

The catcher in the rye and the cement garden



“ Rather than being a flaw of The Cement Garden, ambiguity of character and authorial intention actually makes for a more satisfying reader experience than the obvious and over-repeated insights Salinger gives us into Holden’s mind. ” Discuss, with close comparison of the writers’ techniques in The Catcher in the Rye and The Cement Garden.

When compared to the psychologically revealing account of Salinger’s “ artless” colloquial narrator, Holden Caulfield, the detached, non-committal narrative of The Cement Garden could well be a flaw in McEwan’s technique as it potentially detracts from the realism of Jack’s ambiguous character and often seems to alienate the reader. Indeed, The Catcher in the Rye is addressed directly to the reader through frequent deployment of the personal pronoun ‘ you’ and parts of Holden’s narrative are frequently italicized to communicate the intensity of his feelings regarding the ‘ phoniness’ of adulthood and all it entails, (‘ you never know where the hell you are [with sex]’). He also frequently uses colloquial phrases like ‘ it killed me’ and ‘ I go crazy’, the negative content of which ironically reveals the neurosis generated by his brother Allie’s death, and this self-revelatory subtext undeniably helps to create reader empathy. Similarly, psychological associations (like not wanting to mar the symbolic snow in Chapter 5 as it is ‘ so nice and white’) and the repetition of apparent non-sequiturs in the narrative concerning Jane Gallagher’s vulnerability (such digressions revealing his desire to protect her from both her ‘ booze-hound’ of a father (Chapter 11) and from Stradlater ‘ giving her the time’ in Chapter 6) acutely reflect issues raised by his bereavement, especially his naive but moving impulse to preserve the innocence which Allie still embodies for him.

Salinger's use of 'artlessness' (as Bennett defines it 1) here provides an obvious and empathetic depiction of Holden's issues which initially surpasses Jack's unenlightening viewpoint. In contrast to Holden, Jack is immediately introduced as unaffected by bereavement at the novel's point of attack in Chapter 1; the death of his father elicits an emotionless response as Jack 'smoothed away his impression in the soft, fresh concrete', as does the subsequent death of his mother: 'I pictured myself as someone whose mother had just died and my crying became wet and easy. Here Jack reveals an almost psychotic dissociation from his emotions, this predominantly impassive tone existing alongside McEwan's use of Standard English and contrasting sharply with Salinger's colloquial narrator (perhaps tempting us to confuse it with McEwan's voice in the novel, thus compromising Jack's realism as a character). This inability to evaluate is reflected, for instance, when Jack found 'a nest of [his mother's] hair floating in the toilet', or 'watched Julie in the evenings' without elaborating upon his feelings or intentions at the time, thus distancing the reader and preventing empathy as he relates his story in a largely covert manner. Although, as the novel reflects 1970's English society -contrasting with Salinger's outspoken American society- a greater degree of reserve is to be expected in terms of both narrative and authorial voice.

The ambiguity of McEwan's own intentions allows the multiplicity of meaning in keeping with his postmodern style (does he wish us to think beyond the taboo of incest, for instance?): in this way, ambiguities could equally be used to involve the reader and make it possible for inferences to be made about Jack as are made about Holden. In this sense, Jack too is artless (his

actions revealing his dissociated personality, his misguided lusts for Julie (like scrutinizing her ' slim legs' and ' black knickers'), and his isolated and disenchanted mind (having ' no close friends at school' and no wish to invite anyone to his party). Here, as with his use of external perceptions like Sue's counterbalancing viewpoint in her diary and their mother's revelation of Jack ' being tired all day', McEwan expands upon Jack's subjective and yet reticent account and allows the reader to perceive a more reliable narrative and realistic character irrespective of Jack's personal flaws, as Salinger achieves through artlessness. Indeed, the unreliability incorporated into Jack's voice sometimes communicates more about his character than it withholds, the lack of references to places or people outside the house for instance only confirming his obvious isolation (this deliberate lack of context also typically postmodern), and his predominantly descriptive narrative (unlike Holden's continuous stream of reflection and judgments) indicating a lack of opinion. Thus, not all of Jack's narrative is unreliable as his lack of values is then confirmed when he tries to consider the moral implications of their actions: ' Nor could I think whether what we had done was an ordinary thing to do'. Here, Jack's reticence could result from his isolation from the influence of ' normal' society, McEwan attributing his flaws to perhaps understandable outside factors and thus securing more realism than many credit him with.

Like McEwan's subtle meanings, the extreme realism portrayed by Salinger in turn creates an unreliable narrator; as Holden is very open his faults instead emerge as misinterpretations and hypocrisy within his tale. In contrast to Jack's character, Holden is very judgmental of the ' phoniness' of

the world around him, which he mistakenly blames for Allie's death yet relays with glib certainty as the truth. He uses sweeping generalizations such as 'I was surrounded by jerks. I'm not kidding' and 'people never listen,' these assumptions reflecting Holden's child-like inability to comprehend the intricacies of the real world. However, these criticisms could also satirize society in 1950's post-war America, Salinger's modernist portrayal of the 'suffering saint' in an uncaring world reflecting the disillusionment with society felt at this time.

Frequent contradictions between his opinions and actions also reveal his hypocrisy (such as his calling the guests at the Edmont Hotel 'perverts' committing 'crummy' crimes before his subsequent arousal at their sexual acts), and undermine the rest of his assertions. So, though Salinger's colloquial style enhances the realism of his protagonist, it also reveals the true extent of his unreliability to equal, if not surpass, that of Jack; he himself confesses to being a 'terrific liar' and appears to generalize and exaggerate often, this extending to complete fantasy in the form of hypothetical scenarios at various points within his tale (depicting him as both an isolated deaf-mute and an injured gangster). Ultimately, though, the truth is repeatedly communicated through the artless nature of Holden's narration, his ironic hypocrisies employed by Salinger to illustrate psychological issues such as the conflicting sexual desires and naivety within his character (shown above). However, this relays a conversely confused message in comparison to Jack as his narrative is deceptive in places. Jack seems not to have deception in mind, the distanced nature of his tale instead ironically having the air of a more reliable account as the reader is given an objective

perspective upon his subjective one, unlike the confusing invitation into Holden's frequent misinterpretations. Jack's reticent voice is also compensated for through McEwan's manipulation of narrative structure in the form of flashbacks to restore a degree of realism within *The Cement Garden*, whereas Salinger's use of structure simply serves to consolidate information already revealed through Holden's artlessness.

In this regard, Chapter 6 of *The Cement Garden* features a flashback to an occasion when Jack's parents had left the children alone in the house while they attended a funeral, this situation being a parallel to the present lack of parental guidance. The similarity between past and present shows the persistence of Jack's adverse circumstances and elicits sympathy as he is subject to this stagnant lifestyle. It is placed at the beginning of Part 2 to echo the mother's death in Part 1 and prefigure the amoral effect that parentless conditions will have upon Jack, McEwan subtly achieving realism by portraying his past as well as implying a future. Comparatively in Chapter 11 of Salinger's novel Holden's narrative shifts to a description of his early childhood with Jane Gallagher, who he was 'never worried' with.

With her, he says, 'All you knew was, you were happy'. The contrast between this idealistic language of a 'happy' past and Holden's 'lonesome and depressed' state on returning to the present in Chapter 12 once again demonstrates his obsession with innocence and childhood through obvious manipulation of tone and highlights the theme of transition within the novel; here also he resists maturity as it makes him 'depressed', the repetitive nature of Holden's frequent reflections on Jane and the past construably rendering his account implausibly digressive (unlike McEwan's more rigidly

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chronological tale), disrupting the reader's interest and comprehension of the main plotline by interpolating predictably similar memories. Other meanings contained within McEwan's structure also serve a revelatory purpose, the subtle progression of implications and justifications seeming more successful than Salinger's obvious intrusions and disordered chronology. Jack's omission of the mourning process after his father's death could be unreliable and ambiguous, but could also be utilized by McEwan to portray the orphans' lack of normal methods to cope with death, partially justifying the freakish preservation of their mother.

Though the chronology of Jack's narration is ambiguous as he rarely refers to time, this reflects his 'aimless' reaction to trauma and enhances the timeless quality of the novel, which seems to take approximately one and a half years. The long and cloying symbolism of *The Cement Garden* achieves a melding of both this length and setting to develop mounting tension through the rising heat of the season, the 'hottest [one] since 1900.' This heat is used to represent the 'abnormal' progression of sexual urges within Jack, McEwan emphasizing Jack's relative normality within an inappropriate environment (the only potential sexual partner being his sister). The longer story time of 'The Cement Garden' is therefore more realistic regarding the time taken for this level of social degradation to take place, this slower progression and rising heat making the eventual climax of this tension more plausible when Jack and Julie have sex. McEwan here invites us to realistically perceive 'these inordinate, even taboo, relationships' (Jack Slay, 1996). In contrast, Salinger's shorter story time of 3-4 days is, in spite of its modest time frame, brimming with obvious repetition and contradiction to

portray psychological verisimilitude, in keeping with his novel's psychoanalytic nature (reflecting '50s America and its interest in psychoanalysis).

However, this degree of intensity within such a shorter stretch of time may seem overwhelming as his narrative can potentially be seen as disorganized and repetitive, and harder to comprehend than the slow progression of McEwan's technique. The frequent placement of Holden's nostalgic reflections upon representations of innocence (such as Jane, Allie and Phoebe) repeat too often his obsession with childhood, while his repeated sexual advances contradict confusingly with this and so repeatedly result in failure (with Sunny and when buying women drinks in Chapter 11), these continual failures perhaps rendering his narrative disappointingly anti-climatic and implausible when compared with the allegedly cathartic conclusion of *The Cement Garden*. So, McEwan's use of postmodernist minimalism within his structural technique - rather than being obscure - enables the reader to partake in the creation of Jack's own subjective perspective through inference, and portray a comprehensive plotline despite his understated intention and reserved narrator. Similarly, Salinger's modernist obviousness of intention also presents a psychological insight into his protagonist's mind, though this method may seem overwhelming, his intrusions delivering the same message too often and achieving a less satisfying reader experience. In this vein, Salinger's employment of symbolism within *The Catcher in the Rye* is more obvious and repetitive than McEwan's more subtle usage, used to paint the same transparent picture of Holden's issues received through both voice and structure. Holden's red

hunting hat appears in 5 consecutive chapters (from 3 to 9) and frequently afterwards whenever he needed comfort or protection, the obviousness and over-use of this symbol perhaps rendering it meaningless and an obvious intrusion of Salinger's despite its significance for Holden. He wears it in Chapter 7 when he decides to 'get the hell out of Pencey' as he was 'sort of crying' and 'too sad and lonesome', this departure marking yet another escape from thoughts of Jane losing her innocence.

Allie's death is seen to be represented by the ducks' departure from the Central Park lagoon as Holden repeatedly wonders on their whereabouts in Chapters 9 and 12, returning again in Chapter 20 to 'see if they were around or not', showing he still cannot accept the reality of his brother's demise. Holden's blame of the world and adults for Allie's death is expressed in his consideration of someone having 'come around in a truck or something and took [the ducks] away', suggesting forceful intervention in the natural order of things. Chapter 16 features Holden's wistful recollection of the museum, where 'nobody'd move' and 'nobody'd be different'. This represents Holden's fear of change and abandonment (an issue particularly over-emphasized by Salinger which may confuse the reader in comparison to the gradual insights developed within McEwan's technique), his desire to preserve the joys of childhood repeated in his belief that 'certain things they should stay the way they are'. And yet, McEwan's use of symbolism is also obvious on occasions - surprising given his covert insights elsewhere - making his intention uncertain, this ambiguity perhaps a flaw in his style: the obvious meaning of events such as Julie's handstand at her brother's birthday (opening her legs, she presents Jack with a view of what he wants)

and Jack's having squirted ' a pale, creamy fluid' (sun cream) onto her could seem implausible, a clumsy intrusion.

However, McEwan's intentions may in fact be irrelevant as postmodern novels are expected to address taboo subjects such as incest and resist stable meaning, these obvious meanings perhaps used to emphasize the controversial theme of misguided sexual urges (as Salinger emphasizes Holden's psychology), though perhaps lessening realism. So, to counterbalance this McEwan also uses complex symbols such as the cement garden itself to represent the orphans' isolation, extending to Jack's equally cold father who ' constructed rather than cultivated' it ' all around the house'. This isolation subtly extends to account for Jack's own emotionless qualities and misguided sexuality, while McEwan's summer symbolism successfully serves to build tension and make shocking events more plausible while emphasizing this sexuality. So, McEwan also expands upon Jack's predicament and issues with subtler symbols, while his sometimes obvious symbolism may in fact assist the communication of his message; these sexual deviancies emphasize the primitive effect of isolation upon the family, particularly Jack's development. Furthermore, as Jack is shown to seek maturity he is as realistic and empathetic as Holden- perhaps more, as the reader may identify with McEwan's fundamental theme of growing up, portrayed as successful (unlike Holden's transition) through Jack awakening from his metaphorical ' dream'. Salinger's symbolism primarily serves to repeat information, relaying the same message on all levels of textual communication, whereas McEwan employs this method to emphasize an

important aspect of Jack's character as he is not forthcoming himself, and to lead the reader's perception past the taboo of incest.

Overall, then, McEwan's message emerges effectively despite the ambiguity of his novel, which may even be considered to contribute to a 'more satisfying' reader experience. Jack is presented as real within an exceptional situation, his ambiguous nature utilized to involve the reader in his experiences and develop their understanding of him through McEwan's technique instead, the conclusion leaving the reader satisfied at the possibility of a successful transition into adulthood which has been suspended due to his environment and the initially negative figure of his father. Salinger's message is contrastingly delivered too often, these obvious reiterations- while effectively demonstrating the repetitions of Holden's fixated mind - perhaps even 'predictable and boring' (Ernest Jones, 1951), and on the whole a less satisfying reader experience than *The Cement Garden's* subtle revelations.