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About this Madman Stuff

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by John Pilkington

Nobody has ever accused Huck Finn of being crazy. On the contrary, readers have generally found Huck a sensitive, perceptive, and eminently realistic adolescent. The measure of his sanity, as well as the climax of his moral growth, has been seen in his ability to reach the determination that even though he may "*go* to hell," he will defy the accepted patterns of thought and conduct, which have been practiced by his elders, approved by society, and reinforced by religion itself. To our notion, his defiance becomes a magnificent triumph because he is unquestionably right. Huck is right, and society is wrong. We do not blame him when he asserts that he wants to light out for the territory ahead. In fact, we agree heartily with Huck Finn, for we feel that life along the banks of the Mississippi is not good enough for him—or for us.

Mark Twain never bothered to show us what the society that Huck Finn rejected thought about Huck Finn. In fact, for most of the novel, Huck is "dead" to that society. Yet one cannot help wondering what Miss Watson would have thought about Huck's decision about Jim. If she had accepted it, then Huck Finn's rebellion would become somewhat vitiated for us. On the other hand, if she had rejected his decision—as Huck thought she would have—would she have said, "Huck's gone crazy!" And if Aunt Sally, who was going to adopt him at the end of the novel, had lived on some seventy years later, would she have sent Huck out to a psychoanalyst near Hollywood, California, to have him "cured" so that he would return to the banks of the Mississippi? Since Mark Twain never told us what Miss Watson or Aunt Sally thought about these problems, and since he did not live long enough himself even to consider the solution that might be offered by a psychoanalyst, we shall never know; and perhaps the point is not worth a great deal of speculation. The important fact of *Huckleberry Finn*

is that the last remark Mark Twain makes to us implies unmistakably that Huck Finn is not only determined "to light out for the territory ahead of the rest" but also that he will never come back to this society he has weighed and found badly wanting.

During the years between the publication of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in 1884 and *The Catcher in the Rye* in 1951, the problem which Huck Finn faced has not essentially changed; rather, it is the terms in which it is stated, and perhaps the answer, that have been changed. Most noticeable, of course, is the change in environment—the virtual disappearance of nature as a factor. Huck Finn found it "lovely to live on a raft" and float down the middle of the Big River. But by the time Holden Caulfield puts on his red hunting cap, or "People shooting" cap, even the Big Woods where Ike McCaslin hunted in "The Bear" have vanished, and in their stead Holden has only the streets of New York. Indeed, the only place that Holden can find that is nice and peaceful and quiet and lovely is the tomb room where the Egyptian mummies are kept in the Museum of Natural History.

The relative disappearance of nature as one of the terms has been balanced by the emergence of the urban factor. Huck Finn knew at once which end of the cow got up first, but Holden Caulfield has no idea what happens to the ducks on the pond in winter. On the other hand, Holden has lived in New York all of his life and much of it he knows like he knows the back of his hand, but Huck Finn would have marvelled even more at New York than he did at the circus. Huck Finn reflects the time when the norm of American living was the small town; Holden Caulfield faces the problems of urban living. By comparison Huck Finn's problems seem simpler; less complex, and more clear cut. He can recognize the rascality of the king and the duke, but would he have identified the "secret slob" or the lack of religion in the Christmas show at Radio City? Huck's problems are also reduced by the apparent absence of adolescent sexual problems.

Important as these changes are, they become overshadowed by Salinger's introduction of another factor that ultimately becomes crucial in the interpretation of the novel—the question of Holden's sanity. A comparison with Mark Twain's novel helps to sharpen

the issue. Huck Finn struggles powerfully with his "conscience" and frequently voices his loneliness and mental depression, but neither he nor the reader ever has any doubt about his sanity. Huck's difficulties, indeed, seem to us somewhat less consequential when placed beside the implication, accepted as fact by many astute critics, that Holden is at worst insane or at best suffering from some kind of mental illness.[1] If Holden is sane and remains unchanged by the psychoanalyst, then our estimate of the novel may stand in need of revision; as a matter of fact, in Holden's alleged madness may lie the key to the right understanding of the novel.

There is much in the novel to suggest that Holden has been mentally ill. The first paragraph and the coda-like ending (Chapter 26) would imply that he is telling his story in a California sanatarium where he has been recovering from "this madman stuff . . . last Christmas."[2] Holden mentions that after the carrousel ride, he went home, became "sick and all" (p. 275) and "had to come out here and take it easy" (p. 3). That he has been treated by a psychoanalyst is evident from his reference to "this one psychoanalyst guy they have here" (p. 192), who keeps asking him if he is going to apply himself when he returns to school.

Throughout the novel the reader is constantly urged to accept the view that Holden does need psychiatric treatment. Mental disturbances seem to run in his family. One need not, of course, attach any serious importance to Holden's comment that his grandmother "doesn't have all her marbles any more" (p. 67), or to his generalization that "mothers are all slightly insane" (p. 72), or to his remark that when he lost something "it used to drive my mother crazy" (p. 117). Likewise we cannot be too certain about Holden's assertion that when his father invests in Broadway shows,

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[1]This point of view has been most cogently stated by Edgar Branch, "Mark Twain and J. D. Salinger: A Study in Literary Continuity," *American Quarterly*, IX (Summer, 1957), 144-158. Branch finds Holden aware that he is "mentally ill" and suggests that "Holden's tense outpouring is a convincing expression of his psychological unrest and of the release he is finding in psychiatric treatment."

[2]J. D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1951), p. 3. Hereafter, the page numbers in parentheses refer to this edition.

"it drives my mother crazy" (p. 140). He adds that "she hasn't felt too healthy since my brother Allie died. She's very nervous" (p. 140; for virtually the same comment see p. 201). Again, he declares "my mother gets very hysterical" (p. 66). On another occasion, Holden declares that his mother is "nervous as hell. Half the time she's up all night smoking cigarettes" (p. 206). The fact that "she gets headaches quite frequently" (p. 231) does not surprise us; and we are fully prepared to believe that if Holden left home for the West, his mother "would get nervous as hell and start to cry" (p. 265). In themselves, these remarks are scarcely convincing; but when one considers that they constitute most of what Holden tells us about his mother, they take on more significance. Did his mother need mentral therapy?

The ten-year-old Phoebe exhibits many of the same evidences of emotional tension that characterize her mother. Holden presents Phoebe to us as a very bright girl. Perhaps no ironic inference is to be drawn from the fact that he also refers to her "crazy face" (p. 216), her "crazy eye" (p. 270), and twice to her actions as "crazy stuff" (p. 269). On two separate occasions, he says flatly that she is "a madman sometimes" (p. 214 and p. 270). Elsewhere, Holden remarks that "she gets very emotional, I swear to God" (p. 214) and "she's very emotional, for a child" (p. 89). Phoebe, herself, mentions her "nerves" (p. 213), hopes to learn to make her temperature go up (pp. 228-229), and writes under assumed names (pp. 208-209). Was Phoebe just a little "crazy"?

With the possible exception of Allie, Holden makes no suggestion that anyone else in the family suffers from emotional disturbances. Allie, of course, is dead, but Holden tells us that Allie wrote Emily Dickinson's poems on his catcher's mitt, an action that would indicate, to say the least, a remarkable boy. Far from being called "crazy," D.B. is described as outwardly well-adjusted and very successful. Holden observes that D.B. is out in Hollywood, "being a prostitute" (p. 4). D.B., in fact, "just got a Jaguar" (p. 4).

> One of those little English jobs that can do around two hundred miles an hour. It cost him damn near four thousand bucks. He's got a lot of dough, now. He didn't *use* to. He used to be just a regular

> writer, when he was home. He wrote this terrific book of short stories . . . . (p. 4)

To complete the description, Holden adds that D.B. has an "English babe" (p. 276). Obviously, D.B. has no need for the help of a psychoanalyst. Well adjusted himself, D.B. asks Holden the same type of question that the psychoanalyst keeps asking. We are likewise led to believe that Holden's father is a successful man. Holden says that his father is a wealthy corporation lawyer who invests money in Broadway shows (p. 140). Evidently, Mr. Caulfield has expressed concern over Holden's failure. When Phoebe learns that Holden has been dismissed from another school, she repeatedly exclaims, "Daddy's gonna kill you" (p. 214); and Mr. Antolini later informs Holden that his father is "terribly concerned" (p. 242) about him. But even though Mr. Caulfield may be distressed, Holden does not seem to feel that his father would lose any sleep over the matter. The contrast between the mother, who would awaken if you "cough somewhere in Siberia," and his father, whom you "can hit . . . over the head with a chair and he won't wake up" (p. 206) is both clear and meaningful. Mr. Caulfield has no emotional problems; significantly, the successful lawyer sleeps soundly at night.

To the reader who accepts Holden's statements about himself at face value, the truth is plainly evident: this boy is nervous, depressed, and lonely. To put the matter bluntly, Holden must be crazy. The evidence may be found on page after page in the novel. Like his mother and his sister, Holden is nervous. Time and again he makes such remarks as "I'm quite a nervous guy" (p. 44), "Boy, was I getting nervous" (p. 55), or "I was pretty nervous. I admit it . . . . I could hardly tie my shoelaces, I was so damn nervous" (p. 231). Equally apparent is Holden's mental depression. No reader can forget the multitude of such comments as "I felt so lonesome . . . . I almost wished I was dead" (p. 62), "Depressed and all. I almost wished I was dead" (p. 118), "It made me too sad and lonesome" (p. 66), "It makes me so depressed I can't stand it" (p. 98), or "I was feeling so damn depressed and lonesome" (p. 198).

In themselves, these admissions of nervousness and mental despondency would not be sufficient to warrant the conclusion that Holden is crazy. Holden, however, does not shrink from stronger assertions. Three times in the novel he says categorically, "I'm crazy. I swear to God I am" (pp. 135, 162, 163), and once he declares, "I swear to God I'm a madman" (p. 174). On eight occasions he tells us that he has been driven crazy (pp. 19, 95, 104, 145, 147, 161, 212, 260), and in six other instances he affirms that he has been nearly or almost driven crazy (pp. 45, 105, 161, 202, 238, 260). This tabulation excludes instances in which Holden uses the word *crazy* or madman in an off-hand manner; for example, "I wasn't too crazy about doing it" (p. 51), or "I apologized like a madman" (p. 173), or "when I'm drunk, I'm a madman" (p. 197). Is Holden, to use his word, crazy?

The basis, then, for the widely accepted conclusion that Holden needs mental therapy rests mainly upon the framework of the novel (that Holden is narrating his story in some kind of mental institution and that perhaps even his verbalizing or narration of his experiences is actually a kind of therapy), upon the suggestion that he came from a family where there was a history of mental difficulties, and upon Holden's own declarations of his nervousness, despondency, and, in his language, his craziness. Accepting these conclusions, the reader closes the novel hoping that the psychoanalyst will send Holden back to school "cured," and that at his fourth preparatory school Holden will apply himself and ultimately become a "useful" citizen like his father and his brother. Incidentally, he will stop this crazy kid stuff, this nonsense about wanting to be the catcher in the rye. In this view, the correct comparison with Huck Finn is that Holden is saved for society by the psychoanalyst who has taught him not only "to live humbly" for a cause but also to make the compromises necessary to live humbly and to succeed in society. If there had been psychoanalysts in Huck Finn's day, Huck Finn, too, might have been rescued and persuaded not to light out for the territory ahead of the rest. Unfortunately, Huck Finn refused to make the compromise necessary to become cured. Holden would thus become a "reformed" Huckleberry Finn.

Such a view of *The Catcher in the Rye,* resting as it does upon the assumption of Holden's "craziness," is mistaken simply because

Holden is no more crazy than Huck Finn and because any reading of the work that accepts Holden's submissiveness to psychoanalytic treatment fails to take into consideration the facts of the novel or the fundamental ironic paradox that constitutes the core of Salinger's literary method. Again the comparison with Huck Finn will be instructive.

A person reading *The Catcher in the Rye* finds himself continually asking why Holden has been consulting a psychoanalyst. Like Huck Finn, Holden undergoes a number of "adventures." In each case, their reactions to their adventures—that is, their perceptions of the real issues involved in their experiences—become the basis of our judgment of each boy. The difference between the problems in perception presented to Huck and to Holden is more apparent than real. Under various circumstances, Huck is called upon to unmask the fraud and hypocrisy in the characters of the duke and the king, to recognize the absurdity of feuds and the wrongs of lynching, and to protest against the cruelty of human beings toward each other. The evil that Huck discovers in his fellow-beings depresses him and intensifies his loneliness, largely because of his never failing sense of compassion. Holden Caulfield, among other things, is called upon to perceive the distortion of values at Radio City, the hypocritical cant of the rich Pencey alumnus, the insincerity of the socially pretentious Sally Hayes, and D.B.'s prostitution of his literary talent. As in the case of Huck Finn, it is Holden's compassion that intensifies the loneliness and depression that arise from his discovery of the nature of the society around him. Just as Huck Finn covers his refusal to compromise his ethical principles by declaring that he will "*go* to hell," so Holden Caulfield covers his refusal by exclaiming, "I'm crazy. I swear to God I am," or, in effect, saying, "I know it's crazy, but . . . ." Although one can conceive of a person "without his marbles" having compassion, one cannot imagine the same person having the ethical perception that both Huck and Holden exhibit.

The ethical perception which they have in common leads both boys to reject the civilization around them. In the last two sentences of his narrative, Huck Finn announces his determination "to light out for the territory ahead of the rest." Holden's rejection is

analogous, but distinctly different. His initial plan to "light out" comes upon him as a sudden inspiration: he and Sally Hayes will go to Massachusetts and Vermont. "It's beautiful as hell up there" (p. 171), declares Holden, in his characteristically adolescent speech idiom (which Salinger manipulates for ironic effect). But Sally, "the queen of the phonies," has no real desire to rebel; in fact, she rather likes the idea of a comfortable conformity to the pattern of life around her. Holden hates the very thought of that life, as he pictures it for her:

> We'd have to go downstairs in elevators with suitcases and stuff. We'd have to phone up everybody and tell 'em good-by and send 'em postcards from hotels and all. And I'd be working in some office, making a lot of dough, and riding to work in cabs and Madison Avenue buses, and reading newspapers, and playing bridge all the time, and going to the movies and seeing a lot of stupid shorts and coming attractions and newsreels. (pp. 172-173)

Sorry that he has ever mentioned the idea, Holden breaks off with Sally.

The flight from conformity, nevertheless, continues to occupy his thoughts. During his nocturnal visit to Phoebe, he tells her that his father will not send him military school because "I'll probably be in Colorado on this ranch" (p. 216). While sitting on a bench along Fifth Avenue, Holden resolves to hitch-hike his way out West. Once there he would pretend to be a deaf-mute.

> That way I wouldn't have to have any goddam stupid useless conversations with anybody . . . . Everybody'd think I was just a poor deaf-mute bastard and they'd leave me alone. They'd let me put gas and oil in their stupid cars . . . and I'd build me a little cabin somewhere . . . . I'd build it right near the woods, but not right *in* them, because I'd want it to be sunny as hell all the time . . . . I knew the part about pretending I was a deaf-mute was crazy, but I liked thinking

> about it anyway. But I really decided to go out West and all. (pp. 257-258)

Holden's repudiation or rejection here seems as firm and determined as that of Huck Finn. Later, when Holden sees the obscenities on the walls of the tomb of the mummies in the museum and realizes that "you can't ever find a place that's nice and peaceful, because there isn't any" (p. 264), he declares that he would return only if someone at home "got sick and wanted to see me before they died" (p. 265). But he would allow Phoebe and even D.B. to come to visit him, provided that D.B. would not write movies in the cabin. "I'd have this rule that nobody could do anything phony when they visited me. If anybody tried to do anything phony, they couldn't stay" (p. 266).

Holden's resolve, even his desire, to "light out" for the West is finally broken by his sister Phoebe. Just as his plans are completed, Phoebe appears with her suitcase packed, wearing Holden's red hunting cap and pleading to be taken along. By the time the carrousel scene—certainly intended by Salinger to be the turning point and climactic event of the novel—has ended, they have shared the "people hunting" cap and Holden has dramatically reversed his rejection of the society around him. He has decided to go home, not to the West. And by this decision he has returned to the line of conduct he initiated when he left Pencey Prep. His bitterness and mental depression have vanished: "I was damn near bawling, I felt so damn happy, if you want to know the truth" (p. 275). The reversal of Holden's plans—and more importantly the change in his attitude toward society—has been effected at least in part by his recognition both of Phoebe's affection for him and of his love for her. Equally a factor is Holden's realization that in his protest against the "phoniness" of false values he does not stand alone. (Had he ever been able to give "old Jane a buzz," she might have performed the same service for him.) The fact that Holden knows he can communicate dispels his sense of loneliness and effectively separates him from Huck Finn. That Holden's decision not to reject society persisted in his mind is confirmed by the final sentences of the novel in which he evidences new tolerance for Stradlater and Ackley and even Maurice.

If we are to believe Holden, and here there is certainly no reason to doubt him, he made his decision to return home at the carrousel. This decision was in no way dependent upon any mental treatment which Holden later received. It can only be described as a sane, reasonable decision. Yet the reader is reminded on the following page (the last passage in the novel) that Holden is being treated by a psychoanalyst and is writing from what can only be understood as a mental institution near Hollywood, California. No thoughtful reader needs an explanation of the implications of Hollywood, California (Holden had originally wanted to go to Colorado), as the home of the phony of phonies—the movies which Holden detests. That he had no real need to come and that he did not come of his own accord are inferences compelled not only by the carrousel scene but also by Holden's initial comment in the novel that he "had to come out here" to "this crumby place." Phoebe's explanation that "Daddy's gonna kill you" takes on additional meaning when we realize that Holden is in "this crumby place" because his parents have sent him. Perhaps his father took him (Phoebe also says that their father will miss seeing her in the Christmas pageant because he is going to fly to California).

The threat of psychoanalysis is nothing new to Holden. Recalling how he felt about the death of Allie, Holden remarks, "I was only thirteen, and they [his parents] were going to have me psychoanalyzed and all, because I broke all the windows in the garage" (p. 50). At this point, many a reader may have reflected that for non-conformity the world no longer "whips you with its displeasure"; instead, it sends you to a psychoanalyst. Holden does not blame his parents because he realizes that what he did "was a stupid thing to do" (p. 50). Yet by the very mention of the incident, Holden has informed us that his parents have in the past connected non-conformity with psychoanalysis.

At the Wicker Bar, where "the phonies are coming in the window" (p. 184), Holden's former Student Adviser who knew about "every flit and Lesbian in the United States" (p. 186) suggests to him that a psychoanalyst would "help you to recognize the patterns of your mind" (p. 192). No one can mistake the meaning of Holden's quick and blunt retort to Carl Luce: "You're a real friendly bastard" (p. 192). Luce's counsel, in fact, anticipates Mr. Antolini's advice

that Holden get "an idea what size mind you have" (p. 247), a remark answered by Holden with a yawn. Implying that the psychoanalyst has replaced the poet as a source of human wisdom, Mr. Antolini urges Holden to pattern his life by the words of "a psychoanalyst named Wilhelm Stekel" (p. 244); and quoting words attributed to Wilhelm Stekel, this boozy, unbalanced, and somewhat pompous "flit" advises Holden that "'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'" (p. 244). Thus, Mr. Antolini (the "flit") ranges himself alongside of Carl Luce (the son of a psychoanalyst and an expert on perversion), Mr. Caulfield (a successful corporation lawyer), and D.B. (the writer-prostitute). It is not a very impressive group, but every member of it believes in compromise and psychoanalysis.

There remains the psychoanalyst in the sanatarium near Hollywood. We can predict Holden's attitude towards him. Holden will take the same attitude he has consistently taken towards psychoanalysts and towards efforts to push him into being psychoanalyzed. Holden does not want the kind of "cure" offered by the psychoanalyst. He is not going to say he will conform, that he will "apply" himself when he returns to school, or that the psychoanalyst has in any way changed him. We are not surprised to hear Holden twice refer to the "stupid question" (p. 276) of the psychoanalyst.

Holden is sane. He has always been sane; paradoxically he is most sane even as he shouts loudest "I swear to God I'm crazy!" By comparison with the secret slobs, the bores, and the sex perverts who surround him (and us), Holden seems a healthy, normal adolescent, who knowing full well the kind of world in which he lives yet conquers his desire to escape from it and returns for another engagement. In his decision not to "light out for the territory," he differs from Huck Finn; otherwise, the two boys have a great deal in common, particularly in their idealism, their individualism, their compassion, and most of all their sanity. Their adolescent speech idioms, their "adventures," and their occasional streaks of anti-intellectualism make us laugh and cry by turns. Yet it is their essential normalcy and our ability to apply to the conduct of adult life their insight, their perspective, and their essential sanity that help to keep us sane and out of the clutches of the psychoanalyst.