

Analysing the identity status of Holden Caulfield in

J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*

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Abstract:

Individuality and identity have been the twin aspects that define a human being. The authors of young adult fiction are fond of exploring this aspect in teenagers as that age group overflows with curiosity and surprises. Teenagers like Peter Pan do not wish to grow into adults and he is not the only one with that wish in literature. J. D. Salinger is an American novelist, who takes the readers into the mindscape of one such ordinary teenager named Holden Caulfield in his renowned novel, *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951). Holden's angst, turmoil, and attempts to handle the "phoniness" of the adult world while he becomes a part of it, become the issue of interest that promotes the researcher to study him using Marcia's Identity Status Theory. The findings unfold in this research article with great earnestness.

Keywords: Individuality, teenage, angst, turmoil, phoniness, Identity Status Theory.

"All children, except one, grow up. They soon know that they will grow up, ..." (7) begins the famous children's classic, *Peter Pan* of J. M. Barrie. Peter Pan's wish is granted as his life is bound within the pages of fantasy. Despite that, he also undergoes identity crisis when he meets Wendy. Establishing one's identity status occurs during one's teenage. Taking this into account, J. D. Salinger employs this confusion in his protagonist and builds the storyline of the realistic novel, *The Catcher in the Rye*. Salinger is an American author with the full name Jerome David Salinger. His fame reached great heights with the publication of *The Catcher in the Rye* in 1951. His other literary works include numerous short stories.

To introduce the family of the Caulfield household is preliminary as they have four children. The firstborn is D. B. Caulfield and he writes for Hollywood. He is the elder brother

of the protagonist. Holden Caulfield is the second child, who is a sixteen-year-old teenager. He is both the protagonist and the narrator of this novel. His younger brother is Allie Caulfield, who dies due to leukaemia during his childhood. This death creates trauma in the mind of Holden. Holden has a sister named Phoebe Caulfield. She is still in her childhood and her innocence gives a sense of hope to Holden.

Holden's dilemma to leave the cocoon of his childhood and explore his adulthood via the chaotic teenage becomes the story part of the novel. The story evolves in the terms of a bildungsroman as it investigates Holdens' experience of coming of age. His refusal to accept his growth and move onto to the world of adulthood is magnified as a mystery. He is afraid of the inconsistency and insecurities of the adult world as he names this perception of his as something "phony" (Salinger 3). By calling adults as phony, he means to hint at their hypocrisies. On a closer reading, readers can observe that Holden is also victim of this phoniness, thus making his way into becoming an adult. William Shakespeare sums up the seven stages in the life of man in his play, *As You Like It* (Act II Sc 7) through the mouth of Jacques as the infant, the school boy, the lover, the soldier, the justice, the pantaloon, and the old man.

Holden is caught in an in between stage, a stage of transition, wherein he is to find out his identity as an individual. He is constantly thrown out of schools and the novel opens as he is running out of another residential school where he is placed at the present. The suicide of his classmate while he was in the previous school traumatises him. Not only that, losing Allie to death while staying close to him also traumatises him. These traumatic experiences restrict him to have a clear picture of human life as a whole. This is identified as his problem in the novel. This has enabled the researcher to analyse the identity crisis that Holden faces using James Marcia's Identity Status Theory.

The title of the novel rightly resonates with Holden's dilemma. The catcher in the rye, in its literal meaning, refers to Holden's misunderstanding of a line from a song. He assumes that children are chasing rye in a vast field without knowing its destination. The chase eventually leads them off a cliff and take their life away. Holden wishes to save these innocent children from this wild goose chase, because he believes that there is a possibility that they may lose their lives. His mentality to save such children in danger is rooted to his trauma of losing two of them in his childhood. He wishes to wash away his guilt of letting those boys die as he blames himself for letting them die. His guilty conscience over rides his sanity and thus, results this interpretation of the title.

Phoebe clarifies his misconception later in the novel. She rightly points out that he has mistaken the word "meet" to be "catch" from the song and that is the result of his confusion. She observes, "He was singing that song, "If a body catch a body coming through the rye."" (Salinger 63). The song, in its true purpose, meant of two people meeting in the field of rye to have recreational sex without any commitment towards each other in terms of relationship. As sex is another concept that Holden hardly understands, it is apt to attribute his misunderstanding to his unresolved confusion. Thus, he is also conscious of making children stay away from sex and stay within the circle of innocence.

As to mention other elements of interest in the novel, his name symbolically reveals his attitude and action in the story. Kate Lohnes observes it as follows: "Holden can be read as "hold on," and Caulfield can be separated into *caul* and *field*. Holden's desire is to "hold on" to the protective covering (the [caul](#)) that encloses the field of innocence (the same field he wishes to keep the children from leaving). Holden desperately wants to remain true and innocent in a world full of, as he puts it, "phonies."" (2). Moreover, the same article reveals striking facts of two criminals reading this same novel while committing a horrendous

murder. It seems that this fact itself made the novel fall into the reading list of many people. The controversies of this novel are shared for reference.

In 1980 [Mark David Chapman](#) identified so wholly with Holden that he

became convinced that murdering [John Lennon](#) would turn him into the

novel's protagonist. *The Catcher in the Rye* was also linked to [John W.](#)

[Hinckley, Jr.](#)'s attempted assassination of U.S. Pres. [Ronald Reagan](#) in 1981.

... American high schools included it in their curriculum. The novel has been banned numerous times because of its salty language and sexual content. (4)

Due to this thrilling aspect, Holden's persona is to be approached from the area of psychology. James Marcia is a psychologist who discovered the development of identity status in adolescents and has named it as "Identity Status Theory". He deals with four categories based on the choices and commitments they undertake. He has improved Erik Erikson's theory and formulated this one as his own contribution. Identity development of an individual begins with "Identity Diffusion" (1) wherein it refers to the no choices and no commitment stage. This is practically one's childhood where the child is free of responsibilities and the parents take care of the child's choices. The second stage, "Identity Foreclosure" (1), refers to the phase where the adolescent is willing to make a commitment for the betterment of his future, but is not experienced to do so yet. The third stage, "Identity Moratorium" (1), refers to the confused state wherein the adolescent faces dilemma to identify his choices and makes up his commitment. When this is resolved, the fourth and final stage occurs. The fourth one is the "Identity Achievement" (1) stage and this refers to creating solution of the confusion that the adolescent faces during the previous phase. With this, Marcia's theory traces the evolution of one's identity that defines him as an individual when he enters into the world of adults. This is to cross check his identity status, as the theory deliberately hints at by its nomenclature.

Using this theory, the identity crisis of Holden is analysed and his identity status as represented in the novel is highlighted here as evidence. Holden enjoys being an innocent individual, free of responsibilities or rather, commitments, which he feels to free him from confusions of every sort. Life as a child is simple and carefree. Therefore, he wishes every child to feel and same and he is ambitious to freeze other children in their childhood. This is one reason why he has a soft spot for his sister as well. She still belongs in this phase of childhood and her innocence is preserved. This situation is explained vividly in the following scene where he is commenting about his sister as, “My kid sister Phoebe goes to bed around nine o'clock-- so I couldn't call her up. She wouldn't've cared if I'd woke her up, but the trouble was, she wouldn't've been the one that answered the phone. My parents would be the ones.” (Salinger 33).

As he grows, his choices are made by his parents for him, but he constantly drops out of school. Holden stays in schools picked up by his parents because he is crossing the second phase, which is identity foreclosure. He tries his best to stay in schools, but his trauma of losing his classmate and Allie leave him with guilt and scar. He feels hardly healed from those experiences. With this scary baggage, he tries to move on. Moreover, his obscurity about sex and how other guys of his age deal with it remains a mystery to him. It is here his dilemma in life begins and a thoughtless action force him to leave his present school as the story begins. “Where I want to start telling is the day I left Pencey Prep. Pencey Prep is this school that's in Agerstown, Pennsylvania. You probably heard of it. You've probably seen the ads, anyway.” (Salinger 2).

Moving forward to the third stage, identity moratorium, Holden realises his identity crisis for the first time. He is annoyed by sex as he does not get a proper hold of it. He tries to talk with guys who are well versed in it and at one point hires a prostitute but ends up talking with her forgetting his mission. These incidents showcase his own phoniness. He tries to

address his confusions by seeking answers from his teacher named Mr. Antonio and that also does not go well as Holden feels awkward when Mr. Antonio strokes Holden's hair while he is asleep. He reads his body language to be that of a paedophilic. His confusion with sex disturbs his normalcy of life. He feels threatened and helpless everywhere. His girlfriends also turn him down because of his confused state of mind. Thus, he loses audience of all sorts and hopes the company of his sister, whose innocence is still intact as a child.

When adults around him fail to clarify him, he sees through their phoniness. "There's a word I really hate. It's a phony. I could puke every time I hear it." (Salinger 6). Still, he uses it more often to denote the hypocrisies of the adults whom he is familiar with. In exposing the phoniness of others, he fails to see his own phoniness. It is Phoebe who points out his phoniness to him. When he realizes that, he is sure that he is growing out of childhood and is coming of age to be an adult. It is with this epiphany that his change in tone takes place as the narration ends. He assesses his identity status and is ready to make his commitment. He chooses to continue his studies somewhere else and make best use of the education that his parents provide for him. This affirming note does give a positive turn in his quest for establishing his identity.

Concerning the fourth stage of identity status theory, Holden is hopeful of venturing into it. When the story begins, the readers can sense his never mind attitude in the narration thus, "If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you'll probably want to know is where I was born, an what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don't feel like going into it, if you want to know the truth." (Salinger 2). However, the author uses Phoebe, the innocent kid, to perform the feat of a sage chiming in harmony with William Wordsworth who dared to declare that, "The Child is the father of the Man" in his poem titled, "My Heart

Leaps Up”. In doing so, he has crafted Holden to walk towards the fourth identity status, identity achievement, with new confidence.

Reading this novel from bildungsroman’s point of view has enabled the researcher to opt for James Marcia’s Identity Status Theory in order to understand Holden’s attitude towards and perceptions of the world around him. This theory also aligns with the developmental phase of the protagonist and traces the reasons behinds his wild and ruthless behaviours. The title carries a metaphoric meaning of how Holden interprets life. His adamant will to not let go of his childhood and his resolution to move on with his next school is analysed using the crises he faces as a part of his identity’s evolution. In all, Holden belongs to the third stage as per Marcia’s Identity Status theory and shows optimistic signs to be promoted to the next status.

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