THE SYMBOlic STRUCTURE OF
THE CATCHER IN THE RYE

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THE symbolic content of Salinger's work has been hinted at, wildly and arbitrarily interpreted, overlooked, and even denied. In view of the fact that Salinger is the most self-conscious and deliberate of artists (it always surprises the undergraduate to learn that The Catcher in the Rye took ten years to write and was originally twice as long), as well as one whose interest in symbolism proclaims itself in the very title of his novel, it seems surprising that Salinger's use of symbolism has not been closely studied. In fiction, as in poetry, a symbol cannot be fully understood without discussing it in relation to the entire work. Yet it is just this that those critics who deal with Salinger's use of symbolism have failed to do. This lack has tended to make their remarks either tantalizing, absurd, or simply obtuse. For instance, the great significance that the Central Park ducks have for Holden Caulfield is hardly more than suggested in the following passage: "Like the Central Park ducks in winter, Holden is essentially homeless, frozen out." An example of the absurdities into which the arbitrary symbolmonger can be led is revealed in the following passage from Leslie Fiedler. Referring to The Catcher in the Rye, he writes: "It is the Orestes-Iphigenia story, we see there, that Salinger all along had been trying to rewrite, the account of a Fury-haunted brother redeemed by his priestess-sister; though Salinger demotes that sister in age, thus downgrading the tone of the legend from tragic to merely pathetic." Only a complete failure to see what Salinger


is trying to do in *The Catcher* can account for the obtuseness of this remark from another Salinger debunker, Maxwell Geismar: "For the later sections of the narrative are simply an episodic account of Holden Caulfield’s ‘lost weekend’ in New York City which manages to sustain our interest but hardly deepens our understanding." Finally, another critic goes so far as to praise Salinger for not making use of symbolism. "In his work we find no showy or covert gesture in the direction of Symbolism."

As has been generally recognized, *The Catcher in the Rye* is the story of a quest, a search for truth in a world that has been dominated by falsity, the search for personal integrity by a hero who constantly falls short of his own ideal, who, in fact, participates in the very falsity he is trying to escape. The dramatic power of the novel stems from two things: that the hero’s conflict is both internal and external and that it increases in intensity as his vision of inner and outer falsity becomes more and more overwhelming. What Fiedler call "the pat Happy Ending" is simply the resolution of this conflict, a superbly appropriate one if we take into account what Salinger’s intention is.

Thematically speaking, Salinger’s intent is to present us with the plight of the idealist in the modern world. The undergraduate’s, particularly the idealist undergraduate’s, enthusiasm for *The Catcher* shows a recognition of this basic purpose as well as compliments Salinger’s rendering of his theme. A college student writes: "Why do I like *The Catcher?* Because it puts forth in a fairly good argument the problems which boys of my age face, and also perhaps the inadequacy with which some of us cope with them. I have great admiration for Caulfield because he didn’t compromise. . . . He likes the only things really worth liking, whereas most of us like all the things that aren’t worth liking. Because he is sincere he won’t settle for less.”

5Fiedler; in Grunwald, p. 60.
6Christopher Parker, "Why the Hell Not Smash All the Windows?", Grunwald, p. 257.
The idealist, the person who sees a difference between what is and what ought to be and is bothered by that vision into some sort of action, has a number of alternatives facing him. If he is to remain an idealist, he must either strive to find his ideal world or attempt to reform what is into what ought to be. That is, his idealism can be either personal and escapist or impersonal and social. He can, of course, become disillusioned about the possibilities of attaining his end and, as a result, abandon, modify, or change his ideal.

What happens to Holden, and what constitutes, therefore, the structural pattern of the novel, is that, as a result of a frighteningly clear vision of the disparity between what is and what ought to be both in the world and in himself and because of an increasing feeling of incapacity to reform either, he attempts to escape into a series of ideal worlds, fails, and is finally brought to the realization of a higher and more impersonal ideal, that man and the world, in spite of all their imperfections, are to be loved.

The first of the ideal worlds into which Holden tries to escape is the sophisticated, man-about-town's New York City, the symbol to virtually every New England prep school boy of the glamorous adult life that his school is the monastic and detested antithesis of. Although Holden is hardly in the right frame of mind to enjoy fully the anticipation of the typical prep school boy's dream—a long weekend on the town—and although he has even seen through this dream, his parting words: "Sleep tight, ya morons!" do represent a complete rejection of the adolescent world. The action that immediately follows reveals Holden trying to play the part of an adult. His first encounter, the scene with Mrs. Morrow, is, significantly enough, his most successful one. He is taken, delightfully, on his own terms. He is allowed to play the man-of-the-world, though only, it is evident, because he is so clearly playing it. The rest of his experi-

7J. D. Salinger, The Catcher in the Rye, New York (The New American Library), 1958, p. 50. All further references are to this edition and will be indicated by page numbers in parentheses.
ences as a man-of-the-world, until that image of himself is destroyed by Maurice, are increasingly unsuccessful. It is his lack of sophistication rather than her unwillingness that is the reason for the failure of the Faith Cavendish affair, but he is refused a drink by the waiter and patronized as well as taken advantage of by the three "grools" from Seattle, screamed at by Horowitz the taxi driver, and treated very much as the younger brother by Lillian Simmons at Ernie's. During these scenes we learn more both about Holden's real affections (his love for the childish innocence and simplicity of his sister and Jane Gallagher) and the degree of his detestation for the very part he is playing and the adult world that he believes insists on his playing that part. Then comes the climactic scene with Sunny and its devastating aftermath.

Maurice's question "Innarested in a little tail t'night?" (84) constitutes a challenge to Holden's image of himself as the suave sophisticate and thus must be answered affirmatively. His subsequent failure with Sunny and the brutality of Maurice's treatment of him are forceful ways of destroying Holden's man-of-the-world image of himself. More important to us, however, is our learning at this point of the nature and degree of Holden's sexual and religious idealism. He cannot use people. Like Christ, he finds pity and compassion to be stronger in him than self-will; unlike Christ, he is unable to find anything in himself approximating to the love of God, anything that can make of this pity and compassion a positive force. And so Holden is merely depressed to the point of contemplating suicide. Already we have the suggestion of what is to become so important later in the novel, that since Holden cannot live up to his Christ ideal, he will choose to emulate the only other character in the Bible he likes, the lunatic "that lived in the tombs and kept cutting himself with stones". It is significant that just as Holden rejected the adolescent world in his parting shout to his dormitory mates at Pencey Prep, so Sunny dismisses his pretensions of being an
adult with the wonderfully casual, and completely devastating, "So long, crumb-bum."

His vision of himself as a man-of-the-world has not been completely destroyed however, merely altered to young man-of-the-world, a pose that he has tested before, that, in fact, he has just learned that he cannot emerge from. And so he calls up Sally Hayes and makes a date with her to go to a matinee. Sally Hayes represents the double nature of the social world as it is. It is full of falsity but undeniably attractive. "She gave me a pain in the ass, but she was very good-looking." She both dramatizes for us the appeal that social conformity has for Holden and shows us his weakness in failing to escape from it. She fits in beautifully with his genuine leather bags from Mark Cross, but we learn in this section of the novel that one of the things that most bothers Holden about things as they are is that appearances seem to have more power than reality. How much money you have, what your social position is, what your father does for a living, what church you belong to, even what you look like, all these things are superficialities that separate us from our fellow man, from ourselves, and ultimately from the life of integrity, from truth. Even the nuns, against whose genuine charity Holden so pitilessly contrasts the false philanthropy of Sally Hayes's mother, see things as Catholics; at least Holden thinks that they do. To Holden the adult world is dominated by categories, so much so that it can only be fled from. It is this vision that leads Holden to value the child over the adult (the child has not yet learned to experience the world in terms of categories) as well as to seek a personal escape from society.

Holden's dilemma, however, is that while he sees the phoniness of the world in which he lives, he is bound to that world through ties of affection as well as through force of habit and social pressure. Thus when he finally sees Sally Hayes, the "queen of the phonies", he says, "I felt like marrying her the minute I saw her. I'm crazy. I didn't even like her much, and yet all of a
sudden I felt like I was in love with her and wanted to marry her. I swear to God I'm crazy. I admit it.” When he proposes to Sally that they go off to New England together to live a Farewell to Arms sort of idyllic life, he is desperately trying to escape from the ever-encroaching adult world and at the same time carry off that which is attractive to him in it. But this is the sort of romantic escape that even Holden rejects, though only after he has been rejected, and he ends by insulting and abandoning her, defeated once again in his quest for an ideal world. In abandoning Sally he has for the second time turned his back on himself as an adolescent. Now he tries again to become a man, this time by seeking advice from his former advisor at a previous school, Carl Luce.

In many ways Carl Luce represents the ideal of the man-about-town that Holden still dimly wants to become. He is several years older than Holden and has all the appearances of the suave sophisticate. He has a Chinese mistress and seems to Holden to be coolly in control of his life. Yet his lack of understanding of Holden’s plight and even more his lack of concern for it depresses Holden to the point where all he can do is sneak home and seek comfort in the company of the only person he knows will not disappoint him, his sister Phoebe. Luce’s advice, that Holden needs to discover the “patterns of his mind”, represents the idea of adjustment to the world as it is that is the dubious gift of psychoanalysis, and though only dimly understood as such by Holden, it is more a “cure” for idealism than a way of expressing it.

With Phoebe, Holden is at home in a world of innocence and integrity. He can trust her to take his side, to understand and sympathize. Thus it is doubly depressing when she reacts in just the opposite manner. Without even being told, she knows that he has been kicked out, and her “Oh, why did you do it?” affects him so deeply that he confesses far more than he intends to about the extent of his own nihilistic world-weariness.
Phoebe's penetrating "You don't like anything that's happening" forces him to make some sort of affirmation, to explain the sort of idealism that would justify so sad-making a picture of the world as it is. Neither his affirmation of his love of goodness (his brother Allie, James Castle) nor what might be called his love of pure being (just being with his sister) satisfies Phoebe, but Holden's memory of James Castle, the only person he has ever known who died for a principle, suggests to him a way in which he can devote his life to the protection of goodness. The significance of the catcher image lies in three things. First of all, it is a saviour image, and shows us the extent of Holden's religious idealism. Secondly, it crystallizes for us Holden's concept of good and evil; childhood is good, the only pure good, but it is surrounded by perils, the cliff of adolescence over which the children will plunge into the evil of adulthood unless stopped. But finally, the image is based on a misunderstanding. The Burns poem goes "If a body meet a body" not "if a body catch a body", and the fact that Phoebe is aware of this and Holden is not, plus the manner in which these two words ("catch" and "meet") are re-examined and re-interpreted by Holden at the end of the novel, shows us in a powerful and deeply suggestive way the center of Holden's difficulty. Both Holden's nihilistic view of life as it is and his notion of what life ought to be are based on a misunderstanding of man's place in the universe. In this central metaphor is condensed the essence of the novel, though not until the end does Holden fully understand the significance of the difference between "man catching" and "man meeting".

Of course, the catcher image does not represent a workable ideal, and Holden knows that. Its very impossibility means that all Holden is left with is his nihilism. He tells Phoebe that he plans to go out West and work on a ranch, but he shows that his real desire is to be saved from the emptiness of his negativism when he telephones Mr. Antolini and when he admits that he almost hopes that his parents will catch him as he sneaks out of
the apartment. The catcher, in fact, wants to be caught, the saviour saved.

Mr. Antolini, a former English teacher of Holden's, is the nearest thing that Holden knows to the non-phony adult, and, as such, he is Holden's last refuge. As the person who protected the body of James Castle, he is also to Holden a kind of catcher figure, an image of his own ideal, therefore. In his understanding concern for Holden, and through his remarkably appropriate advice, Antolini does, in fact, seem to be saving him. Holden's physical relaxation, as well as the fact that he seems to have abandoned his plan to run off to the West (he even tells Antolini that he is planning to call up Jane Gallagher in the morning), augurs well for his spiritual recovery. What Antolini tells him, in essence, is that his present depressed state is a perfectly natural result of an awareness of evil, the imperfectness of man and the world, and what he promises him is that if only he will not give up his quest for truth, he will find a way of incorporating his idealism about man and the world into some sort of action, some constructive way of life. His promise that a formal education will help him discover his potentialities—the ways in which he personally can contribute toward the implementation of the ideal—is what he means by discovering the "size [of one's] mind". The phrase, so close to Carl Luce's "the pattern of your mind", represents a wholly contrary idea. It is not adjustment to the world but adjustment to one's self that Mr. Antolini is advocating. With his quotations from Stekel, he is urging Holden toward maturity and a more practical and less egotistical idealism. But then all is ruined by what is basically Holden's intolerance of human imperfection. He is awakened by Antolini's patting him on the head, and once more he rejects what is because of its lack of perfection. Pursued by doubts about his interpretation of Antolini's apparent homosexuality as well as guilt feelings about his rejection of Antolini ("even if he was a flit he certainly'd been very nice to me"), he wanders in a state of terrible depression toward literal as well as figurative death.
The literal and figurative coalesce as Holden seems to be plunging into a void each time he crosses the street; he manages to get to the other side only by praying to his dead brother Allie to save him. So terrible is Holden’s depression, so complete his sense of alienation from the world of the living, that in his disturbed imagination only the dead, idealized brother can save him from the nothingness, the hellish state of his own nihilism. Resting on a Fifth Avenue bench he comes to a vision of the only ideal world that now seems left to him. Though he does not believe in the serious possibility of the deaf-mute image of himself any more than he did of the catcher figure, it is equally significant as a metaphor of his state of mind. Just as in the catcher image Holden was showing his devotion to the Christ ideal, so in the deaf-mute figure Holden is revealing his allegiance to the only other character he likes in the Bible, the lunatic who lives in the tombs and cuts himself with stones. They are, of course, obverse images of each other: save the world or completely reject it, cherish and protect the good or wall yourself in from the evil, choose health and happiness or the masochistic lunacy of isolation and self-pity. Holden’s disillusionment is complete, his search for truth apparently over. He has only to say good-bye to Phoebe and return to her the money she lent him before he starts West. It is as if he were saying good-bye to life itself, a suggestion that Salinger enforces by having Holden almost killed as he runs across the street.

That Holden has given up his idealism, that his decision to go West represents not an escape into an ideal world, as he had formerly thought of it as being, but rather a rejection of his quest, is made clear to us in the next section of the novel. Throughout the novel Holden has been in search of a world, a way of life, an ideal that does not change. What he has never been able to accept is the mutability of life. The images that he loves are static images: Jane Gallagher as the girl who keeps her kings in the back row; children who, because of their absorption in the
present and because of their innocence, seem to be unchanging; and above all (and increasingly as the novel progresses) the world of the dead: the martyred James Castle, the idealized, dead younger brother Allie, the natural history museum where even the smells are the same year after year. Holden's absorption with the idea of death reaches its culmination, appropriately enough, in the Egyptian tombs of the Museum of Art. The marvel of the Egyptians was that they were able to achieve permanence with something as essentially impermanent as the human body. The mummies represent the kind of conquest over time and mutability that Holden has been in search of all along. While to the younger boys that Holden is guiding, the tombs are spooky places from which they soon flee, to Holden they are symbolic of the peace and permanence that he so desperately wants. What he discovers there, in the form of the obscenity written under one of the glass cases, is that the quest for permanence is a hopeless one. "That's the whole trouble. You can't ever find a place that's nice and peaceful, because there isn't any." Even death is no escape. The trip West is embraced, but without the usual Caulfield enthusiasm, as a sort of negative ideal. It is the most pathetic, as well as the most fantastic, image of himself that Holden has yet created; and we see how little he is really interested in it, how sadly he must in fact be contemplating it, in the next scene when Phoebe arrives and insists on going with him.

The brilliance of the concluding section of the novel lies almost wholly in its irony. The ironic pattern has already been established that each time one of Holden's ideal images of himself is tested by reality it fails and in so failing shows us the phoniness of that particular image. But the images of himself that have been tested thus far have been phony ones and we have been relieved rather than disappointed that he has failed to act in accordance with them. Consider, for example, his behavior with Sunny. Here, for the first time, however, an apparently genuine image of
himself is being tested: Holden the non-phony, the only non-phony left, at least in the adult world, is going to preserve his own integrity by keeping himself unspotted from the world and at the same time provide an oasis in the desert of phoniness for those who are worthy of salvation, mainly Phoebe and his older brother D. B. There are remnants of the catcher image in this picture of himself but more significant is the world-weariness, the alienation of himself from all but a chosen few, his apparent contempt for and hatred of the world.

But this too, when tested, turns out to be a phony image of himself. His refusal to allow Phoebe to accompany him, his anger with her for even wanting to go, provides us, and finally himself, with a climactic insight into his real character. In the first place, he is by no means as alienated from his world as he or we supposed. We have believed the theatre to be the epitome of phoniness to Holden; yet what most infuriated Holden about Phoebe's decision to leave with him is that she will not be acting in her school-play if she does. And consider the ironies involved in the fact that the part she is to play is that of Benedict Arnold. He is concerned over whether or not she has had lunch. He tells her that she has to go back to school. In fact, we see quite clearly that she is now behaving like him, has taken on his role. This vision of himself, as well as his sudden realization of the extent to which he has endangered the very goodness and innocence that he most wanted to protect, so horrifies him that he immediately abandons his plan to go West, tells her he is going home instead, and carefully and touchingly tries to lead her back to normalcy. Holden, who has apparently been uninfluenced by the various people who have tried to help him in the course of the novel, acts in this scene like a combination of Mr. Spencer, Antolini, and Phoebe as she had been on the previous night. What he tells her even smacks of his headmaster's statement, so abhorred by Holden at the time, that life's a game and has to be played according to the rules.
Secondly, Holden’s behavior with Phoebe proves to us the genuineness of the catcher image. When tested, his love for Phoebe and his desire to save her innocence is far greater than his hatred for the world and his determination to abandon it. His love of good is stronger than his hatred of evil. And so, paradoxically, he is saved through saving; the catcher is caught by the person he most wants to catch. Of course, Holden is by no means completely saved, merely reclaimed from the death-like state of his world-weariness. He does, after all, suffer a nervous breakdown. He doesn’t know if he’s going to “apply himself” or not. Though the conclusion of the novel is hardly a “pat Happy Ending”, then, it is affirmative; for Holden has caught some glimpse of how he can implement the catcher image of himself in action and as a result embraces a higher and more impersonal ideal: that man and the world are to be loved in spite of their imperfections.

The experience that leads Holden to this final affirmation occurs while he is watching Phoebe ride the carousel in the zoo.

All the kids kept trying to grab for the gold ring, and so was old Phoebe, and I was sort of afraid she’d fall off the god-dam horse, but I didn’t say anything or do anything. The thing with kids is, if they want to grab for the gold ring, you have to let them do it, and not say anything. If they fall off, they fall off, but it’s bad if you say anything to them.

Understood in terms of its connection with the original catcher metaphor, what Holden is saying is something like this: innocence and goodness, epitomized in the condition of the child, are not static conditions; just as the child must grow up through adolescence into adulthood, so must innocence and goodness risk this passage through experience and evil. One cannot push the metaphor too far, but the gold ring suggests the promise of life, the beatific end that is the prize as well as the goal. Some are
defeated by experience and evil—fall off the horse; others never get the gold ring—fail to attain the promise of life. The important thing to realize is that these are the conditions of life and that (to put it back in terms of the catcher metaphor), rather than attempt the impossible (catch and hold something that by its very nature cannot be caught and held—childhood, innocence), man should meet man, form a relationship of love and understanding with him, and in so doing help him toward his goal just as Holden is doing here with Phoebe. Man cannot save the world; he should not despise it; he may, however, love it. The effects on Holden are immediate.

I was damn near bawling, I felt so damn happy, if you want to know the truth. I don’t know why. It was just that she looked so damn nice, the way she kept going around and around, in her blue coat and all. God, I wish you could’ve been there.

This final sentence sets the tone for the concluding chapter and shows the effect on Holden of his altered catcher ideal. He misses everybody, even Maurice. The concern to communicate, to establish a relationship with man, has led to the love of man. Holden, whose actions and ideas had been prompted largely by his supersensitivity to evil, is now so sensitive to good that he can even love Maurice.