

Identity Confusion of Adolescents in Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*

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Abstract: *The narration of Holden Caulfield in J. D. Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye depicts the confusion and interior struggle that a vulnerable adolescent goes through as he starts a journey to explore the world of adults with very confused and resisting attitude. Holden's reaction during his exploration and observation of adult life in New York reflects the identity confusion he is experiencing and the uncertainty of what he is and what he wants to be. The purpose of this paper is to present a critical analysis of The Catcher in the Rye from a psychoanalytical perspective to examine how Salinger in this novel dramatizes Erik H. Erikson's and James E. Marcia's psychoanalytic theories of adolescents' identity confusion. When Holden fails to integrate with the new merging identity of adulthood as a way of preserving his own idealism, a kind of resentment is developed towards everything that represents this threatening new identity. This rejection is manifested in Holden's disgust of all the phoniness and hypocrisy he faces in the adult world and his clinging to childhood. Holden's attitude towards adults in their appearance and behavior portrays a loss of ego integration and its consequences. Salinger skillfully engages the reader in a journey through the experience of this vulnerable character, demonstrating Erikson's theory of adolescent's state of crisis and portraying Marcia's status of identity diffusion. Through the character of Holden, the reader explores the experience of Erikson's identity confusion and its characteristics. The four components of Erikson's identity confusion are displayed in Holden's failing to communicate as a result of avoiding intimacy and his developed sense of time diffusion between what he clings to and what he fears might happen as well as his negative identity of rejecting everything that his community expected of him and feels disgusted by everything associated with adulthood. Holden seems to be in diffusion of industry as he concentrates only on negative aspects of the adult world and emphasizes its phoniness.*

Keywords: Psychoanalysis, adolescence, identity confusion, identity diffusion, intimacy, resistance, adulthood

1. Introduction

Holden Caulfield, the main character and narrator of Jerome David Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (2010[1951]) is depicted as a teenager who is going through a stressful time in his attempts to cope with the physical and social changes he is experiencing. As he develops signs of physical and social maturation, Caulfield starts exploring the world of adults with a very confused and resisting attitude, which leads him to live in a state of in-betweenness; not being a child any more nor an adult. This confusion of identity is best investigated by psychosocial analysis based on Erik H. Erikson's and James E. Marcia's theories of identity formation. Erikson (1950; 1968; 1994) develops a framework of personality formation in which he identifies the stressful conditions of the adolescence period of development as a case of identity crisis when the young person suffers from identity diffusion and uncertainty. Marcia (1966) expands Erikson's theory of identity diffusion to recognize different phases that an adolescent may go through in the process of identity formation. Holden's narration of his lost weekend in New York City dramatizes this identity confusion and portrays the tension that a vulnerable adolescent experiences while making his first tentative movements into the adult world.

2. Review of Literature

Adolescence is a term derived from the Latin word *adolēscens*, referring to "the period of life when a child develops into an adult: the period from puberty to maturity" (*Merriam Webster Dictionary*, 2018). Psychologists pay attention to this stage of development because of its peculiar characteristics that affect drastically the formation of personal identity. A person in this phase passes through a

stressful time while adjusting to the physical changes in his/her body and the social demands required of him/her. Erikson's theory, articulated in *Childhood and society* (1950), *Identity: Youth and crisis* (1968), and *Identity and the Life Cycle* (1994), presents him as an influential psychoanalytical theorist who follows the psychoanalytic tradition of Sigmund Freud's *id*, *ego*, and *superego*. However, Erikson focuses on the *ego* and considers it not just as a moderator between the *id* and the *superego* but as having its own entity representing the person's actual personality. In addition, Erikson does not regard development as only a "psychosexual process" as Freud but believes in the effect of "social interactions" in the development of personality as well (Fleming, 2004: 9-3). Erikson asserts that the *ego's* job is to "integrate the psychosexual and psychosocial aspects on a given level of development" in addition to integrating "the relation of newly added identity elements with those already in existence" (1968: 162). Erikson is the first psychologist to divide the development of personality into recognized psychosocial stages from childhood to late adulthood. The development from one phase to another, he believes, creates a sense of "crisis" in the individual (161).

Adolescence is one of these stages of developments that Erikson focuses on through observing some emotionally distressed youth who were undergoing a therapeutic treatment. He acknowledges that those adolescents suffer from 'identity diffusion' (later he preferred to use the term confusion instead of diffusion) and a great deal of uncertainty (1950; 1968). Erikson (1968) refers to this confusion as a 'crisis' that an adolescent goes through, pointing out that he does not mean by a 'crisis' "a threat of catastrophe, but a turning point, a crucial period of increased vulnerability and heightened potential, and therefore, the

ontogenetic source of generational strength and maladjustment” (96). Erikson in *Identity: Youth and crisis* (1968) identifies four characteristics associated with identity diffusion and uncertainty that an adolescent goes through; ‘intimacy’, ‘diffusion of time’, ‘diffusion of industry’, and ‘negative identity’. A manifestation of severe identity confusion is brought about by adolescent’s exposure to experiences that require of him/her a “simultaneous commitment to physical intimacy,” (166) which is not always sexual. The adolescent resists in fear of losing childhood identity and thus attempts to create a sort of detachment by rejecting or disregarding whoever or whatever calls for such intimacy (166). The adolescent also suffers from a ‘diffusion of time’ as a result of his “disbelief in the possibility that time may not bring change,” but at the same time seriously feels “that it might” (169). The third element of identity diffusion, according to Erikson, is what he calls a ‘diffusion of industry’ when adolescents lose the capability to focusing on certain issues or the opposite when they pay much attention and effort to accomplish only one activity. The final component of diffusion represents the adolescent’s negative attitude as he/she develops “a scornful and snobbish hostility towards” any behavior or role expected of him from his family or his (Erikson, 1968: 173). What Erikson perceives in adolescence is an age of identity confusion as the adolescent finds himself/herself at a crossroad, and where he/she is not certain which way will lead to an achievement of identity.

Marcia (1966; 1980) is another influential psychoanalytic theorist who follows Erikson’s principle of identity formation and expands it to include four statuses representative of adolescent identity development. Kroger and Marcia (2011: 49-50) believe that the model of identity status provided by Marcia (1966) and Marcia et al. (1993) augments the principles identified by Erikson (1968). They assert that this model is still quite applicable today and provides a profound understanding of the actual process of identity development. Marcia builds this model on the assumption that there is not only one way of identity formation malfunction but there are different identity statuses that an adolescent can fit into in his/her struggle to achieve identity (Eysenck, 2004:5). These four statuses are ‘identity diffusion’, ‘foreclosure’, ‘Moratorium’, and ‘identity achievement’. Those adolescents who are not concerned with finding an identity nor commit themselves to such endeavor are considered to be in the status of ‘identity diffusion’, while those adolescents who, regardless of their indifference to identity issues, make future commitment are labeled in Marcia’s model in the status of ‘foreclosure’. The ‘moratorium’ status describes adolescents who are trying to explore what is available to them but at the same time are not ready for a commitment. Sometimes they may either achieve such identity or fail to do so and end up with the state of diffusion. This ‘moratorium’ status parallels Erikson’s ‘identity confusion’. The fourth status in Marcia’s model is ‘identity achievement’ which identify those adolescents who consider all the options available to them and choose carefully to commit themselves. Irving and Sayre (2013) put forward that these four statuses can be divided into two groups; ‘identity achievement’ and ‘foreclosure’ belong to a group that shows a “high degree of commitment,” while ‘moratorium’ and ‘identity diffusion’

are marked with” a low degree of commitment” (4). Marcia’s model of four statuses with the characteristics of exploration and commitment in the process of identity formation is actually an operational outline to Erikson’s identity formation principles.

3. Discussion

The narrative of Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* is analyzed in this paper from a psychoanalytic perspective to explore the process of identity formation of the main character in the novel. The protagonist and narrator, Holden Caulfield, is a sixteen-year-old young man whose lost weekend in New York is narrated in this book. As a vulnerable adolescent starting his first cautious steps into the adult world, Holden resents the corruption associated with this world. He clings to childhood and resists the whole world of adulthood which he considers as “phony”. Holden narrates his story during a time in his life when he is experiencing many unpleasant moments. It seems that things are not going right for him in his Pencey Prep school, from which he is expelled. He has a fight with his friend Stradlater, who starts dating a girl Holden likes and fancies having a strong relation with. Melancholy and depression conquer his heart and shake his stability. Holden finds himself in these circumstances which offer too little comfort and becomes afraid of going home and faces his parents with this grim situation. He runs away from school three days earlier, planning to wander in New York. He simply “just flew away” (*The Catcher* 13) similar to the action of the ducks leaving the lagoon after it freezes and becomes impossible to live in. His plan is to stay in New York, hiding from his family until Wednesday, the day he is supposed to come back from school.

Holden’s attitude and reaction during this exploration and observation of adult life in New York portray the identity confusion he is experiencing and the uncertainty of what he is and what he wants to be. Salinger dramatizes Erikson’s identity crisis through the actual experiences that Holden goes through in these three days. Holden’s confusion about his identity is articulated in his narrated thoughts when he admits that he is living in a state of in-betweenness in his feeling and behavior, not sure if he is still a child or if he has become an adult. He admits that this is “ironic” when he says, “... I still act sometimes like I was only about twelve. Sometimes I act a lot older than I am” (*The Catcher* 12). According to Marcia’s model, a state of ‘identity diffusion’ can be applied to Holden’s case, as he is not certain about his own identity nor does he exert any effort to find out. Although, initially, he seems to be in a moratorium state, exploring what is available to him in the adult world; going to bars, drinking alcohol, and fixing a date with a prostitute, but all these attempts fail and as described by Marcia, he regresses to the state of identity diffusion. This is clearly depicted by the end of the novel when the psychoanalyst asks him about his plans when moving to a new school next September. Holden regards this to be “a stupid question,” because he wanders: “how do you know what you’re going to do till you do it?” (*The Catcher* 213). Ann Pinsker (1999:154) acknowledges Holden’s answer as confirmation of the state of identity diffusion and remarks that the response of an adolescent who is in a state of healthy

'identity achievement' would be completely different from Holden's.

During these narrated three days of his life, Holden tries to communicate with different people but most of his attempts end up in failure. A sense of alienation is developed and grows in him. He feels that he is deeply drifted away from his family, his friends and even from the society around him. This society is embodied in his school and in places he visits in New York during his hiding time from his family after he has been expelled from school. Erikson's theory describes such attitude of confused adolescents who at initial stages try to reach out for people, seeking trust in oneself and in the others. However, when this fails, adolescents shut themselves out from those people and associated activities, avoiding any type of interpersonal intimacy. They enter into "a painfully heightened sense of isolation; a disintegration of the sense of inner continuity and sameness; ... an inability to derive a sense of accomplishment from any kind of activity" (Erikson, 1968: 168). Holden Caulfield's inability to communicate satisfactorily with others represents itself symbolically in the uncompleted telephone calls and in the undelivered messages which permeate the novel. Seeing a phone booth, he almost constantly feels like "giving somebody a buzz" (*The Catcher*59). For many times, an urge is developed inside him to communicate with somebody by phone; nevertheless, he is only able to make four calls but with unsuccessful outcomes. Usually the desire to make a call vanishes without him having even attempted to place the call. It seems that he is afraid of the consequences of such a call, justifying this by saying that he was not in the mood. He simply cannot succeed in making contact, which shows that he is deeply avoiding interpersonal intimacy.

Young people in their attempt to solve their identity crisis develop, according to Erikson (1968), a need to identify with a trusted person, specially an adult leader figure, who guides the adolescent safely. However, during this process of search for trustworthy people and ideas, the adolescent hesitates to have complete "trusting commitment, and will, paradoxically, express his need for faith in loud and cynical mistrust" (Erikson 1968: 129). Holden attempts to search for someone trustworthy to turn to during this time of his identity crisis. He first pays a visit to Mr. Smith, his history teacher, thinking that he will get a consolation from this meeting, but instead, a feeling of disgust grows in him when he realizes the old man's physical appearance. This shows how Holden is afraid of getting old as it is associated with body decay similar to what happens to Mr. Smith. Next, he tries to contact his English teacher, Mr. Antolini, with whom he felt content, but as Mr. Antolini shows a kind of sympathy by affectionately passing his fingers through Holden's hair, Holden immediately lost trust on his teacher, and abruptly left Mr. Antolini's house, with a confused feeling as these tender touches might be a sign of sexual intention. Wherever Holden turns for intimacy, he gets frustrated by the phoniness of the world. From his hotel window he looks out upon scenes of falsification and distortion; in bars and night clubs he hears only the brief accents of shallow arrogant people. When he finds innocence or purity it is always infected by evil embodied in the adults world. According to Bernard Kinnick(1970), the "adolescent's disillusionment and sense of failure arrive

when his search for an ideal and decent world for his ideal and decent self to respond to, proves useless"(441).

Holden fails to integrate with the new merging identity of adulthood because of his attempt to preserve his own idealism, and as a result a kind of resentment is developed towards everything that represents this threatening new identity. Holden's disgust of all the phoniness and hypocrisy he faces in the adult world is manifested in his clinging into childhood. David J. Burrows(1969) notes that critics have concentrated on the gap that exists "between the society which Holden recognizes he must conform to and his own adolescent vision of innocence which, he is coming to realize, is for him no longer an effective means of coping with that society" (109). Erikson (1994) asserts that when the social environment forces a radical change in the process of identity development and the adolescent fails to integrate "the new step in his ego identity, he will resist with the astonishing strength encountered in animals who are suddenly forced to defend their lives" (95). Holden expresses this by worrying about the expected boring routine of his life as an adult of "working in some office, making a lot of dough ... reading newspapers, and playing bridge all the time, and going to the movies..." (*The Catcher*119-120). He is scared of getting older and as speculated by his teacher, when he reaches the age of thirty, he might "end up in some business office, throwing paper clips at the nearest stenographer" (*The Catcher*186). This kind of rejection and fear of getting older is probably best described by Erikson as a *negative identity*, one of the characteristics of identity confusion when the adolescent refuses any role expected of him/her from the society and lives in a state of isolation with a scornful and ironic attitude towards adults and their world. Holden's alienation develops in him an accumulated feeling of mixed detestations towards almost everything around him, including places of social entertainment such as the movies and night clubs. He is also disgusted by physical appearance and activities such as sex, picking noses, and pimples. This weird feeling of hatred and disgust reflect an attitude found in a sixteen-year-old, reluctant to encounter the horrors of the adult world reality.

Caulfield's problem is one of communication. As a teenager, he simply cannot get through to the adult world which surrounds him. He is so sensitive that he cannot even get through to others of his own age. As a result of this failure to communicate with others, Caulfield told his younger sister Phoebe that he intends to work somewhere far away in a gas station where people do not know him. There, he plans to pretend to be a deaf-mute so that he will stop having verbal communication with anybody, even his future wife whom he wishes to be deaf-mute too, communicating with him by writing on a piece of paper. The main reason for Caulfield's communicative difficulty lies in his absolute hatred of phoniness that exists not only in the world of people around him, but in the world of art as well. He detests phony books, phony music, phony movies and plays. He sees Hamlet as a "sad, screwed-up type guy" and prefers him to be like that instead of "like a goddam general" (*The Catcher*117). He understands what Ernie and the piano player go through in their sincere attempts to not be phonies. Even his brother D.B. does not escape Holden's harsh judgment; he thinks he was once a sincere writer, but similar to the others in Hollywood, he turns to the job of prostituting his

work. Nevertheless, Holden expresses his approval of Thomas Hardy because he thinks that he did not surrender to the hypocritical attitude of prostituting his work like the other phonies.

Significantly, the fact that a message does get through to Holden's little sister Phoebe, the only successful communication in the entire novel, demonstrates how adolescents, regardless of their fear of interpersonal intimacy with members of their society, attach to one of their siblings as a substitute of such alienation from their community. Erikson (1968) believes that as a result of "an early identity hunger," the adolescents "attach themselves to one brother or sister" (178), in the hope of merging their own identity with that of their siblings as a compensation for their unattained identity. For Holden, Phoebe exemplifies everything he admires and clings to in children's world as opposite to that of adults. He is attracted to her because of her special skill of reaching out and communicating with him with an affectionate closeness. She, according to Holden, can smartly understand him and every other thing happening in this world. He believes that she also has the ability to distinguish good quality from bad ones in things around her such as the movies. She represents the personality of innocent childhood that he does not want to lose.

When adolescents fail to integrate with the new merging identity of adulthood, a kind of resentment is developed towards everything that represents this threatening new identity. This is articulated by Erikson:

Clinical and anthropological evidence suggest that the lack or loss of this accrued ego integration is signified by disgust and by despair. [...] Such a despair is often hidden behind a show of disgust, a misanthropy, or a chronic contemptuous displeasure with particular institutions and particular people. (1968: 140)

Holden's attitude towards adults in their appearance and behavior portrays this loss of ego integration and its consequences. He ironically compares adults' personalities and appearances to that of children. This is articulated in the way, for example, he describes, with admiration, Phoebe while she is sleeping with her open mouth on the pillow, while he thinks that adults "look lousy when they're asleep and they have their mouths way open" (*The Catcher*171). He also expresses his disgust upon noticing Mr. Smith's physical defecation and appearance, the old man's "bumpy old chests" in his "pajamas and bathrobes" (*The Catcher*45). Adults' world in contrast with children's is tainted with so many habits, such as drinking alcohol and smoking cigarettes. Holden shows his reaction towards these things by expressing his disgust of adults' bad breath. As he is waiting in his hotel room for Sunny, the prostitute, he comments: "Then I tested to see if my breath stank from so many cigarettes and the Scotch and sodas I drank at Ernie's" (*The Catcher*436). In other words, these acts are signs of corruption associated with adulthood, and he is trying to explore and experience their effect, but then he strongly rejects them. Holden shows bluntly his disgust whenever anyone has bad breath, such as when he comments about his aunt with halitosis. He also gets annoyed by the stinking

breath of the Cuban-looking guy while giving the road direction. Holden considers that the individual most likely to still have healthy breath would be the one who has least experienced this world, or, in other words, children, as represented by Phoebe. When Holden goes home secretly and dances with Phoebe, he contrasts his unhealthy state of breathing with that of hers. He believes that this shortage of breath that he suffers is a result of smoking cigarettes, a habit of adults from which children such as Phoebe are spared.

A second kind of symbolism that is significant for the contrast between innocent children and corrupted adults is illustrated in the notion of movement, especially up and down, or falling. Progressing from childhood to adulthood is regarded negatively, similar to a fall that is foreseeable. The more experience in the adult world, the deeper the fall is. In other words, any fall represents a loss of childhood innocence and an immersion into adult life with all the corruption it contains. Mr. Antolini warns Holden that he is approaching such fall: "This fall I think you're riding for—it's a special kind of fall, a horrible kind" (*The Catcher*243). When his sister asks him what he really wants to do he says he wants to protect the children from a fall to the adult world. He visions children world in a big field of rye and the adult world down the hill. He tells Phoebe that what he really dreams of doing is standing at the cliff saving children who are about to fall, protecting them from the terrible change that will stain their innocence with corruption and phoniness. Burrows (1969: 110) thinks that when Holden expresses his desire to save children from falling into the phoniness of the adult world, the reader feels that Holden is calling for help for himself. He wants someone to save him. Holden's fear of falling is manifested in the scene when he is depicted as walking up Fifth Avenue and going through a very weird experience. Every time he passes one block and attempts to step to the next one, he says he feels going "down, down, down, and nobody'd ever see me again" (*The Catcher*204). At every curb when he has this feeling of going down, he starts imagining talking to his dead brother Allie, begging to save him from falling. The fall represents a way down to adulthood and consequently the end of life. The contradiction between Holden's insisting on not accepting to leave the state of childhood and his hallucination that the threat of falling to adult world might be approaching represents, in Erikson's terms, a condition of 'diffusion of time'. Struggling with time, Holden wishes for himself and for other children to live in a constant state of childhood. A kind of regression pulls him towards this state of innocence and away from the phoniness of adulthood. He admires what he sees in the museum because nothing changes, every time he visits it he sees "everything always stayed right where it was. Nobody'd move. [...] Nobody'd be different" (*The Catcher*131). In contrast to the museum, he finally admits that people in real life do change, and every day they seem different from the day before in a way or another.

4. Conclusion

Holden Caulfield's narration of his three days out in New York manifests the terrible experience an adolescence faces when he/she is exposed to the adult world with all its

hypocrisy. He attempts to reach out to people who might help him in his interior struggle with the world he lives in. When he fails, he starts to fancy a situation where he will stay in a frozen state of childhood to avoid the corruption of the adult world. Salinger engages the reader in a journey through the experience of a vulnerable adolescent, dramatizing Erikson's theory of adolescent's state of 'crisis' and portraying Marcia's status of 'identity diffusion'. Through the character of Holden, the reader lives the experience of Erikson's identity confusion and its characteristics. Holden's failing to communicate is a result of avoiding 'intimacy', a state which Erikson describes as one of the portrayals of 'identity confusion'. Holden develops another characteristic of identity confusion, a sense of 'time diffusion' between what he clings to and what he fears might happen, which leads him to live in a state of in-betweenness. Erikson's 'negative identity' is illustrated in Holden's rejection of everything that his community expects of him and feels disgusted by everything associated with adulthood. Finally, he seems to be in 'diffusion of industry' as he concentrates only on negative aspects of the adult world and emphasizes its hypocrisy and phoniness.

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