore, Holden says: "You can't never find a place that's nice and peaceful, because there isn't any."<sup>(42)</sup> Holden is not destined to be saved in *space*, too. What can relieve him from his depression and lonesomeness, then? If we admit that it is an innocent love that inhuman civilization and the phoney adult world lack for Holden, then this question can be clearly answered, though we must admit that Holden himself is immature and sensitive. Holden is finally rescued by Phoebe's innocent love from his depression and lonesomeness and stops running away to the west, because it is only Phoebe's love that makes him feel so happy.

## NOTES

- (1) J. D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*, Penguin, 1974, p. 5.
- (2) *Loc. cit.*
- (3) *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- (4) *Ibid.*, p. 219.
- (5) *Ibid.*, p. 132.
- (6) *Ibid.*, p. 205.
- (7) *Ibid.*, p. 211.
- (8) *Ibid.*, p. 168.
- (9) *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- (10) *Ibid.*, p. 159.



- (11) *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- (12) *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18.
- (13) *Ibid.*, p. 196.
- (14) *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- (15) *Ibid.*, p. 19.
- (16) *Ibid.*, p. 16.
- (17) *Ibid.*, p. 19.
- (18) *Ibid.*, p. 145.
- (19) *Loc. cit.*
- (20) Warren French, *J. D. Salinger*, College and University Press, 1963, p. 124.
- (21) J. D. Salinger, *op. cit.*, p. 92.
- (22) *Ibid.*, pp. 179-180.
- (23) *Ibid.*, p. 122.
- (24) *Ibid.*, p. 66.
- (25) *Ibid.*, p. 128.
- (26) *Loc. cit.*
- (27) *Ibid.*, p. 181.
- (28) *Ibid.*, p. 194.
- (29) *Ibid.*, p. 196.
- (30) Ray Allen Billington, *America's Frontier Heritage*, University of New Mexico Press, 1974, p. 28.
- (31) John Steinbeck, *The Red Pony*, Bantam, 1973, p. 91.
- (32) J. D. Salinger, *op. cit.*, p. 86.
- (33) Brooks Atkinson, *Walden and Other Writings of Henry David Thoreau*, Modern Library, 1950, pp. 118-119.
- (34) *Ibid.*, p. 119.
- (35) J. D. Salinger, *op. cit.*, p. 136.
- (36) Brooks Atkinson, *op. cit.*, p. 19.
- (37) J. D. Salinger, *op. cit.*, p. 138.
- (38) *Ibid.*, pp. 205-206.
- (39) Brooks Atkinson, *op. cit.*, p. 81.
- (40) *Ibid.*, pp. 81-82.
- (41) Willa Cather, *A Lost Lady*, Alfred. A. Knopf, 1969, p. 106.
- (42) J. D. Salinger, *op. cit.*, p. 210.

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