HOLDEN CAULFIELD: A PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACH ON THE CATCHER IN THE RYE’S ANTI-HERO

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RESUMO: Valendo-se das teorias psicanalíticas de Freud, a saber, do ego, do superego e do id, o trabalho pretende traçar um paralelo entre essas teorias e a figura da personagem central da obra The Catcher in the Rye, buscando, dessa forma, uma maior compreensão da obra e de sua personagem principal. Holden Caulfield, um retrato de sua geração, apresenta traços de rebeldia e insatisfação comum à maioria dos adolescentes, levando-o a um estado de depressão que, no desenrolar da história, podem ser analisados pela ótica das teorias freudianas da psique humana. Através do discurso do narrador-personagem e de suas ações no decorrer da narrativa, apontaremos algumas possíveis interpretações das figuras do superego, do ego e do id dentro da obra de J. D. Salinger, considerando suas possíveis implicações para o desfecho da obra. Dentre outras possíveis representações das teorias freudianas na obra, apontamos a sociedade e o mundo dos adultos como seu maior repressor (superego), contrapostos pela rebeldia da personagem (id) e pelo constante dilema de agir corretamente e poder respeitar suas verdades (ego).

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Holden Caulfield, análise, psicanalítica.

ABSTRACT: Taking into account Freud’s psychoanalytical theories, namely, the ones related to the ego, the superego and the id approaches, this paper intends to depict some traces of such theories applied to the figure of The catcher in the rye’s main character, Holden Caulfield. Holden, a portrait of his generation, shows a rebellious and dissatisfied attitude, leading him into a nervous breakdown, in the end of the story. The unfolding of the actions in this narrative, seen by the eyes of the psychoanalytical approach, may help the readers find a deeper meaning and a different interpretation to their reading. Some of Holden’s speech and attitudes throughout the narrative will enlighten our interpretation of the ego, the superego and the id’s representation in J.D. Salinger’s masterpiece.

KEY-WORDS: Holden Caulfield, analysis, psychoanalytical.

1 INTRODUCTION

The catcher in the rye, J.D. Salinger’s masterpiece, is one of the most controversial books in North-American contemporary literature. It was first released in 1951 and, since then, it has been drawing people’s attention from all over. A very strange writer with very unusual manners combined with a rebellious character who

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would both shock and move people was the magic formula for a resounding success. Obligatory reading for high-school students around the globe, this book has crossed all boundaries and conquered the whole world. However criticized and controversial Salinger’s book might have been, its contribution to both changing some literature concepts and changing people’s mind about some issues concerning being a teenager is unquestionable. Understanding all the myths and controversies which surround this magnificent piece of work is hard-working but rewarding. In this paper, due to its great importance for literature, some considerations on *The catcher in the rye* and mostly on its main character, Holden Caulfield, have been made. This paper intends to take a deeper look into Salinger’s masterpiece, using some traces of the psychological approach – based on Freud’s studies on *Ego*, *Superego* and *Id*, mainly - to try to help other readers to unfold some of the deeper meanings of this book.

*The catcher in the rye* is timeless: more than sixty years have gone by since it was first published and it remains modern. Its thematic – an adolescent having trouble to fit into the rules of society – will always be contemporary. The fact that Salinger was the first person to openly and faithfully write about the difficulties of growing up gave him the credit for living a very uncommon and questionable life and remaining respectful anyhow. During the fifties, it was very difficult for youngsters to be heard and respected; after Holden Caulfield appeared, teenagers were given the opportunity of being heard and not taken for granted anymore. With its strong and acid vocabulary, full of swear words – not openly uttered at that time – *The catcher in the rye* shocked most Americans when it was first published. However, all the bad things about living in a *phoney* society were now revealed: the “perfect” American way of life was about to be exposed. Holden Caulfield and his rebelliousness completely changed a generation and continue being reference to youngsters nowadays.

By using the psychological approach we intend to help clarify some misunderstood ideas which surround this masterpiece. One of them, for example, consists of mistaking *The catcher in the rye* for an ordinary story about a rebellious teenager. Such definition could not be further from the truth. We are aware that it is always a big challenge to try to analyze in greater depth a literary masterpiece. Some mistakes can be made. Our intention here, though, is to get to possible conclusions by giving examples from the character’s speech and actions: no conclusion will be made out of nowhere, that is, conclusions are always supported by textual references to *The catcher in the rye*. It will thus be possible to show future readers – or even people who
have already been in touch with this book, but had never given it its real importance – some less apparent meanings in some of Holden Caulfield’s attitudes and actions.

However criticized and taken for granted Salinger’s masterpiece may have been, this paper is a tribute to one of the best and most important books in American literature, one that undoubtedly deserves to be properly appreciated and enjoyed.

1 J.D. SALINGER AND HIS MASTERPIECE

2.1 Some considerations on the author and his life

Behind every masterpiece there is an author, who dedicated hours, days, months or even years to create a magnificent piece of work to delight their readers. The author can be famous or not; creative or not, or even crazy or not. J.D. Salinger, the author under consideration in this paper, could be considered as famous and creative, and some used to consider him even a little crazy. But, however strange and criticized he might have been, his masterpiece, *The catcher in the rye*, keeps being published and read generation after generation, and has become one of the most loved and hated North-American literature books.

Jerome David Salinger, who was born in New York in 1919, had a very exciting life, just like his most important character, Holden Caulfield, did. His father was Sol Salinger, an importer of hams and cheese. His mother was Miriam Jilich. Neither Sol nor Miriam was part of the entertainment world anyway. They were both ordinary people in search of a comfortable life. Salinger also had one sister. According to Morrill (2002), his relationship with his father was very distant and “he didn’t even bother to attend his funeral”. On the other hand, he was very fond of his mother.

Salinger attended public schools all through his adolescent and young-adult life and his grades were just average. Being talented does not necessarily mean being the best student in class. Most successful writers, scientists - Albert Einstein, for instance - and also musicians – John Lennon, just for the record - were never really brilliant students when they were at school. The future, however, was saving the best for them. J. D. Salinger’s story was not much different. When he was a teenager, he started studying at Valley Forge Military Academy in Pennsylvania. While he was there, he wrote his first stories. After enrolling at *New York University*, his father took him to Vienna where he was introduced to the ham business. However, his father’s idea of making his
son enter the ham business did not work, which allowed Salinger to return to the States and start improving his writing skills.

Salinger’s first published story appeared in 1949, when he was 21. Although it seemed to be the beginning of a successful career, Salinger was sent to the Army in 1942. As a matter of fact, his days in the army did not interrupt his aspirations to become a writer: the boy spent weekends inside hotel rooms writing, as Kaplan (1965, p. 5) states in his book.

After spending four years serving the Army, Salinger returned to New York and lived a few years with his parents. That was the time when the author began withdrawing from the rest of the society. Researchers, journalists, writers themselves do not know the specific reason why J. D. Salinger decided to exclude himself from the rest of the world and live his own life apart. Being the author of one of the most polemic books in the whole story of literature was not enough. He had to be polemic too. His awkward behavior certainly helped his most, and probably only, famous book become even more popular. *The catcher in the rye*, his masterpiece, was released in 1951.

Salinger’s love life has also been a troubled one: he got married about three times and had many lovers and undisclosed relationships with both famous and ordinary girls. His reclusive life has also been another factor to turn him into a legend and persecuted figure. After many years living far from the spotlight, Salinger passed away on January 27th in 2010. His legacy, though, will remain among us forever.

1 Salinger’s writings

The funniest part about researching and writing about writers is to face the fact that most people try to find similarities between the authors’ personal lives and their work. Since *The catcher in the rye* is one of the only Salinger’s published novel, people tend to think Holden Caulfield’s character could have been basically based on the author’s own life; however, according to Kaplan, such comparison is at least controversial: “Undoubtedly, much of what he writes about is essentially autobiographical, but much of his life has little relation with his fiction” (1965, p.5)

As we can see, according to Kaplan (1965, p. 5), there are probably some similarities between Salinger’s life and his masterpiece. However, the best thing to do when reading a novel is always keep in mind that author and persona are totally distinct
figures. Thus, Salinger and Caulfield are completely different figures and people should not try to judge the author by the actions of his/her characters.

Even though *The catcher in the rye* may be the only renowned book among all of Salinger’s writings, there is much more written by this author than people ever read. As mentioned before, his first short story, “*The young folks*”, was published in 1941, in *Story* magazine. During the 1940s, he published approximately 21 short stories in the *Saturday Evening Post* and some other magazines. He suffered through ten years of rejection reviews before one of his stories, *A Perfect Day for Bananafish*, was finally accepted. That story sailed through the approval process; the *New Yorker* editors were very impressed. After that, he seemed to become the great writer he has been known as today.

In 1953, *Nine stories* was released. It is a collection of short stories, with the members of the Glass family as main characters. Eight years later, *Franny and Zooey* was published. Once again The Glass family is involved. A few more short stories have been published in magazines and newspapers, the last one dated 1965.

As we can see, Salinger is the writer of merely one published novel, certainly a very successful novel. People could tend to ask: is he a good writer after all or this great popularity was just sheer luck? Does Salinger receive attention because he is a good writer or because he is a recluse? He might have been one of the best American writers of the 20th century. Unfortunately, a lot of the attention he gets is because of a peculiar cult-like attraction he has over a lot of people. A lot of critics do not think he deserves such attention and honors; most of them, though, recognize the fact that Salinger is a very good writer indeed, and his reclusive life is only a consequence of his choices and preferences.

### 2.3 The myth

Whenever either Salinger’s name is mentioned or *The catcher in the rye* itself is, it is impossible to avoid some discussions or argument, and sometimes even misunderstandings. Either you love it or hate it, there seems not to be any intermediary option. Since the novel was first released, in 1951, a lot of polemic events and facts have been related to it. In the beginning, the book was banished because of its content and risqué vocabulary. But then almost suddenly, it became a hit, being received by critics and book reviewers as a “literary sensation”, a masterpiece, in which “a human
being had been created out of ink, paper and the imagination” according to Clifton Fadimon (KAPLAN, 1965, p. 6). On the other hand, the use of profanity in this story contributed to its banishment in some communities and parts of the world. Not only did its content turn this author and his book into myths, but some events related to both author and book helped create and feed the myth.

Salinger’s recluse life-style can be considered as one of the main reasons behind so many controversies over *The catcher in the rye*. Morrill (2002), on her website dedicated to trying to understand Salinger’s figure, states that Salinger’s reclusive life has always generated a lot of attention, and has also helped increase his book sales. This mystique surrounding him could possibly be interpreted as an intelligent way of getting even more popularity.

Salinger’s odd behavior has always called people’s attention: he only ate organic food, he followed some Buddhists beliefs, even though he was very fond of having sex with really young ladies; besides, he has never allowed anyone to photograph him, so that we have no idea what he looks like today, and he has always successfully avoided media interviewers. When *The catcher in the rye* was first released he asked his publisher not to send him any review about his book. He did not want his picture to appear so large on the cover of the book. He was a strange man with strange manners, let’s put it this way. However reclusive and distant Salinger might have wanted to be, the effects of this behavior only made people’s attention grow towards him.

Lots of Hollywood movies have been mentioning *The catcher in the rye* throughout the years. It has been reference to many teenagers who identify themselves with Holden’s confused ideas of life. Another reason for all this mystique surrounding the book has been related to the fact that the man who killed the famous musician John Lennon in 1980, Marc Chapman, was carrying this book in his hands when he shot the famous Beatle, who was called to the building door with the specific purpose to autograph the book.

If you are a fan of *The catcher in the rye*, you can either be considered as a good-taste reader or even a devil worshipper. The real reason for so many different opinions about one only book will probably never be found out. In fact, I believe there is no specific reason for both Salinger and his masterpiece to be considered myths. This is an idea which has been created and reinforced throughout the years, but maybe it is
just a good marketing strategy or maybe we are just dealing with a very good book, written by a very weird/intelligent man, who has never wanted to be the center of attention anyway. Most people probably do not even know that Salinger is a recluse and has a somewhat strange personality and do enjoy reading and re-reading his famous novel.

1 The catcher in the rye

*The catcher in the rye’s* formula worked out due to the fact that it was written by a very skilled writer who, maybe without really meaning to change the world, ended up being a trailblazer by his unique style and by his subject and opening society’s eyes to the teenager’s point of view. The way Salinger wrote his masterpiece and his total empathy with the way teenagers feel and express themselves, brought him very close to them and finally started having their own voices heard. The young people who lived during the fourties and fifties were all taken for granted. Nobody really gave so much attention to their own thoughts and ideas. Elvis Presley was the only reference to them. Being a teenager was considered only a transitional phase in everybody’s life. It was not supposed to be painful or remarkable: it was only a big transition of hormones and a psycho-somatic change, nothing else; teenagers were just tolerated.

A combination of strong vocabulary and the creation of a strong-acid-behavior character was the best formula for a legend to be born: Holden Caulfield became the “older brother” for many adolescents who did not have anyone to turn to, a kind of partner, fellow friend. Caulfield and his existentialistic problems showed the whole world how tough and tiring being a teenager could be. Not only teenagers did find themselves by reading this book but also their parents started paying closer attention to their children’s needs.

After *The catcher in the rye* was published, parents started understanding their children and youngsters as respectful people, whose opinions and desires had to be taken into consideration. This is what makes Salinger’s book unique: it affected deeply the points of view of a whole stable society. Old concepts have been changed since then and the ones who were before considered voiceless now would have the opportunity to express themselves.

In spite of all this success and revolutionary ideas, there is no clear evidence about what the original idea that made Salinger write this book might have been.
Researchers know that in the late fourties – the period when Salinger wrote it – the author already started living a reclusive life. It is impossible to make any kind of association with Salinger’s life and his plot. Some journalists like to say the school where Salinger studied when he was in his teenage years - Valley Forge Military Academy – was the inspiration to create the Pencey school, school where Holden Caulfield studied at. However, there are no concrete facts which show us these speculations are actually true.

No matter where it came from, and how or who inspired this masterpiece, *The catcher in the rye* will always remain as an icon to the young generations and will also be appreciated and respected by the older ones, as it is a faithful picture, not always beautiful, of the crises adolescents go through.

2 The story

*The catcher in the rye* is about a 17-year-old boy, called Holden Caulfield, who has been temporarily sent to a mental institution to recover from some nervous breakdown. Holden himself is the narrator and he tells the readers his story while he is at that institution. He narrates the crazy things that happened to him one week before being sent to this place and also tells us the reasons why he is there now.

Holden comes from a wealthy family. He has always studied at the best schools in New York, although he had generally been “kicked out” from most of them. The last school where he studied at was called Pencey School from where, once again, he got expelled. This time, however, there was a different development: Holden was not really mentally prepared for that harsh punishment and decided not to go back home. He thought it would be nice to fool around a little bit before coming back home, since his parents could really not be expecting such “great” news.

All along the book we see the main character under various and unusual circumstances: he would frequently lie to the people around him, he would try to lose his virginity with a prostitute but would give it up in the last minute; he also visited a former teacher and thought the man was in love with him and so on. The plot itself is very simple. What really makes the book a masterpiece, however, is the way Salinger told Caulfield’s story: Holden is a teenager in conflict. He has been under pressure for a long time and does not know how to deal with such emotions and odd situations. The way the young character expresses himself, the vocabulary choices – quite offensive for
that time, indeed – his very strong and articulate ideas turn what could be a very simple and silly story into a delight for even the most ordinary reader. The fact that it was written in the late fourties may be the reason why this book has always been so successful and polemical: people were not really prepared to get in touch with this kind of literature, where “bad words” and also bad behavior was openly shown.

Holden Caulfield spends seven days of his life wandering around New York City. It is a very introspective story, where each action or decision which is made originates a thought or opinion. Holden does not miss the opportunity to show what he really thinks about the society and the people surrounding him. Everyone and everything is lousy for him. People are phoney. He sometimes acts as if he were phoney too, though. He knows that being inserted in such society sometimes can obligate you to act like this as well.

Holden is alone in the world: he does not know what to do, where to go or, which is even worse, who to talk to. He has no perspectives and the hypocrisy of this world only makes him down. A group of non-succeeded attempts of being understood and heard end up depressing the boy at such a point that he has to be sent to that mental institution. What happens next, nobody knows.
The purpose of using the psychological approach to analyze a book in more depth is to “read between the lines”, that is, to try to unfold some mysteries involving the plot and the characters. *The catcher in the rye* is a very controversial book, as some people love it and others simply hate it. In some people’s opinion, Salinger’s book is merely about a teenager who is in conflict and depressed. Such definition, to unaware people, would probably sound as if the book did not have a deeper purpose - a 210-page-book describing a very banal contemporary topic, a young boy in conflict, - or as if the main character’s problems were as shallow or even unimportant as any other of today’s youngsters’. The main objective of this psychological analysis is to show how meaningful and interesting *The catcher in the rye* really is. It does not matter whether Caulfield’s situation for our generation could be even considered ordinary. It is true that all teenagers have problems and dilemmas. The point here, though, is to see what is going on inside Caulfield’s mind and why he reacted like this or like that, since from the very beginning, the reader can see how rebellious Holden is. This is the most important and remarkable feature in Holden’s character, his rebelliousness. When he first introduces himself to the reader he uses words such as *crap*, *goddamn*, *lousy* and *hate* (SALINGER, 1973, p. 5). From his speech, it is possible to see how indignant towards people surrounding him he is. The vocabulary choice can also say a lot about this boy’s way of acting. Using an aggressive tone, he immediately warns the readers that talking about his life is something that really *bores* him and that he is not interested at all in telling them his “whole goddamn autobiography or anything” (SALINGER, 1973, p.5). Holden Caulfield also describes himself as an *exhibitionist*, as he also states “All I need’s an audience. I’m an exhibitionist (SALINGER, 1973, p. 33)”. Such information is very important to understand this character’s behavior as well.

The fact that Holden is a rebellious and an exhibitionist will appear many times during the whole plot, as it is going to be exemplified afterwards. Taking Freud’s definitions of *ego*, *super ego* and *id* into consideration, after reading the book, we can draw several interesting and curious conclusions.

The *super ego* in this book is represented by the authorities in general, that is, the school and, most of all, society and its rules. Holden has a big problem with
following orders and fitting into the rules and regulations of society. As the super ego stands for the morality principle, the repressing entities, it stands to reason that society is one of Holden’s main repressors; he cannot do whatever he would like to due to the fact that he, no matter how he does, whether he agrees or not, has to be submitted to the rules of society. In the very beginning of *The catcher in the rye*, Holden tells the reader he has been “kicked out” from his school, Pencey. This is a clear example of how authorities in general - the school, for instance – can work as a super ego and get Holden to follow some rules:

I forgot to tell you about that. They kicked me out. I wasn’t supposed to come back after Christmas vacation, on account I was flunking four subjects and not applying myself and all. They gave me frequent warning to start applying myself and all [...] but I didn’t do it. So I got the axe. They give the guys the axe very frequently at Pencey. It has a very good academic rating, Pencey. It really does. (SALINGER, 1973, p. 8)

The super ego, as has already been said, works as a repressor of the id, which is the part of the unconscious mind where many of a person’s basic needs, feelings and desires are supposed to exist. Taking such definitions into consideration, it is easy to perceive that Holden’s deepest desires - the id - are completely blocked and frustrated by society and its rules – the super ego.

Since society represents the super ego, the id manifests itself in some of Caulfield’s attitudes and decisions, mostly when he decides to escape from everything that both bores and represses him. His decision to escape from Pencey School is a clear manifestation of his id, since it is clear for the reader that Caulfield allowed his impulses to lead him wherever he wanted. In the middle of a very ordinary night, after spending some time with his room-mate, Stradlater, and having an argument with him – the boy was dating Jane Gallagher, the only girl Holden has always been really fond of – Caulfield makes this sudden decision: “get the hell out of Pencey” (SALINGER, 1973, p. 54). As the character himself stated: “I sort of needed a little vacation. My nerves were shot. They really were.”(SALINGER, 1973, p. 55) It is clear when Caulfield says that “all of sudden I changed my mind. All of sudden I decided what I’d really do – I’d get the hell out of Pencey – right that same night and all. I mean not to wait till Wednesday or anything. I just didn’t want to hang around any more. It made me too sad and lonesome” (SALINGER, 1973, p. 55) that he let his id lead him. He was not clearly thinking – he was mad at all those “phoney” guys at Pencey and, all of a sudden, made this so-called insane decision.
His inconsistency is also another manifestation of the id. Caulfield is very inconsistent; most of what happens to him during his journey in New York could not have happened if it were not for his resistance about reasoning over some situations.

Another way that the id appears in Caulfield’s behavior is that he is constantly lying and deceiving people. As Holden himself says it is something that seems to be part of himself, he simply does it, without much worrying: “I’m the most terrific liar you ever saw in your life” (SALINGER, 1973, p. 20). No matter what the place or the circumstance, Caulfield is always lying. In one particular moment, when he is inside a train, he starts talking to an older woman and pretends to be another person. He also tells the woman he is sick: “I have to have this operation. [...] It isn’t very serious. I have this tiny little tumour on the brain” (SALINGER, 1973, p. 62). The reader can see there is no need for doing such thing, but it seems that Holden simply cannot avoid it: he lies all the time. Even during the most ordinary conversations the boy has, he lies about either his age, or something about his family or even when he is trying to please people around him.

On the other hand, we have Caulfield’s ego, which is very present and clear in his behavior. In fact, there seems to be a strong fight between Caulfield’s id (all the sudden and inconsistent decisions he makes during his life) and his ego (his consciousness, his being aware of everything and everyone surrounding him).

However rebellious and inconsistent Holden’s behavior might have been, no matter how strongly and bitterly his id may try to join forces, the conscious part of his mind, the one which makes him aware of whom he really is, the ego seems to be really present too. Holden Caulfield shows some concern about his mother’s feelings while he is packing his things to “get the hell out of Pencey” (SALINGER, 1973, p. 53):

One thing about packing depressed me a little. I had to pack these brand-new ice-skates my mother had practically just sent me a couple of days before. That depressed me. I could see my mother going in Spaulding’s and asking the salesman a million dopey questions – and here I was getting the axe again. It made me feel pretty sad. She bought me the wrong kind of skates – I wanted reacing-skates and she bought hockey – but it made me sad anyway. Almost every time somebody gives me a present, it ends up making me sad (SALINGER, 1973, p. 55).

In this passage there is a clear manifestation of Caulfield’s ego, where we can see his concern about his mother’s buying him a present and spending some time on doing it. The idea of knowing his mother spent some time buying a present for him, who is now being “kicked out” from school and may even not be considered a person
who deserves a present, “depresses him”: he is aware of who he really is and of what he is doing and he knows what the possible effects of such action in his mother could be. Meanwhile he is ready to get away from school, without thinking twice – the id’s manifestation – he knows how disappointed and sad his family would probably get – the ego’s manifestation.

The ego is present in Caulfield’s behavior not only concerning his family, but also when it comes to society and its rules – the super ego manifestation. Caulfield hates society’s conventions but he is aware of the consequences, in case he does not follow them. It is a way his ego finds to respect the super ego, his big repressor, in order to survive and not to be punished. This respect towards some conventions is noticeable when Caulfield is in the bar in the hotel dancing with some girls. He had spent some time lying to the girls and really making fun of them, when he realizes something really important:

“He practically stopped dancing, and started looking over everybody’s head to see if she could see him. ‘Oh, shoot!’ she said. I’d just about broken her heart – I really had. I was sorry as hell I’d kidded her. Some people you shouldn’t kid, even if they deserve it” (SALINGER, 1973, p. 78).

Even though the girl he was dancing with was not so intelligent and pleasant, he felt really sorry for making fun of her and being so sarcastic. When he says that “some people you shouldn’t kid, even if they deserve it” he is showing, somehow, he is completely conscious that we cannot do whatever we please to. People are different and these differences should be respected. Moreover, on the same night, Holden meets some new people, and when he is introduced to a man who works for the Navy, he makes some remarks about how “glad” he was to meet him:

“The Navy guy and I told each other we were glad to have met each other. Which always kills me. 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, 1973, p. 92).

In this excerpt, Caulfield’s awareness of the existence of some of society’s conventions is very clear. And as the reader will probably notice, no matter how rebellious and inconsistent and even selfish Caulfield might sound most of the times, his id hardly ever succeeds. Society – which works here as the super ego – is more often successful in repressing Caulfield’s desire – the id - of living his own life without depending on the phoney people who surround him. One very good example of this
victory, is the excerpt above, in which Holden shows his disappointment to having to follow some conventions. If it were not for the social conventions, however, he would probably be dead.

Freud also stated that all human behavior is motivated ultimately by sexuality. When it comes to dealing with girls and sex, Holden shows he has principles, even though he seems to be a little confused and unsettled person, he is a boy who respects girls and does not allow his *id* to prevail. He really follows his principles, as we can see in the excerpt below:

“I can never get really sexy – I mean *really* sexy - with a girl I don’t like a lot. I mean I have to *like* her a lot. If I don’t, I sort of lose my goddamn desire for her and all. Boy, it really screws up my sex life something awful. My sex life stinks.” (SALINGER, 1973, p. 153)

When he says that his sex life “stinks”, we can see how frustrated he feels about never having had sex in his life. It does not mean, though, that he is going to have sex with a girl who does not really want to have it. Once again, his *ego* is much stronger than his *id*. If he were really desperate and inconsistent, he would have sex with any girl. Another consideration about the character’s sex life and his dilemmas is visible when he finally decides to lose his virginity with a prostitute. When he says that having sex with a prostitute “was against my principles and all” (SALINGER, 1973, p. 96) the reader can notice, once again, how the character has a sense of right and wrong, even though sometimes he may not act according to some of society’s conventions. He is, in fact, true to his principles. He continues, though: “but I was feeling so depressed I didn’t even think. That’s the whole trouble. When you’re feeling very depressed, you can’t even think” (SALINGER, 1973, p. 96). Holden almost explicitly went against his principles since he was feeling too depressed. Being depressed could be a reason not to think properly. However, Holden does not have sexual intercourse with the young prostitute, Sandy. His conscience, the *super ego*, defeated his *id*.

Being a 16-year-old-virgin is not very pleasant and admirable, according to Holden’s perspective, but this fact does not turn him into a sexual maniac – the *id* would prevail then. The young boy remains respectful to the girls and shows the reader how nice he really is towards girls. When he first tells the reader he still is a virgin, the reader can even get moved by the boy’s naivety, sensitivity and kindness:

If you want to know the truth, I’m a virgin. I really am. [...] The thing is, most of the time when you’re coming pretty close to doing it with a girl – a girl that isn’t a prostitute or anything, I mean – she keeps telling you to stop.
The trouble with me is, I stop. Most guys don’t. I can’t help it. You never know whether they’re just scared as hell, or whether they’re just telling you to stop so that if you do go through with it, the blame’ll be on you, not them. Anyway, I keep stopping. The trouble is I get to feeling sorry for them. I mean most girls are so dumb and all. After you neck them for a while, you can really watch them losing their brains. You take a girl when she really gets passionate, she just hasn’t any brains. I don’t know. They tell me to stop, so I stop. I always wish I hadn’t, after I take them home, but I keep doing it anyway (SALINGER, 1973, p. 97).

From this description of how he behaves with the girls he goes out with, the reader can get a taste of who Holden Caulfield really is: a young boy whose sexual desires do not take control of him. The passage above is another clear example of Holden’s super ego, or moral conscience: the id is always defeated when sex is involved. His kindness towards girls is what keeps him a virgin. According to him, on one hand, he stops trying to have sex with the girls when they ask him to, on the other, “most guys don’t”, which says a lot about this character, since, even though most people who read this masterpiece like to say Holden is “mentally insane” or a “pervert”, here we have the proof that he, indeed, is worried about other people’s feelings and lives. If he really were a pervert or a swine, he would have probably had sex at least once in his life. When the subject is sex, Holden Caulfield is purely ego or super ego.

I’m probably the biggest sex maniac you ever saw. Sometimes I can think of very crumby stuff I wouldn’t mind doing if the opportunity came up. I can even see how it might be quite a lot of fun, in a crumby way, and if you were both sort of drunk and all, to get a girl and squirt water or something all over each other’s face. The thing is, though, I don’t like the idea. It stinks, if you analyze it. I think if you don’t really like a girl, you shouldn’t horse around with her at all, and if you do like her, then you’re supposed to like her face, and if you like her face, you ought to be careful about doing crumby stuff to it, like squirting water all over it. It’s really too bad that so much crumby stuff is a lot of fun sometimes (SALINGER, 1973, p. 66).

Another demonstration of his ego is when it comes to religion. Caulfield, feeling completely desperate for not knowing what to do of his life, whether coming back home or getting away, almost found a solution for his depression:

“I felt like praying or something, when I was in bed, but I couldn’t do it. I can’t always pray when I feel like it. In first place, I’m sort of an atheist. I like Jesus and all, but I don’t care too much for most of the other stuff in the Bible” (SALINGER, 1973, p. 104).

From the excerpt above, we can see Caulfield is not a hypocrite at all: he does not feel comfortable praying whenever he would like or need to, different from other people, who generally ask for God’s help whenever they have a problem, even if they
do not believe in God’s existence. As a matter of fact, these people are the hypocrites. Holden was faithful to his principles.

According to Freud, as Guerin et al (GUERIN, 1966, p. 97) state, rebellion is in essence a rejection of parental, specifically paternal, authority, which means rebelliousness is a way of trying to get free from paternal repression, that is the super ego. In The catcher in the rye, although we have rebelliousness as one of the main topics, our character is not trying to escape from his parent’s authority; they are, indeed, very apathetic characters in this book. Caulfield’s parents do not seem to interfere much in the boy’s decisions and life. Caulfield never shows any kind of disrespect or even big disapproval towards his parents. As any ordinary teenager, he sure does have his relationship problems with his parents, but nothing really meaningful to try to understand the boy’s behavior. The real super ego in Caulfield’s world is society.

1 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Despite all the controversies and myth-like stories surrounding Salinger’s masterpiece, The catcher in the rye should be read like any other novel. The reader should try to focus in the story itself, but, it is important that the reader should know how unusual and criticized Salinger’s life had been and all the polemical stories which were created since The catcher in the rye was first released, in 1951. For a better understanding of this book, the reader should always keep in mind how important and revolutionary this book has been and how Caulfield’s trajectory and behavior have changed not only literary concepts, but, maybe most of all, people’s way of thinking about literary concepts and about life itself. Salinger’s particular style of writing combined with a rebellious main character approached this novel to the youngster’s world and has become unforgettable since then. Holden Caulfield’s figure will remain alive in whoever has read The catcher in the rye forever. Salinger became immortal and so did Caulfield. More than fifty years have already gone by and Salinger’s masterpiece remains as an icon to both past and future generations.

The catcher in the rye shocked many people in the early fifties and keeps on doing so even so many years later. Even though people, little by little, started accepting and enjoying Salinger’s unique and controversial style, until today The catcher in the rye remains as one of the most loved and also hated books in the history of American literature. That is why it must be properly analyzed and read. This paper was an attempt
to help Brazilian students have a better understanding of this masterpiece and also help them get deeper into the plot and Holden Caulfield’s behavior.

By using the *psychological* approach, we showed some very interesting possibilities of understanding Holden Caulfield’s figure. To common and superficial readers, some very important features in this character could not be understood or may even be taken for granted. After reading this paper, though, the reader will be able to recognize some deeper meanings inside the plot and about Holden’s behavior.

This was an attempt to show how significant the meanings inside one single novel can be. We know that there are many possible interpretations for this book and all of them should be taken into consideration. The analysis in this paper is not at all exclusive and excluding. In fact, when it comes to analyzing a novel, nothing is definitive. What people have to pay attention to, though, is that we can never get to any conclusion about a book without having evidence from inside the novel that may support our ideas. Whoever is analyzing a literary book can never assume what the author wanted to say or think, but the mechanisms of critical analysis can always help him see things that maybe the author himself was not fully conscious of.

The main purpose of this paper was not only to show some other views from one only book, but also to encourage other people to come up with other possible interpretations of *The catcher in the rye*. We hope more and more people may feel urged to find out other deeper and more meaningful features inside Salinger’s masterpiece. We also hope that, after reading this paper, people may be able to recognize other manifestations of both the psychological approach in *The catcher in the rye*.

Salinger will remain immortal and so will Holden Caulfield and *The catcher in the rye*. It does not matter how many years may go by; people will keep being both shocked and surprised after reading this masterpiece. We believe this is what literature is all about: touching people, giving them a variety of feelings and thoughts. A masterpiece is never built on its own. Besides having an author, it will need people to delight it and also to question it. That is what exactly makes *The catcher in the rye* an unforgettable book. In spite of Salinger’s being a very talented writer, we must take into consideration the fact that this book has a huge capacity of making people spend days, months or even years researching and trying to exhaust all the different possible interpretations of it, as it has already been done here. For this reason, and for many others which have already been previously mentioned in this paper, *The catcher in the rye* is worth reading.
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