

# *Alien in the Rye*

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*The modern American disciples of Rousseau in fiction adhere to the delusion that man is naturally good and society naturally evil.*

J. D. SALINGER'S PICTURE of man sickened by society reflects the idea propounded by Rousseau and the disciples of naturalism of the individual born good and corrupted by his institutions. Both in the novel *The Catcher in the Rye* and in the stories like *For Esme—with Love and Squalor* he shows an adolescent trailing clouds of childhood and very much at odds with the world. The argument that Salinger has inherited from a long tradition of writers is that nature is norm and ideal, civilization the alien and

warping form imposed against the grain. Many have been the voices raised in support of this theme, and none more significant for the present century than that of Sigmund Freud who said: "My secret conclusion was: since we can only regard the highest civilization of the present as disfigured by a gigantic hypocrisy it follows that we are organically unfit for it."

The cause of the alienation is placed at the doors of schools, churches, business houses, government bureaus. They are charged with thwarting human aspira-

tions, frustrating conscience, outraging sensitivity. Salinger's stand for the individual and against the world, for the heaven of inner desire and opposed to the hell of outward circumstance, brings up the question posed by the disciples of naturalism how deep the split is between moral man and immoral society. Is it a superficial alienation, a literary idea caught between the covers of a book, a figure of speech confined to the imaginative events of novel and story, or does it have roots in the behavior of real men and women in everyday life? Is this a romantic notion handed down through two centuries of naturalism, or a basic flaw in the makeup of the western body social?

Although Freud was explicit in his belief that man is being constrained almost to the breaking point by social code and convention, his famous disciple and biographer Ernest Jones does not place Salinger's novel in this frame of reference. His review of *The Catcher in the Rye* distinguishes between actual alienation and the sense of alienation he finds in Holden Caulfield, whose feeling of being cut off from his fellows, from parents, friends, school and society, Dr. Jones insists has been common to every sensitive adolescent for the past two hundred years. He considers it only a phase of growing up, only an intimation and intuition of disaffection.

Despite Ernest Jones' and a few other unsympathetic reviews, the critics generally have dealt kindly with the novel, and Salinger's stories have enjoyed an impressive vogue in *The New Yorker*. He is praised as intelligent, poignant, profound; his writing original, serious, and beautiful. Now the *Western Humanities Review* has presented an evaluation of the body of his work under the title *J. D. Salinger: Some Crazy Cliff* by Arthur Heiserman and James E. Miller, Jr. What they have to say about the alienated individual deserves careful attention.

They place *The Catcher in the Rye* in the epic tradition of the Quest, which seems to them the most profound in western fiction, and range Holden Caulfield beside those great outcasts, Stephen Dedalus, Hans Castorp, Huck Finn and Prince Myshkin. The young man is pictured full of love and courage, innocent and good, a wise sheep forced into lone wolf's clothing. He pierces the shams and deceits and vulgarity of a phony society which botches things so terribly that at last Holden has no escape except a mental institution.

The final sentences of this perceptive Salinger analysis give an answer to the question how deep the present split is between the individual and his society.

As we leave Holden alone in his room in the psychiatric ward, we are aware of the book's last ironic incongruity. It is not Holden who should be examined for a sickness of the mind, but the world in which he has sojourned and found himself an alien. To "cure" Holden, he must be given the contagious, almost universal disease of phony adulthood; he must be pushed over that "crazy cliff."

This position can be buttressed by similar remarks by other writers in the university quarterlies. Lawrence Lipton, in his *Disaffiliation and the Art of Poverty* in the *Chicago Review*, says Holden rebels against the moral cowardice of an age that jails the victims and lets the criminals rule. Lipton supports Nelson Algren's opinions expressed in *The Man with the Golden Arm* that society creates the sinner, that the guilty ones are the judges and the lawyers, and that the writer's duty is forever with the accused. This idea that society is so meanly organized it forces the individual to perpetrate villainies goes back to Dostoievski, as Algren points out, and beyond the Russian to Rousseau

and to an age which discarded the discipline of the church for personal freedom, the bondage to manual labor for scientific technology.

The novelist's right to condemn society without fear of criticism has been defended by Wayne Burns in *The Novelist as Revolutionary* in the *Arizona Quarterly*. He claims that first and foremost the novelist is an artist, and as such cannot be judged on the basis of moral and religious values. If he is not granted complete and unqualified freedom to write as he pleases, Burns argues, the novelist must somehow contrive to wrest that freedom from society or cease to be an artist.

This is the price of modern fictional art; and if we are to pay that price, we must be prepared to accept and encourage the serious novelist as we do the scientist—as a kind of licensed madman and revolutionary.

The pertinent part of the bargain is that while the artist is free to castigate society for its sins, society is warned to withhold its criticism of the artist for fear of maiming or killing him. It is on the naturalistic premise that the good is found in the individual and the evil in society that such a bargain can be struck.

The argument that the world is sick and that its sickness is forcing the healthy person to alienate himself from society gains strength from the widespread and continuing growth of mental disturbance like that of Holden Caulfield. The neurotic and psychotic constitute an increasing group that is crowding the capacity of mental institutions and living a separate existence largely cut off from the main body social. An occasional doctor, psychiatrist, and religious teacher is convinced it would be dangerous to try to persuade the neurotic to adjust to his society because that society may be too sick to insure its own survival. They de-

scribe him as a fascinating and beautiful rebel, one of the few in a moribund culture who is spiritually alive, a wise seeker from whom a desperately ill world has much to learn. To ask him to accept his environment and his institutions would be to propose that he exchange a precious if precarious health for a mortal affliction.

Further support for the belief that a breach too deep for bridging has been opened between the individual and society may be found in the current fear of subversion and the cry for loyalty oaths and security screens. Even the occasionally hysterical investigations of so-called un-American activities might be cited as evidence of a dread that the body social is split by disaffection. But this aspect of the argument is clouded by the presence of contrary witnesses, and if there are individuals seceding from society there are others like the Negroes who are beginning to leave their ghetto status and join as partners and equals in the business of building a stronger community.

Salinger expresses the alienation in another way by contrasting the child with the adult, early innocence and goodness with later cynicism and corruption, on the naturalistic theory that the farther one goes from the purity of the cradle the more tainted one becomes from contact with society. As a child Holden Caulfield had known truth and "non-phoniness," say the authors of the *Western Humanities Review* evaluation, and he retains the courage and wisdom to refuse to compromise with adulthood and its necessary adulteries. They confess that his heroism, like that of Dostoevski's princely idiot, finally drives him out of his mind, but they insist the hero must either flee his institutions or defy them in the search for what is real. These critics see beyond the romantic aspect of their argument, for they realize how horrified Wordsworth would have been at Freud's discoveries about the child as father of the man and

they declare that when Freud made the cult of childhood clinical he made it rampant.

The goal of Holden's quest is what Heiserman and Miller describe as that inner peace found in the midst of nature "when you're naked of civilization and in company with an outcast more untarnished and childlike than yourself . . ." The figure of the hunter seems to them to personify man stripped to his essence because in this role he has left behind him, like the boy in Faulkner's story *The Bear*, whatever is unnatural or convenient. They feel the wilderness requires an integrity of life from the man who faces it alone, a courage and a fury which lie at the core of human nature unspoiled by contact with society.

Is the flight from civilization prompted by an unusual maturity or by an undisciplined nostalgia for childhood? Is it based on a wise appraisal of a society stricken beyond rescue or on an inherited assumption that society is evil? As one studies Heiserman's and Miller's evaluation of Salinger, his reverence for childhood, his canonization of the child's innocence and inability to do any wrong, make one wonder whether there is about him some bias against manhood, against the choices and conciliations the adult must make in everyday life. And one is moved to wonder further whether some of the disaffected refuse the challenge of their society partly because it necessitates the response of a mature mind and educated emotions.

Much of the persuasive power in Salinger's naturalism stems from the artificial division it makes between the good and the evil. The world of experience is a bewildering combination of good and evil, and neither in society nor in the individual is the good or the bad to be found by itself. If the novelist is free to do what the disciples of naturalism have done with impunity since Rousseau, to separate good from bad, to endow the

hero with the good qualities and his society with the bad ones, this falsification will continue to charm the reader as long as it can command belief. The weakness of naturalism becomes apparent whenever it tackles the problem of evil as part of the makeup of the individual without foisting it off on the external world.

It is convenient and comforting to forget that almost as soon as Rousseau proclaimed man was born good, his contemporary the Marquis de Sade proclaimed man was born evil. It is becoming increasingly difficult to dismiss Sade's maleficent individual as a force in history after the series of events that were touched off in 1914 and 1939. Naturalism has been about as busy celebrating maleficent as his beneficent counterpart, and his friends and defenders form a famous line from Sade through Baudelaire to Nietzsche. So little attention has been paid to this side of naturalism, however, that it is hard to name more than a handful of well reasoned books devoted to the subject, notable among which are Mario Praz' *The Romantic Agony* and Albert Camus' *The Rebel*. But enough work has been done to show that as long as Rousseau's idea of man good in essence persists, Sade's idea of man evil in essence will flourish beside it.

If it is true that Salinger follows Rousseau in concentrating the good in his adolescent hero Holden Caulfield and concentrating the evil in the surrounding environment, Heiserman and Miller aid the process by making explicit what they believe he implied. They have set this novel beside the work of the greatest writers, raising it to the high level of a holy quest and teasing from it implications of the tremendous. They find here the search for Virtue and Truth in the face of grave danger. "The phoniness of society forces Holden Caulfield to leave it. . . . For Holden loves the world more than the world can bear." But for him,

they explain, there is no Ithaca that waited for Ulysses after his trials. "Ithaca has not merely been defiled by a horde of suitors; it has sunk beneath waves of phoniness." To be a catcher of men as Holden wanted to be, to save them from the crazy cliff of destruction, is possible only at the price of breaking with the world. "To be good is to be a 'case,' a 'bad boy' who confounds the society of men." According to this searching interpretation, Holden is a truly tragic figure, a wanderer with no place to call his own, a pilgrim kept forever from Jerusalem.

It is as a critique of the contemporary world that Harvey Breit in *The Atlantic Monthly* considered the novel a failure. Its seriousness seemed always overwhelmed by the greater power of the comic element, and he found the book a brilliant *tour de force* capable of making the reader laugh aloud. Again and again the reviews refer to the quality of Salinger's humor, and one is tempted at the beginning of *The Catcher in the Rye* to wonder whether it will turn out to be a side-splitting satire on the modern romantic theme of the good man in a naughty world. Heiserman and Miller understand how common is the writer's flight into the Eden of innocence, how nonexistent was Rousseau's noble savage, and how obsessed western literature has been since his time with the charms of childhood as solutions to social problems. But in spite of their insight these critics insist with Eudora Welty that the distinctive mark of Salinger's humor is its ability to intensify the heartbreak and the horror, to bring out the catch in the throat that accompanies all the laughs. It is important to them not that he has a saving sense of the comical but that he uses it to point up the tragic, to make his hero's plight more poignant.

In the light of their critical analysis Salinger appears to be presenting a tragedy without a catharsis. As they interpret his message it seems to be a counsel of despair. In it one catches an echo of Freud's remark: "We have to abdicate, and the Great Unknown, He or It, lurking behind Fate, will sometime repeat such an experiment with another race." Civilization is pictured here as phony beyond succor, the individual as casting loose from society and taking with him whoever he can rescue at the risk of his life. This dismay at the evil of the external world, this tendency to throw up one's hands in horror and withdraw from the body social in desperation at its depravity, seems to be the result of the Rousseau wedge driven between good and evil, confining the good in the individual and the evil in social institutions.

Rousseau's assumption of man noble and innocent at birth, endowed by nature with all beautiful and loveable qualities only to have them tainted and poisoned by contact with society, has held an enormous appeal ever since the west began to discard the discipline of the church and to depend for its existence on the technology of science. From the seventeenth century on men have been fascinated with the possibility that the church had misled them, that perhaps they were not born both good and evil, perhaps life was not a battleground between the good and the bad but was instead a paradise of virtue waiting to welcome them once they could see through the church's deception. But no matter how hard they have tried to believe in the human soul as essentially good they have never succeeded in ridding it of the essence of evil. The shining figure of Rousseau is forever shadowed by Sade, and the good and evil they argue for continue to struggle together in the individual as well as in society.