THE FALL FROM CHILDHOOD INTO ADULTHOOD IN THE CATCHER IN THE RYE

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The Catcher in the Rye is a novel whose warp and woof is that of a journey, one which is conceived and expressed in such a way that, in its development, it takes place what Baquero Goyanes says in his assessment of the novel structure, that is to say, the journey, has meaning in itself, in it “the temporal itinerary and the spiritual itinerary (or memorial) interchange their meaning” (31, T.A.), since it actually deals with a journey towards the interior of man as a human being, towards individual and social conscience, because, as Arvin R. Wells says, “the central conflict is an ethical and emotional one within the narrator-protagonist” (50); and it is precisely from this perspective that Holden narrates his vicissitudes, which in that way acquire a sense of recollections or reminiscences. Recollections from which, as Mr Antolini tells Holden himself, “if you have something to offer, someone will learn something” (Salinger 196), as his is a human experience; because it is actually not the journey of an outsider or an outsider, but simply that of an innocent rebel who, following the American literary tradition has his identity “shaped, not by interaction with others but in resistance to whatever, in the name of a higher social, ethical or aesthetic ideal.” (Rowe 86). That is why one of the constant themes of the book is precisely “the absence of good” (Baumbach 69) with which Holden is confronted, an idea that makes the reader sympathise with him more than with the society he is unwilling to accept -one in which “they make you bleed for purity and virtue” (Panova 62), but at the same time a society that is “increasingly sacrificing its value system for the sake of monetary gain..., a society that is conformist, where no one has the courage to be true, honest and different” (pinkmonkey, par 1); and it is not only the absence of good in
society, but also in the children's environment, symbolised by nasty graffiti he starts finding everywhere, that reinforces his idea of becoming a catcher, the children's saviour.

So, one of the first things Holden does in his narrative is to let the readers know about what they are going to find in the book they have in their hands:

"If you really want to hear about it, ...I'm not going to tell you my whole goddam autobiography or anything. I'll just tell you about this madman stuff that happened to me around Christmas before I got pretty run-down and had to come out here and take it easy." (Salinger 5).

This is Holden's introduction, most probably from a psychiatric ward, to the narration of some of the vicissitudes which finally take him to this health centre. A starting point that seems to destroy autobiography as the main focus of any analysis, despite the autobiographical tone of the story. But it may be necessary, for what the novel actually gives us is not the development of an identity but his failure in the search of a support for an illusion—for a new system of values—, the different steps of an unconscious escape that leads him to face and accept what he is not looking for: that reality which is the reason for the hero's running, which is nothing else but himself in the unwanted state of adulthood. Being between the two worlds of childhood and adulthood, Holden has to face his problem and, as Charles Kegel says, "like Stepen Dedalus of James Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, Caulfield is in search of the Word. His problem is one of communication; as a teenager, he simply cannot get through to the adult world which surrounds him; as a sensible teenager, he cannot get through to others of his own age" (54).

We are once again accompanying a hero on his journey to nowhere —"I don't even know what I was running for" (Salinger 9)— taking part in a mad quest whose answer he does not know, but for whose solution he will be in a continual search, asking for help from several people, to discover in the end that it is not outside, but inside himself where the answer is. But in the meanwhile, he just "loiters in this world sadly and senselessly, alone and helpless before a life which is no good for him, trying to conceal his helplessness by being compulsively talkative and reckless" (Panova 61) and "using his cynical sense of superiority as a type of self-protection" (Phillips, par 2). That is why old Mr Spencer will deceive him, the same as all those to whom he approaches asking for support, in search of a ray of light to illuminate the darkness in which he lives, because all of them, in an implicit or explicit way -
as it is the case of Mr Spencer- will tell him what he does not want to hear -that his main problem is that he does not want to face life-, but as the allegory of his name seems to explain, he would like to hold his cap, his illusion of childhood for ever, which finally proves to be an impossible task, as old Mr Spencer warns him:

"Do you feel absolutely no concern for your future, boy?"

"... Not too much, I guess."

"... You will, boy. You will when it's too late." (Salinger 18)

Holden wants to belong to his past, he wants to live for ever in that world without obligations, without responsibilities, an imaginary world of permanent childhood, though he also seems to guess that that situation is impossible, that that stage, as it also happened to his brother Allie, is unfortunately dead already. Because of this, J. Baumbach is right when he states that “to say that Holden is seeking something his environment cannot provide him is certainly true.”(82)

Before going to Mr Spencer’s house, Holden receives his first great message, the first important clue to solve his problem: “Life is a game, boy. Life is a game that one plays according to some rules.” (Salinger 13) A comment with which Holden agrees, but it is that adult life full of conventions, hypocrisy, prejudices and restrictions -which he repeatedly calls ‘phoniness’, which is a synonym for falsehood- which he is reluctant to embrace, that is why “at the center of Holden’s difficulties is the dangerous symbolism of childhood and its innocence. His disgust with the adult world is so great that he is blinded to the realities of childhood.” (Lundquist 120) He knows perfectly well that life is a game, and that, as in every game, there must be winners and losers, and he also knows who is who in that game and he even recognises the necessity of taking part in it, even if it is as a loser.

“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.” (Salinger 92)

However, this knowledge that Holden has is purely intuitive; his sixteen years and the economic position of his family are two clear guarantees to ascertain that he is just a young rebel, inexperienced and innocent, without a clear vision of where those peculiarities -youth, rebelliousness, inexperience and innocence- are leading him; yet, he seems to be clearly conscious that what his environment offers him is not worthwhile. And it will be that trajectory of his wandering about New York that clears this affirmation. Those two days of complete liberty that he lives in his own city will help him to know about the warp and woof of the great
city and that of the adult world as well. Almost at the moment of his arrival, from the window of the hotel, he observes something that was unwanted by him:

“You’d be surprised what was going on on the other side of the hotel. They didn’t even bother to pull their shades down. I saw one guy... with only his shorts on, do something you wouldn’t believe me if I told you... He took out all these women’s clothes, and put them on... Then, in the window almost right above his, I saw a man and a woman squirting water out of their mouths at each other.” (Salinger 65)

Later, however, it will be Holden himself, encouraged by Maurice, the elevator guy, who agrees to enter that ambiguous world that had just shocked him, inviting a prostitute to go to his room. Nevertheless, when he sees that she is a younger of his age, he is unable to accept her services, despite all her insinuations and mockeries, and is forced to pay double.

In that way the real world of adulthood appears, when its respectable shades are lifted (Baumbach 69), and it seems ironic that Holden, who is wandering in search of someone to protect him from that world, finds in Maurice someone who invites him to share that experience and he, at first, accepts. Maurice, through Sunny, the young prostitute, offers him the experience of sex, but as soon as he sees her, he realises that it is not sex that he is looking for; but love, motherly love and protection. And the fact of not finding a world that can satisfy his necessities makes him leave the hotel and, unseen, enter his own house to tell his little sister Phoebe his plans, showing us once again that what he needs is to be loved, for he is still a child and he still needs someone to prevent his own fall; that is the basis of his personal quest: he is looking for an innocent adult who can become his spiritual father; and this is the terrible paradox: “He must leave innocence to protect innocence. At sixteen, he is ready to shed his innocence and move like Adam into the fallen adult world, but he resists because those no longer innocent seem to him foolish as well as corrupt. In a sense, then, he is looking for an exemplar, a wise-good father whose example will justify his own initiation into manhood. If Holden can become a catcher in the rye, he must find another catcher in the rye to show him how it is done.” (Baumbach 65) For there is no doubt that the fall he mentions here and there throughout the novel is none other than the fall from the innocence of childhood into the experience of phoniness of adulthood. Let’s see what he tells his sister Phoebe when she asks him to “name something you’d like to be” (Salinger 178):
"You know what I'd like to be? I mean if I had my goddam choice?"

"What?..."

"... 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 -I mean if they are 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. I know it's crazy, but that's the only thing I'd like to be." (Salinger 179-180)

That is why his problem gives us the key to understand his desire to become the catcher in the rye, "since all it can offer man is frustration or corruption, the only worthwhile task to which he can devote himself is that of the protector who stops children before they enter the world of destruction and phoniness and keeps them in a state of arrested innocence" (Galloway 144). But, if we want to see things the other way round, this illusion of his also gives us the clue to understanding his own particular problem.

Undoubtedly, Holden's idealism in that answer to his sister is nothing other than the answer to his own problem, to his own unconscious insecurity, as one of his old teachers tells him when he goes to his house, after having left his own when his parents arrive:

"I have a feeling that you are riding for some kind of a terrible, terrible fall. But I don't honestly know what 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. So they gave up looking. They gave it up before they ever really even got started." (Salinger 193-194)

And that is not the only revelation that Mr Antolini TELLS him; he also tries to make him understand that he is not alone in that sphere of innocence that HE is subjected to the pressures of corruption and confusion of that 'environment'

"... you are not the first person who was ever confused and frightened and even sickened by human behaviour. You are by no means alone on that score, ...Many, many men have been just as troubled morally and spiritually as you are right now." (Salinger 196)

It seems that at last Holden has found someone who understands his situation and is prepared to help him, but, unfortunately, the figure of Mr Antolini also vanishes when, during
the night, Holden wakes up and realises that Mr Antolini is by his side, caressing him; then, embarrassed and nervous, he looks for an excuse and leaves the house, though it is true that “this is the only time during the novel where Holden thinks twice about considering someone as a pervert” (Studyworld, par 3) And, once again, after trying to end his loneliness, “he sabotages his own attempt” and makes of loneliness “both a source of great pain and a source of security” (Phillips, par 2)

Thoughtless, overwhelmed by this situation, he starts wandering again through the streets until he sits on a bench and decides that he has to flee to the west, but before that he wants to say good-bye to his beloved sister. This gives him the opportunity of going back to reality, since when he is in his sister’s school he sees something not edifying at all written on the wall of the stairs. He erases it, but later he has to admit:

“I went down by a different staircase, and I saw another ‘-you’ on the wall. I tried to rub it off with my hand again, but this one was scratched on, with a knife or something. It wouldn’t come off. It’s hopeless, anyway. If you had a million years to do it in, you couldn’t rub out even half the ‘-you’ signs in the world. It’s impossible.” (Salinger 208)

This makes him see his impotence to be that ‘catcher in the rye’ about which he dreams, to protect all those children that go near the cliff where he really is. On the other hand, Phoebe does not come just to say good-bye, but is ready to go away with him, placing him in an awkward situation and making him abandon his plans, since he sees that that is the only way to really be ‘the catcher in the rye’: abandon his own innocence to protect the others’. That is why we could say, as J. Baumbach does, that this novel “is not only about innocence, it is actively for innocence -as if retaining one’s childhood were an existential possibility.” (64)

Childhood is for Salinger the essential source of goodness in human life, it is in that stage when human beings are for him genuine, selfless and open in their love for one another, it is then when they are really natural, that is why he takes Holden and Phoebe to the park in the final scene, to redeem the loss of his innocence by means of her love on the one hand, since in her act of giving back his hat she also gives him back the possibility to remain an idealist, though, on the other hand, while he sees her going round riding her favourite horse on the merry-go-round, he takes not only the heavenly baptism which opens the doors of the future to him -a future of understanding, experience, responsibility and commitment (which are all symbols of adulthood)-, but also these
symbols pile up to make him aware that his journey has come to an end, and he is "reborn into at least a partial acceptance of life" (Trowbridge 79), which in fact starts just a few minutes before, when his little sister appears in front of the museum with her cases and her determination to go with him to the west, because it is then when he, for the first time, "begins genuinely to think of someone else's lot, he assumes responsibility. He is no longer the kid who needs and demands everybody's attention." (Miller 142)

Now, while he sits on a bench in the park watching his sister on the merry-go-round, we understand that he has given up his idea of being the catcher in he rye, when he says:

"All the kids kept trying to grab for the whole ring, and so was old Phoebe," he says quietly, "and I was sort of afraid she'd fall off the goddamn 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" (Salinger 218)

"And suddenly", J. Baumbach says, "Holden is surrounded by symbols that suggest rebirth, blessing and hopefulness. It is raining, it is Christmas, and in the carousel movement he obtains a true and vital vision of eternity to replace his old lunatic's love for the mummies' tombs." (122) So, as W. Glasser says, Holden has now become intellectually capable of leaving behind his idea to be the catcher in the rye, because, after watching Phoebe and the rest of the children on the horses, he even thinks that it might be bad to keep a child in childhood for ever (100), that life has movement in all directions, and though it sounds ironic, it is in fact Phoebe who becomes the catcher in the rye for him, because it is when he finally realises the impossibility or, as he expresses it, the inconvenience of his ideal; it is then when the idealist Holden "is saved from the self-destruction and uselessness, and led back to man and to the world by means of love" (Trowbridge 78). That way Holden's acceptance of adulthood is more a redemption than a capitulation: all those he had gone to looking for help had failed him one way or another, and it is his little and beloved sister who finally saves him; she makes his dream come true, but paradoxically it is not him the one who saves the world of children symbolised in his sister, but it is Phoebe herself the one who actually becomes a saviour, she becomes his catcher, and, at the same time, she shows him that he is not a child any more, that the innocence he would like to preserve and protect has abandoned him for ever, which makes him belong to the world he seems to hate -that of adulthood- because he associates it with death; in the end he understands (or seems to
understand) that adulthood is not that deadly fall over the edge of the cliff of life as he sees it and, even though unwillingly, he realises that his pretended goal is nothing but a chimera, that is, he has learnt the lesson which puts an end to his quest.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


