

The effect of bereavement on the adolescent psyche in J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*

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Abstract:

This article examines the problematic coming of age theme present in J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*. It explores the novel's young and troubled protagonist Holden Caulfield's resistance to the process of maturity, due to his inability to recover from the death of his younger brother, Allie. This pain translates into Holden's intense subscription to idealistic illusions, most prominently his desire to become the saviour figure 'The Catcher in the Rye', in which he saves children from entering into adulthood. Holden's distressing objection to the process of maturing is due to the guilt he harbours, as he believes he should have saved Allie from his illness, in his role as the older brother. His inability to let go of his past trauma and move towards a more resilient future alienates him from the world and ultimately leads to his emotional breakdown, of which the novel chronicles. Therefore, the psychological effects of bereavement on Holden's adolescent mind and his coming of age journey can be scrutinised closely.

J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) is often read as the narrative of a bitter, idealistic young man disillusioned with the hypocrisy and cynicism he sees in the world and is often associated with the era of post-war alienation. However, the estrangement that Holden Caulfield installs between himself and his society is not the product of the moral growth of a young man but is, as Miller states, "his only means of dealing with his inability to come to terms with the death of his brother."¹ Holden feels unable to let go of this deep-rooted trauma, which disrupts his psychological development and ultimately leads to his emotional breakdown, of which the novel chronicles. Therefore, the traumatic effects of the death of a close relative in the adolescent psyche can be scrutinised.

Holden's inability to accept the death of his younger brother and move towards a more resilient future is due to the guilt he harbours, as he believes that he should have saved Allie from his illness, in his role as the older brother. It is this regularly reoccurring feeling of guilt that results in Holden's disturbed psychological state, that renders him "virtually a case study"² of a trauma victim. This troubling state of mind is exhibited in Holden's negative attitude and characteristic aggressive tone, presenting the extent to which the guilt he carries around with him has eroded into his mannerisms and spontaneous reactions, such as speech. An example of this is Holden's continual use of negative language, such as "crazy"³ and "madman"⁴ as well as how everything "depresses"⁵ him, which all appear more times in the novel than his iconic "phony"⁶ term. Holden's pessimistic vocabulary can be seen as "an index into his disturbed emotional state",⁷ according to Miller, as it seems he is only able to view the world through a cynical and despondent lens. Holden's regular use of negative language is developed further with the repetition of the phrase "that killed me"⁸ which can be considered a double entendre. Holden uses this phrase to represent his reaction of surprise and amusement, but simultaneously reflects his dark state of mind and his growing obsession with death, as he covertly discloses his desire to be reunited with Allie.

This obsession with death that Holden subscribes to, continues and gathers pace throughout the novel. An example of this is when in the Egyptian mummy exhibition of the museum, Holden comments that he "sort of liked it, in a way"⁹ and that it "was so nice and peaceful."¹⁰ He experiences a more tranquil and serene mentality in the museum, as "he can finally rest in untroubled communion with eternal death",¹¹ as Shaw comments. This is developed further as the preservation method of the mummies reflects both his wish for Allie's memory to be preserved and his desire for things to remain in a state of constancy.

¹ Edwin Haviland Miller, 'In Memoriam: Allie Caulfield in *The Catcher in the Rye*', *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*, 15.1 (1982) p. 129.

² Peter Shaw, 'Love and Death in *The Catcher in the Rye*', in *New Essays on The Catcher in the Rye*, ed. by Jack Salzman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) p. 98.

³ J. D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye* (London: Penguin, 2010) p. 2.

⁴ Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*, p. 1.

⁵ Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*, p. 15.

⁶ Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*, p. 15.

⁷ Miller, 'In Memoriam: Allie Caulfield in *The Catcher in the Rye*', p. 130.

⁸ Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*, p. 18.

⁹ Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*, p. 219.

¹⁰ Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*, p. 219.

¹¹ Shaw, 'Love and Death in *The Catcher in the Rye*', p. 102.

Holden's preoccupation with the preservation of Allie's memory is present in many symbols and images throughout the novel. This stems from his belief that he failed his younger brother in his role as protector. For example, in the assignment Holden writes for Stradlater he strays from the brief and instead writes about a baseball glove that Allie played with when he was alive. This tribute is touching and brings Holden some enjoyment, as he comments that he "sort of liked writing about it",¹² providing a respite from the negative, pessimistic tone of Holden's general attitude throughout the novel. Another tribute Holden pays to his younger brother is one in which he assumes Allie's "very red hair"¹³ by wearing a red hunting hat as a way to keep his memory alive, sacrificing his own identity for Allie's to survive. The preservation of Allie's memory becomes so engrained in Holden's mind that he begins to relate things to his late brother unconsciously, such as picking Mercutio as his favourite character in *Romeo and Juliet*, expressing both his disappointment at his premature death in the play and his dislike of Romeo, as he comments "I never liked Romeo too much after Mercutio gets stabbed."¹⁴ Like Mercutio, Allie dies a premature death and Holden, like Romeo, is guilty that he has continued to live without him, presenting the extent to which Allie's death has twisted Holden's mind to completely alter his viewpoints, even on literary characters.

The guilt that Holden harbours inside himself, as well as his obsession with keeping Allie's memory alive, ultimately results in, as Shaw states, an "excessively prolonged moratorium on growing up"¹⁵ as he is left emotionally stunted and unable to move past the traumatic event. Although the narrative is set four years after Allie's death, Holden is "emotionally still at the same age, although he has matured into a gangly six-foot adolescent",¹⁶ his physical growth emphasising his lack of mental development. Furthermore, this emotional moratorium surrounding his guilt and obsession with death extends itself to Holden's own inability to 'cross over' from childhood into adulthood, as he is trapped in a no-man's land of psychological progress.

Holden's own inability to 'cross over' into adulthood translates into his 'Catcher in the Rye' fantasy, in which he saves children, playing in the rye, from falling off the cliff of childhood into the ugly and bitter world of adulthood, commenting "I know it's crazy, but that's the only thing I'd really like to be."¹⁷ Holden's wish to become the 'Catcher in the Rye' messiah figure, descends from his failure in saving Allie and in self-punishing penance, as he wishes to save other children from entering into the adult world, in an attempt to lessen the remorse he feels due to his inability to 'catch' Allie. The fact that Holden is neither playing in the rye with the children or living in the society of adults below the cliff symbolises his disconnection from either group, as Miller comments he "cannot connect with anyone in anyway until the burden of Allie's death is lifted",¹⁸ leaving him stranded and isolated from either world.

¹² Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*, p. 41.

¹³ Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*, p. 40.

¹⁴ Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*, p. 120.

¹⁵ Shaw, 'Love and Death in *The Catcher in the Rye*', p. 101.

¹⁶ Miller, 'In Memoriam: Allie Caulfield in *The Catcher in the Rye*', p. 129.

¹⁷ Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*, p. 186.

¹⁸ Miller, 'In Memoriam: Allie Caulfield in *The Catcher in the Rye*', p. 138.

However, Holden's catcher fantasy also masks his wish to be caught himself, despite his attempts to disguise it. Due to the guilt Holden harbours, he feels he does not deserve the luxury to appeal for support and guidance, such as parental comfort, in how to cope with his distress, "leaving him locked into his grief and locked out of family and society."¹⁹ However, despite Holden's assumption that he does not deserve to be 'saved', he cannot deny himself the private wish of consolation, as he says to himself when sneaking out of his parent's apartment, "I figured if they caught me, they caught me. I almost wished they did, in a way"²⁰ proving he represses, "a pitiful, agonised call for emotional support and love"²¹ due to his own self-loathing and self-diagnosed unworthiness.

In conclusion, readers of *The Catcher in the Rye* often label Holden as an aggressive idealist, disillusioned with the world, and as Han writes, belonging to the group of "lonely alienated and bitter ... young Americans in the post-war period."²² However, this reading is unsympathetic of Holden's condition and the traumatic start to his young life. Allie's death has not only interrupted Holden's emotional and psychological growth into a young man but has also stripped him of his own identity, as he feels he must allow Allie's memory to live on through himself. Holden's catcher fantasy perfectly illustrates the extent to which his guilt is slowly consuming him and his rational mind, as his dream vision seems perfectly coherent to him as a way to try to amend his failure as a brother. Therefore, it is clear to see how the novel is a chronicle of Holden's emotional breakdown and the damaging psychological effects that Allie's death has had on Holden's adolescent mind and his coming of age journey.

Bibliography

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¹⁹ Miller, 'In Memoriam: Allie Caulfield in *The Catcher in the Rye*', p. 131.

²⁰ Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*, p. 194.

²¹ Miller, 'In Memoriam: Allie Caulfield in *The Catcher in the Rye*', p. 131.

²² Xiaomei Han, 'A Study on the Painful Transition of Adolescent in J.D. Salinger's Writing', *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 4.11 (2014) p. 2384.