

The Role of Mr. Antolini in Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*

by

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Introduction

In many works of fiction, the narrator is the character best reflecting the author's point of view.¹⁾ *The Catcher in the Rye* is an example of a fashionable but less common variety of fiction in which the viewpoints of the narrator and author are obviously, though somewhat problematically, distinct. Of course, the central intelligence is Holden Caulfield, the hero and narrator. But the character who comes closest to representing the author's point of view is Holden's former English teacher, Mr. Antolini.

For those who have never read the novel, Holden is a sixteen-year-old prep school student, from a well-to-do family, who has just been expelled from his third boarding school.²⁾ One night he impulsively decides to leave the school three days early. Because his parents haven't heard about his expulsion yet, and he wants to put off the day of reckoning, he kills time by wandering around New York on a fascinating tour of his city. On his last night before returning home and facing the music, Holden calls up Mr. Antolini – his English teacher from a previous school, who is now teaching at N.Y.U.³⁾ – and, despite the late hour, is cordially invited to come up to Mr. Antolini's well-appointed penthouse and sleep there. Mr. Antolini's wife is home, so the offer seems quite disinterested. Before Holden succumbs to sleepiness, Mr.

Antolini gives him some kind advice.

Mr. Antolini has been drinking, and this might partly explain the enthusiasm with which he throws himself into the role of advisor. But what he says turns out to be profound and relevant. Naturally, the novel owes ninety percent of its uncanny, and undated,⁴⁾ life to Holden himself. But it is Antolini who offers the key to Holden's experience and observations, even though he only appears in one scene. The importance of having such a key is inadvertently suggested by Wayne C. Booth's trail-blazing book *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, which demonstrates the problems with the unreliable narrator (e.g., pp.295-296). In this paper I will discuss two ways in which Mr. Antolini qualifies himself as the key to the novel: he is a foil to Holden's other teachers,⁵⁾ especially the aging Mr. Spencer; and he knows Holden's strengths and therefore has a sense of his proper destiny and the pitfalls he is liable to. The paper will devote a section to each point.

Contrast with other teachers

We are slyly introduced to Mr. Antolini before his name is even mentioned. Towards the end of his odyssey – in fact the night he eventually stays at Antolini's apartment – Holden visits his precocious little sister Phoebe at his own family's apartment. He can do this because his parents are away for the evening, though they return early enough that Holden has to sneak out. Holden and Phoebe have a

charmingly deep commitment to each other. As he puts it earlier in the novel, "She's all right. You'd like her. The only trouble is, she's little too affectionate sometimes"(68). In this scene, Phoebe quickly divines the truth of Holden's visit: that he has been thrown out of Pencey (his latest school), and in frustration she moans over his imminent fate: e. g., "Daddy'll *kill* you" (166; italics in the text). He is rather inarticulate on the subject, but repeats what is by now a familiar refrain for the reader: that Pencey was like Whooton and Elkton Hills, his previous schools – full of phonies, and he just didn't like it. So Phoebe challenges Holden to mention something he *does* like. After a couple answers that are unacceptable to Phoebe, Holden suggests a student at Elkton Hills named James Castle. This turns out to be something less than pure affirmation as well: James was a student – "a skinny little weak-looking guy"(170) – who, rather than truckling to some bullies invading his dorm room, chose to jump out a window. When we remember that Phoebe is still a little girl, Holden's final description of James is shocking: "He was dead, and his teeth, and blood, were all over he place, and nobody would even go near him. He had on this turtleneck sweater I'd lent him"(170). Four pages later we find that this description isn't entirely accurate. One teacher, did more than go near him, and this was Mr. Antolini:

He was the one that finally picked [the boy] up Old Mr. Antolini felt his pulse and all, and then he took off his coat and put it over James Castle and carried him all the way over to the infirmary. He didn't even give a damn if his coat got all bloody.(174)

Thus, before we even learn this much about Mr.

Antolini, the groundwork has been laid for adjudging him a true friend of the weak and innocent and a man of unselfish strength.

Holden's statement that Mr. Antolini "was just about the best teacher I ever had"(174) reminds us of the one other teacher in the novel whom Holden actually visits, his aging history teacher Mr. Spencer.⁶⁾ Holden visits Mr. Spencer out of kindness because that old teacher asked him to stop by before leaving school. But the visit turns out to be a hilarious trap. Spencer has the grippe and is confined to his room, which is redolent of Vicks Nose Drops. He never calls Holden anything but "boy" (e.g., 14: "Do you have absolutely no concern for your future, boy?"). Holden resents this but he resents even more the nasty way that the old man rubs in the bad results of his history exam and his all-around poor performance at Pencey after he has admitted deserving to fail history and be expelled – and when he is making a courtesy call:

He started handling my exam paper like it was a turd or something.(11)

"If I'm not mistaken, I believe you also had some difficulty at the Whooton School and at Elkton Hills." He didn't say it just sarcastic, but sort of nasty, too.(13)

One amusing nuance of this visit is that however muddled Mr. Spencer might be in a general way – for instance, he never listens to Holden's explanations – he is sharp as a tack at tallying up Holden's transgressions.

This first, hilarious, visit having established itself in the reader's mind, the contrast with the visit to Mr. Antolini's apartment could hardly be more dramatic. Even the harmony between Antolini and his much-older wife – whether or not their show of public affection is sincere –

stands out against Mrs. Spencer's constrained impatience with her grippe-ridden husband: "Holden, he's behaving like a perfect — I don't know what...He's in his room, dear. Go right in"(6; the pause dots are Salinger's).

In broader terms, besides being a paragon of courage and sincerity next to Holden's other teachers, Mr. Antolini is a model of urbane consideration next to Mr. Spencer. Though he lectures Holden at greater length by far than Spencer does — Spencer couldn't give such a lecture if his life depended on it — he never taunts him with his failures.

It is clear that Holden appreciates Mr. Antolini's advice from what happens later. During the lecture, Holden becomes so sleepy that he yawns involuntarily (and therefore not really rudely, despite his mortification).⁷⁾ If this were Mr. Spencer, Holden might have to endure another kind of lecture, but Mr. Antolini just laughs, gets linen from the closet, and turns the couch into a bed. Some time after Holden has gone to sleep, the following scene occurs. Holden's own words are a concise enough summary:

I woke up all of a sudden. I don't know what time it was or anything, but I woke up. I felt something on my head, some guy's hand. Boy, it really scared hell out of me. What it was, it was Mr. Antolini's hand. What he was doing was, he was sitting on the floor right next to the couch, in the dark and all, and he was sort of petting me or patting me on the goddam head. Boy, I'll bet I jumped a thousand feet."(192)

Holden is beside himself. He keeps on repeating variations on "What the hellyya doing?"(192), and he insists on leaving, making the lame excuse that he has to pick up his bags from a locker at the Station.

Mr. Antolini remains cordial, urging Holden to come back after he has picked up the bags. The question of whether Mr. Antolini is really a homosexual strikes me as a moot point. Holden himself, on reflection, realizes he can't be sure either of Mr. Antolini's predilections or of his intentions in patting him on the head: "Maybe he *was* only patting me on the head for the hell of it"(195; italics in text). The thematic point, which William Faulkner made quite spontaneously in one of his University of Virginia question-answer sessions (139) was what Holden's reaction says about Holden himself.⁸⁾ He has been trained to suspect people and to look down on what he calls "flits" — a benignly outdated slur for homosexuals.⁹⁾

For the purposes of this paper, though, the most relevant fact is that Holden feels remorse. He remembers two things specifically: "how he [Antolini] was the only guy that'd even gone *near* that boy James Castle" and "how he went to all the trouble of giving me that advice about finding out the size of your mind and all"(195). And then he feels really depressed at his rash departure: "I mean I started thinking maybe I *should've* gone back to his house" (195; all italics from this page are in the text). In any case, Mr. Antolini stands out among Holden's teachers, both in Holden's estimation and in ours.

Holden's strengths, possible pitfalls, and destiny

The first thing that impresses us about Mr. Antolini, when Holden goes up to his "swanky apartment," is that he knows Holden very well. He remembers both of Holden's "women," as he calls them, Sally Hayes and Jane Gallagher, though he has only met Sally. He is even uncannily attuned to the distinction between them. Sally is beautiful but rather shallow, certainly not the kind of girl who will make Holden happy, as that afternoon's events have already proven. Antolini simply comments that Sally

(whom he remembers by name) is "quite an attractive girl"(190). But with Jane, he gives the impression that there is something more at stake for Holden: "What about that other girl? The one you told me about, in Maine?"¹⁰⁾(191).

And indeed there is more at stake. Holden thinks of Jane in the same fond terms as he thinks of his beloved little sister Phoebe. Both of them "kill" him, which is his highest compliment and means they charm him to death.¹¹⁾ In fact, it is Holden's impromptu fight with his roommate Stradlater, who returns with his usual air of Narcissistic insouciance from a date with Jane, that motivates Holden to leave the dorm earlier than he must. So Jane actually inspires the whole odyssey that Holden tells us about — she is his muse.

Holden compares Mr. Antolini to his older brother D.B., which is high praise because D.B. (currently, Holden has explained, "out in Hollywood..., being a prostitute,"[2]) is still Holden's favorite author; he ranks above Thomas Hardy and Isak Dinesen (18) because of his book of stories, *The Secret Goldfish*. Significantly, Holden mentions that when D.B. decided to make his compromising move to Hollywood, Mr. Antolini's wife called him and tried to talk him out of going. This concern for writing is important because the main thing Mr. Antolini sees in Holden is a young man who needs to express himself. Thus, he asks Holden, as soon as he has had a chance to sit down, "How'd you do in English? I'll show you the door in short order if you flunked English, you little ace composition writer" (182).¹²⁾ Because of this recognition of Holden's special talent — his special sensitivity and gift not just for language but for the truth that language ideally conveys— Mr. Antolini advises him that he won't be happy until he goes back to school and uses it properly:

Once you get past all the Mr. Vinsons [Holden's rather nasty "Oral Communication" teacher] you're going to start getting closer and closer — that is, if you *want* to, and if you look for it and wait for it — to the kind of information that will be very, very dear to your heart." (189; italics in text)

This is a fair recognition of Holden's passion for justice and his eye for the good in people who are superficially weak. These include the unstylish parents at Whooton; the nuns Holden met at the station; "old Selma Thurmer," the Pencey headmaster's unattractive but nice daughter; even Ackley, the pimply pest in the next room, on whose account, we learn, Holden refused to join one of Pencey's cliquish clubs, because no one would admit Ackley. Holden's love for language is not sterily linguistic. And this has relevance to the value of Salinger's novel, which is more than a brilliant linguistic tour de force. The connection between Holden's own powers of expression and Salinger's art is especially relevant to Antolini's defense of scholarship:

"I'm not trying to tell you that only educated and scholarly men are able to contribute something valuable to the world. It's not so. But I do say that educated and scholarly men, if they're brilliant and creative to begin with — which, unfortunately is rarely the case — tend to leave infinitely more valuable records behind them than men do who are *merely* brilliant and creative. They tend to express themselves more clearly, and they usually have a passion for following their thoughts through to the end. And — most important — nine times out of ten they have more humility than the unscholarly

thinker." (189-90).

Reading this novel, one becomes aware of a double-tiered statement at several points. On one level, this is an explanation, in words neither condescending nor pedantic, of why Holden will want to study more. The same person does have a better chance of expressing himself when he has learned the academic art of, for instance, balancing the specific and the general. On a second level, Holden's novel — with all its evocations and humorous repetitions in place of "proper" expression — is a portrait of the preschooler's mind at work. The repetitions themselves have two levels. Take this description of James Castle:

He was one of those quiet guys. He was in my math class, but he was way over on the other side of the room, and he *hardly ever got up to recite or go to the blackboard* or anything. Some guys in school *hardly ever get up to recite or go to the blackboard*. (171; italics mine)

There are many kinds of repetition in this book, some reminding us of Hemingway, a writer Holden dislikes. But the kind of repetition in the description above must stand for more than a score of exactly the same structure. Superficially, it represents a mind that hasn't yet learned to generalize. Surely the repetition of "hardly get up or go..." could be generalized to something like, "Some guys were so shy the teachers made matters worse by ignoring them." But as a poetic evocation, where the reader fills in the final meaning (which is broader than the specific one I have offered), this technique is extremely successful throughout the book.

This connection between Mr. Antolini's advice and Holden's narrative is apparent in an earlier

statement of Antolini's as well. He is making the point — perhaps too subtly for Holden to understand at that time — that the alternative to a proper education is to fall into cynicism or fatuity. Part of the danger in Holden's case, if he fails to fulfill his destiny, is that he will become a petty snob. One of Mr. Antolini's examples of such a state is especially relevant to Holden: "Then again, you may pick up just enough education to hate people who say, 'It's secret between he and I'" (186). This is a brilliant clue to the aptness of Antolini's assessment because it describes a future state. In the present — and this obviously means the period *after* his meaning with Mr. Antolini, since Holden's narrative has to be after the fact — Holden's most notable grammar mistake, from the beginning of his narrative to the end, is precisely this misuse of the nominative case; for instance: "She'd give Allie or *I* a push or something..." (68; italics mine). If we take the story literally — as, on the interpretive level, we must — Holden has not yet grasped this advice, but it will come back to him.¹³⁾

Finally, the advice that is most relevant to Holden is what Mr. Antolini, despite the hour and his obvious inebriation, takes the trouble to write down for him. It is a quote from the psychoanalyst Wilhelm Stekel:

"The mark of the immature man is that he wants to die nobly for a cause, while the mark of the mature man is that he wants to live humbly for one." (188)

The reader immediately senses the relevance of this aphorism. It relates to Holden's sudden hair-brained idea of running off with Sally Hayes to live in the Vermont woods: "We'll stay in cabins and camps and stuff like that till the dough runs out" (132; following quote also). Holden himself recognizes the stupidity of this

idea by the fictional time that he sets down his narrative, his final comment being, "What a goddam *fool* I was." It also relates to his admiration for James Castle's suicide — the very incident that confirms Holden in his admiration of Mr. Antolini both before and after his visit. It certainly was brave of James not to give in to the bullies' demand for an apology (he had secretly referred to the leading bully as "conceited"); but now he is dead and will never become a "mature man," with the power to change the pecking order at boarding schools or anywhere else. James Castle, the immature man, is dead; Holden admires him and is rather too sleepy to pay proper attention to Mr. Antolini. But he has saved his note and does contemplate it later. In Holden's life, Mr. Antolini is "the mature man."

Conclusion

Even though he only appears towards the end of the novel, and then only in one scene, Mr. Antolini is the key to Holden's temperament. Salinger distinguishes him, first, by contrasting him very favorably with Holden's other teachers, and then by showing his truly creative insight into Holden's strengths, the pitfalls he is prey to, and his proper destiny.

Notes

1) The best example of this in Salinger is the short story "For Esme, with Love and Squalor." A young American G.I. is in England awaiting the D-Day landing, and instead of going out with his comrades, he goes to church to hear a children's choir, and then to a tea shop. The most striking of the choir singers, a young girl with a noble title (though we never learn what title) comes in with her brother and governess and soon sits down at the narrator's table. When this exquisite girl (who makes mistakes different from

Holden's but of a similar intellectual order) learns that the narrator is a writer, she asks him to write a story for her — with plenty of "squalor" in it. This, apparently, is the story: it is in two parts, this first being the "Love" part and the second being the "Squalor" part. If I may be allowed a personal observation, this is my favorite short story. But it is worth mentioning here because the narrator seems to resemble J.D. Salinger in every detail. It is hardly fatuous to wonder if the story might not be autobiographical. While the second half of the story especially — with its obnoxious roommate — has obvious parallels with *Catcher*, there is no discernible distance between the narrator and the author. He is a man with the same fine eye and ear — the same appreciation for people — as Salinger; and he is a young writer.

- 2) To be accurate, he has only been expelled for the second time — as he points out to the rather vindictive "old Spencer" — though Pencey is the third school he has stopped attending: he left Elkton Hills, his previous school, because he was "surrounded by phonies" (13).
- 3) This is short for New York University, one of the more prestigious state universities in the country.
- 4) The most remarkable thing about *Catcher* is the freshness of its prose. This is a book that was written before *West Side Story*. That musical is still a gem, but mainly because of the way the theme combines with the Leonard Bernstein-Stephen Sondheim score. Really beautiful music doesn't date. Arthur Laurents's script *has* dated, though. The teenage dialog becomes harder to bear in proportion to how "cool" it attempts to be. In general, the nonmusical elements of the play and movie are mainly saved today by the more stately language of the Puerto Ricans, who don't

- attempt much slang, and the "square" talk of elders like the kindly Jewish shopkeeper. *West Side Story's* teenage slang is an object lesson in how dated slang, by its very nature, becomes. And yet, in *Catcher*, Holden's slang-ridden and ungrammatical narrative is more refreshing to this reader today – personal testimony being the only honest measure in such a matter – than it was twenty years ago, when (as an adult) I read the novel for the second time.
- 5) For those who are not literature specialists and are unfamiliar with this term, a *foil* is any element in a work of fiction that contrasts strongly with other elements to which it is compared. Usually the term is used to refer to characters who contrast with other characters. For example, the slow-witted old man Polonius is a foil to Hamlet, in that Polonius is dull and Hamlet is brilliant. In this case, all of Mr. Antolini's virtues make him a foil in Holden's mind to the other teachers, who are mostly described as social-climbing "phonies." Holden even sees "old Spencer" in this light because he laughs at the jokes of the headmaster, Mr. Thurmer, whom Holden considers "a phony slob" (3).
- 6) Holden uses the affectionate adjective "old" to refer to almost everyone. He even calls his little sister "old Phoebe"; for example: "Old Phoebe still wouldn't talk to me or anything, but she was walking next to me now" (210). So the word is close to meaningless and doesn't refer to age. But Mr. Spencer is literally old, and everything about him suggests advanced age. Furthermore, Holden's use of "old Spencer" is obsessive. On the level of narrative, as opposed to dialog, he never calls Spencer anything else. So this humorously literal application of the idiom must be deliberate on Salinger's part. Salinger is nothing if not funny.
- 7) Here is Holden's characteristic way of indicating his guilty feeling:
Then, all of a sudden, I yawned. What a *rude bastard* but I couldn't help it!
Mr. Antolini just laughed, though. "C'mon," he said, and got up. "We'll fix up the couch for you." (190)
- 8) It is surely to Salinger's credit that as important – arguably even great – a writer as Faulkner called his novel a latter-day *Huckleberry Finn*. If there is one writer whose best work (*As I Lay Dying*, for instance) does recall Mark Twain, it is Faulkner. For what it is worth, Vladimir Nabokov, about thirty years ago on the American PBS television program "Writers at Work," was asked which American fiction writers he admired, and after an embarrassed pause said "Salinger and Updike." I saw that program myself, but this must remain merely an eye-witness account because I haven't been able to pin down the year or month that the program was aired, even with the "benefit" of Internet discussion groups. Nabokov's tastes were refined indeed. He is famous for despising, among others, Hemingway (except for "The Killers"), Faulkner, and even Joseph Conrad (though he may have been tired of comparisons with Conrad, the other third-language foreigner who became a master of English).
- 9) In this as in nearly everything, Salinger seems to be on the side of the angels in this book. It is no longer fashionable to equate homosexuality with perversion. In fact, postmodern critics have made this kind of treatment of homosexuals a specific taboo. Salinger reveals nothing at all about his own attitude toward homosexuality. It is Holden who makes the denigrating remarks about homosexuals in one of the bars he goes in. And it is Holden, not Salinger, who acts out his homophobia when he wakes up and finds Mr. Antolini

petting his head affectionately. But in the present critical climate, Holden's references would be much less acceptable if he had used a more durable epithet, like "queer." "Flit" is dated slang and therefore less offensive. What other author has ever profited from having the slang he uses in his novel go out of fashion?

- 10) To which Holden answers, "Oh—Jane Gallagher. She's all right. I'm probably gonna give her a buzz tomorrow" (191). Actually, Holden's inability to get hold of Jane is preternatural. He wasn't in the mood to go out and say hello to her in Stradlater's car, though he said he would several times. He has already phoned her with no success several times. And he doesn't contact her the following day either.
- 11) Everything about Phoebe "kills" Holden; to take just one example, there are her "Hazle" — not "Hazel" — Weatherfield stories. Hazle's father is "tall attractive man about 20 years of age." On which Holden comments: "That kills me" (68). And Holden describes Jane with the same kind of fondness: "She was sort of muckle-mouthed. I mean when she was talking and she got excited about something her mouth sort of went in about fifty directions, her lips and all. That killed me" (77).
- 12) There is an ironic twist here. We know that Holden's English teacher at Pencey ("Hartzell") was impressed with his writing because Stradlater — who thinks it's a matter of good punctuation — mentions that in the dorm, when Holden agrees to write Stradlater's composition for him (28). But the reason Holden passed was at least partly because he had already done most of the reading for his English class at a previous school. "I passed English all right," Holden tells Mr. Spencer (who thought he had failed everything), "because I had all that Beowulf and Lord Randal My Son stuff when I was at the Whooton School. I

mean I didn't have to do any work in English at all hardly, except write compositions once in a while" (10).

- 13) An irony of this late-40's reference to the "between you and I" mistake is that this form can now be heard, with no irony intended, on American daytime "soap operas" and other cheap forms of television and movie fare. The only plausible inference is that the writers themselves use the form. One feels a deterioration in many things between Holden's time and the present. Just the quality of reading offered in American prep schools was far higher then than it is today.

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「概 要」

「ライ麦畑でつかまえて」は作者の視点が、世の知性派と言われている大人がこの作品を読み解く視点とは明らかに異なる作品である。この作品の中で、この知的大人役を演ずる人物は明らかに物語の「語り手役」をしているホールデン・コールフィールド自身である。

ホールデンは彼が籍を置いていた学校から放逐されるが、基本的には彼は好人物であることは間違いない。なぜならば彼は善き心の持ち主だからであり、また彼の世の中に欺瞞や汚れに対する感性は鋭さを極めている。ただ彼は精神的にまだ未熟なところがあり、ホールデンの「語り」の部分からだけでは作者がどの視点に立っているかを知ることが難しい。この小説の核心部分すなわち、精神的生き方に対する指針は、かつて彼の英語教師であり、現ニューヨーク大学教授であるアントリーニ先生により見事に語られている。アントリーニ先生は小説の中で長い場面ではあるがほんの一場面にしか登場しない。彼がそこで語る言葉は作者の生き方との関連性が強く、重みがあり、ホールデンの語りとうまい具合に調和している。アントリーニ先生の存在が作品の核心部分になりうると言えよう。換言すると作者自身の投影であると言ってもよいだろう。アントリーニ先生はかつてホールデンが習った他の教師たちとは一線を画しているし、またホールデンの人となりもよく知っていたのである。すなわち彼は自分の力量を過信せず、遭遇するであろう危険、運命に対して十分知り尽くしていたと言えよう。

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