

Wuthering heights and catcher in the rye



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The reliability of the narrators in both Wuthering Heights and Catcher In The Rye are vital to the way we respond to the novels, and the style they use is also equally important. In this essay I will outline exactly how the narrators style and reliability affect the readers perceptions. The Catcher In The Rye is a modern 1950's American novel, narrated entirely by the main character Holden Caulfield.

Throughout the book we see the world exactly how he does, journeying through his thoughts and feelings. Wuthering Heights however was published in 1847 and has multiple narrators throughout. The main narrators in Wuthering Heights are not the main characters in the story that is being told, a fundamental difference between the two books. These differences affect our perceptions of the narrators and the story.

It would be easy to read through both books and take everything that is said at face value and accept everything as truth, but that is not what either J. D. Salinger or Emily Bronte were intending. They wanted the readers to think twice about what is being said in order to add more depth and thought into the novels. Right from the onset of both books it is clear that neither narrators are very reliable. Holden Caulfield's unreliability is pointed out by Salinger within the first page, when Holden says he go " pretty run down and had to come down here to take it easy".

It is clear to the reader that he has some kind of breakdown and is now recovering from hospital. Although the reader does not know the extent or the nature of Holden's mental problems it causes the reader to be wary about his reliability right from the start. We are aware that we are going to

be told “ about all this madman stuff” which obviously caused him to be in the state he is in. The reader must remain at a distance from Holden and remember he is not always reliable throughout his story. Similarly, it becomes clear very early on that the first narrator of Wuthering Heights – Lockwood -is not reliable either. Bronte indicates this by showing us Lockwood's inability to judge situations well.

He makes silly and careless mistakes that the reader can see immediately. It is clear to the reader that Lockwood is unwelcome at Wuthering Heights, yet Lockwood cannot see this himself, proving that he is neither a good judge of situations or characters. He describes how his “ heart warmed towards” Heathcliff even though he noticed how his “ black eyes” are withdrawing “ suspiciously”. The reader picks up quickly on Lockwood's bad judge of character.

Like in Catcher In The Rye, we are aware that we have to remain at a distance to judge Lockwood, and to think twice about what he is telling us. In the first chapter, Lockwood attempts to explain to the reader about Heathcliff's character “ Possibly, some people might suspect him of a degree of under-bred pride. ” It soon becomes obvious to the reader that Heathcliff is not at all similar to Lockwood's early description of him. This not only prevents us from further trusting Lockwood, but also makes us question our instincts. Lockwood here is trusting his instincts, and he is very wrong. This acts as a warning to the reader to never over trust anything anyone says or even your own instincts.

Like Lockwood, Holden is also unable to understand his surroundings, another thing that highlights his unreliability. Holden is constantly misjudging people and situations. He is pessimistic and feels that everybody is against him, although in reality they are not, and this is visible to the reader. In the second chapter, just before Holden leaves Pency, he visits an old teacher and his attitude towards Mr Spencer is very cynical. Mr Spencer is simply trying to get Holden to realise he needs to work harder, that he is not a failure and trying to help him.

Holden however has very different view of what Mr Spencer is doing. He feels Mr Spencer is being vindictive and nasty, and that by reading his essay aloud – “ I don’t think I’ll ever forgive him for reading that crap aloud” he is just trying to make Holden feel worse. He does not realise that Mr Spencer is only trying to help. This makes us question Holdens reliability even further.

Lockwood and Holden have many similarities, and they are both used to highlight the unreliability of narrators in the novel. This prevents the reader from over trusting them, which is key to both books.

Their faults and blatant unreliability force the reader to take a back seat on what is going on and remain at a distance, so as to be able to judge the narrator and the story more effectively. Holden Caulfield is a complex character, and it is through his unreliability that we begin to understand him more. Throughout the book Holden is oblivious to many things, not least his actions, he does not realise the desperation of them. He cannot see how bad the situation he is in actually is, something that we as the reader can.

Towards the end of the book Holden takes a walk in Central Park in the middle of the night. It is so cold that he has “ hunks of ice” in his hair.

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Although he is worried about “ getting pneumonia” he does not see how strange it is that he is walking outside when it is so cold that he has actual ice in his hair. It is a strange thing to do and it highlights to the reader how unbalanced Holden is and in turn makes him even more unreliable. However this desperation and lack of realisation also has another effect on the reader. It makes us warm to Holden greatly. We feel very sorry for him as we can see how desperate and unhappy he is, even though he is never too revealing in what he says. By knowing what Holden thinks and realising his unreliability the reader is drawn closer to Holden, which is key to the novel.

In Wuthering Heights, Bronte has no need to draw reader and narrator close together. In fact, she needs to do the opposite, keep the two at a distance so that we do not over trust what is being said, and concentrate more fully on the story than the character of the narrator. The second, and main narrator, Nelly Dean, is, due to Lockwoods unreliability not trusted at first. We are very aware that she also may not be wholly reliable. She is clearly biased and has strong feelings towards certain characters in the book. When Nelly dean presents somebody in a bad light, the reader must remain aware that it does not necessarily mean that they are, and vice versa when she likes a character.

The reader has to remain distanced from her so as not to take her opinions as fact and keep in their mind that the tale is being told by a human with feelings and emotions. These feelings and emotions complicate the story more. We also question Nellys trustworthiness when at various points in the stories she divulges peoples secrets. There are times when Nelly relies on

other people's information for her story, which simply makes us question her reliability even further.

Nelly is not an omniscient narrator, and the reader must remember this at all times in order to see things in a more balanced, less biased way and so that we can draw our own conclusions about events and people. Her untrustworthiness distance the reader from her, something I feel Bronte was aiming for, Nelly is simply a vehicle for the story she is telling us. Bronte wants to avoid us warming to Nelly so that we do not over trust her, and remember that she is simply a human and that her descriptions are not always reliable. Another important factor relating to the reliability of both narrators is that of time. Nelly is relating a story some of which happened over twenty years, yet she can relay conversations from back then word for word to Lockwood! This is very unlikely and provokes the reader into thinking about how much of what she says is truth, creating more of a reader-narrator distance.

Holden however is relating events that happened over a period of a few days and happened not that long ago. He is much more reliable in his presentation of events, inclining us to trust him more, but his troubled mind still makes us stop and think twice about what he is saying. He was present for everything he is telling us about, something which Nelly was not, and his story has a much more personal tone, talking about feelings as well as facts, something that Nelly does not, and can not do. The unreliability of the narrators is key to both the novels. The authors both rely on us appreciating the fact that everyone is human and no-one is reliable.

In *Catcher In The Rye* Holden's unreliability add a whole new dimension to the story, bringing us closer to his character, as it is through his unreliability that we learn the most about him. The bond we form with Holden, the sympathy we have for him and the way can relate to his feelings are all because of his unreliability as a narrator. In *Wuthering Heights* the unreliability creates a distance between reader and narrator which is key in helping us form our own judgements and opinions on the book, not focussing on Nelly's character and constantly remembering that she is unreliable. The style that the narrators in both novels is also a major factor in the way our response is affected. Salinger has written *Catcher In The Rye* in a very informal tone, phonetic speech such as " He's got a lot of dough now", which immediatley draw the modern reader in. Not only can they understand what he is saying but they can so relate to it.

He is also very personal, and throughout the book he talks to ' you' which makes for a friendly tone, making the reader like Holdens character from the very start of the novel. In *Wuthering Heights* it is very different. The first character we meet is Lockwood, and he is a character that the modern reader has difficulty relating to easily. He uses very pompous and elaborate language, which does not engage or interest the reader particulally. His long words such as " physiognomy" push the reader away from him and stop him being able to relate to them fully. Lockwood is not talking directly to us either, he is writing in a diary, for his own use, as the date " 1801" at the very beginning of the book indicates.

This makes for a far less friendly and more formal tone making Lockwood even harder to understand. When Nelly takes over the reader feels

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somewhat relieved. Her language is far simpler and more phonetic than Lockwoods because she is a servant and not of the same class as Lockwood, but still she is difficult to relate to. The reader must remember that she is at all points talking to Lockwood, who is in effect her employer and therefore above her, this could be why her tone is a little more formal than one would expect, and could lead her to hold certain things back. Holden is constantly allowing us into his thoughts, telling us how he was feeling “ it made me feel so lonesome and depressed” and he tells us in such a blunt and truthfull way that the reader cannot help but feel sorry for him and therefore become closer to Holden.

Holdens thoughts are often very jumbled and confused, something that the reader realises. When Holden thinks that the poem by Robert Burns is “ if a body catch a body comin’ through the rye” when its actually “ if a body meets a body”. This confusion is common throughout the book, Holden misinterprets things and people revealing more of his character and making us feel even more sympathetic towards him. Nelly’s narration is constantly focussed on the story.

She hardly ever speaks of personal feelings or emotions, she just simply relates the events of the story. This focus and lack of friendly tone ensure that the reader remembers that this is a story about two families and not about Nelly. The reliability of the narrators and they styles they use affect the way the reader responds to them greatly. Nelly is not supposed to be the focus of the novel, however Holden is. Nelly is just a vehicle, something we need to remain constantly aware of throughout the novel. Bronte keeps

reminding the reader that she is not omniscient and that she is human and therefore hold bias towards certain people.

The unreliability creates a distance between narrator and reader which is key to the understanding of the story. We need this distance to judge for ourselves the events of the novel and to draw our own conclusions. Catcher In The Rye is very different. Closeness to the narrator is key, his unreliability bring us closer to him and allow us an insight into his mind and thoughts, as does his expressive style. His phoneticism and personal tone make Holden more accessible to the reader, something Salinger intended for. The most important factor to remember when assesing how the narrator affects the story is to remember that Wuthering Heights is not about the narrators, it is about two families and their story, however Catcher In The Rye is a novel about the narrator Holden.

Both authours use unreliability and style in a narrator to different ends, but both purposeley for a deeper understanding of their novels.