

The catcher in the rye

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Literature, American Literature



In 1951 Jerome David Salinger published his novel *The Catcher in the Rye*. Salinger quickly became one of the most well-known and popular American writers. Only two weeks after its publication, *The Catcher in the Rye* reached the *New York Times* best-seller list and the novel attracted more readers over the years. By the year 1961 the book had been sold over half a million times in the United States.

In 1954 it had already been published in nine different countries. In that same year in the United States the New American Library published the book in its first paperback edition, which were at the time very popular under high school and college students and the book attracted more young readers. While receiving many reviews praising the novel for being written in such a lively way and speaking to the imagination of the reader, other critics were less enthusiastic about Salinger's work. From the start many considered the book to be unsuitable for youngsters to read, and they condemned the immoral behaviour and foul language that the story features.

The Catcher in the Rye was considered a dangerous novel and its protagonist Holden Caulfield a bad role model for the readers. At the time Salinger changed much about the definition of what a hero should be like: Holden is an underachiever and a liar, who talks with slang. At the same time the reader sympathizes with Holden, since his intentions are good. From the first sentence in which Holden refuses to talk about 'all that David Copperfield kind of crap' it is obvious that Salinger wants to present a different kind of hero. Charles Dickens's

David Copperfield (1850) is seen as the example of a traditional American bildungsroman, and with Holden's comment about David Copperfield Salinger broke with this existing traditional example.

The Catcher in the Rye is written from the perspective of Holden, who looks back on his adventures of the previous three days. After being kicked out of his prep school Pencey, Holden decides to leave the place, just a few days before the start of the Christmas break. Throughout the entire book no complicated plots unfold, nothing really happens besides Holden expressing his thoughts and reminiscing about what happened to him. More important than the actual story is the way Holden tells it.

The reader is given a hint at how much Holden values the written word over image right at the first page of the book when Holden calls his brother a prostitute for working in the film industry in Hollywood, and states: 'if there's one thing I hate, it's the movies. Don't even mention them to me.' Holden uses many swearwords, has little to no respect for any adults because they are 'phony', and describes the things that have happened to him vaguely with phrases such as 'sort of' ('(Ackley) was also sort of a nasty guy'⁵) and many passive constructions.

This way he creates distance from, we later conclude, painful memories. Holden is depressed: he is an outcast, kicked out of school again and the loser who left the fencing equipment on the subway, thereby making his team lose before even having started the game. Moreover, to the reader it slowly becomes clear that Holden is severely traumatized by the death of his younger brother Ally and of his former classmate James Castle. Furthermore,

after his hasty departure from his old teacher Mister Antolini's apartment, a small comment even suggests that sexual abuse in his childhood took place.

Because he does not want to tell his parents he failed all his classes and needs to change schools again, Holden does not return home directly but goes wandering through New York City for three days. During his journey, he starts conversations with many different people, such as a taxi-driver, a prostitute, an old friend and a former teacher. While desperately looking for someone to talk to, mainly about his fears of becoming an adult, he does not succeed in getting anyone to listen to him. Holden is obsessed with the desire to protect innocence.

In the end Holden finally succeeds in finding someone to talk to: his sister Phoebe. He explains to her that he wishes to become a catcher in the rye, someone who watches over children playing in a field of rye near a cliff, making sure they do not fall off of it. In addition to mentioning the death of his brother and the suicide of his former classmate, Holden's speech is full of signals pointing to severe illness and death: he jokes about having a brain tumor, he talks about an imaginary bullet in his gut and sometimes feels like jumping out of a window.

He furthermore uses the expression that something 'killed him' many times, as well as the words 'crazy' and 'madman' to describe himself or other people. Although the ending leaves many things unclear, this could hint at Holden's future and the place from which Holden tells us his story: a mental institution.

An interesting fact is that every generation of young Americans has accepted Salinger's books in their own ways. Thus, since the end of 50s neurotic intonation of the narrative had attracted great interest from 'common people'. The young people of 1970s assessed with much interest and criticism the reality in order to gain self-realization of the humanistic ideals.

The realistic depiction of the life of the nation in modern English and American literary works requires the presentation of its vivid language. It is not strange that the English vernacular as a means of people's communication, who partially master the literary language, is widely used by the masters of the word. The main sphere of the usage of the vernacular is the dialogue and monologue speech of the characters in the novel of or in the household and social novel.

The modern English plays are enriched with vernacular too; they depict the life of workers. The wide usage of the vernacular elements is in the dialogue speech may be explained by that the dialogue is a specific analogue of vivid colloquial language. Against the monologue speech, the replica of the dialogue is characterized by the formal incompleteness, fragmentation of the utterance.

In the dialogue controversial tendencies that are characteristic to the vernacular are brightly expressed. Here, on the one side, in the result of the situation of the utterance and related with it a tendency to restrict the language devices, the reduction of the sentence is observed, but, on the other hand, in the result of spontaneity of communication the numerous repetition, tautology, the disorder of the sentence structure are expressed.

The dialogue that is enriched with vernacular elements complements the language fragmentation of the prose work to classify and individualize the characters. As one of the main forms of self-characterization it clearly expresses the nature of the speaker. The dialogue is used more to reveal the character of the personage than convey a factual information.

The person's language points to his social status, education, culture in general. By making story-teller closer to the reader, the grammatical elements of vernacular alongside with the phonetic and lexical ones also serve to render the easy manner of the monologue speech. The bright example of this is the language of Holden Caulfield, where vernacular creates the impression of easy conversation with the reader. Hence the specific Salinger's style.

The stylistic manner in Holden's narrative which seems to be individual, specific is characterized by versatility that enables the reader to perceive the language characteristics of whole generation. Holden Caulfield is the representative of the younger generation which, as many linguists observe, tends to use vernacular more often than the older generation.

That's why his language is enriched with different vernacular elements. Holden also tends to use a specific manner of conveying his thoughts, outrunning his feelings which is characteristic of children. He never talks the way the author does, he does not use the language of the 'adults' though occasionally inserts scientific words and even special language terms.

Concerning the youth slang in Salinger's work 'The Catcher in the Rye' and language of Holden Caulfield, the literary critic and linguist D. Costello

considers it as the authentic reflection of the colloquial language of the American teenager. However, Holden's slang has special features that help to perceive the character of the novel as an individual. His idiolect is rich in small words that reflect the specification of his character. Thus, Holden usually repeats 'It really is' or 'I really do' as if wishes to assure the reader that one can trust him, Holden, despite all the lies around and pretence, he tell only the truth.

The typical peculiarity of the youth slang and Holden's language is its vulgarity. The word 'damn it' is never repeated at one page more than five times but in the very cases when Holden talks about the school (the conversation with Sdradlater), talks about cinema or future carrier. The roughly emotional and unpleasant repetitions are always accompanied by the phrase 'I hate it'.

Holden sometimes comments on peculiarities of his language. Thus, according to him, a frequent usage of the word 'boy' points to the fact that he and his actions are adequate to his age. Such a 'subtext' has a constant repetition 'I am crazy', 'I am a madman'. Certain informative filling has the word old. It, as a rule, expresses Holden's preference of anyone – 'old Phoebe', 'Old Gane', 'old Jesus'.

Thus, it is common sense to view *The Catcher in the Rye* as the American fiction that manifests youth slang in a particular way.

The issue of appropriate transfer of slangs into Russian of *The Catcher in the Rye*

Translation of slang is never an easy task for a translator. First of all translator has to take into account all the intra linguistic and extra linguistic factors and have a wide knowledge of both source and target languages to understand and translate slang words and phrases properly. Secondly translator has decide whatever slang performs a certain function in the text, or it occurs once or twice and does not contribute to the context of the literary text. However in J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* there are numerous examples of slang words and phrases that cannot be neglected. Slang serves as a means of characterising the main character and as well revealing peculiarities of his environment.

When exactly the editorial board of *Inostrannaya Literatura* became interested in *The Catcher in the Rye* is hard to determine, as all direct correspondence between the journal, Salinger and the translator Rait is either lost or in closed archives. In 1972, scholar Carl Proffer published his research *Soviet criticism of American Literature in the Sixties*.

This work gives a short introduction, written by Proffer, about the publication process and reviewing of foreign literature in the Soviet Union, and contains translations of articles critical of American Literature written by Soviet critics between 1960 and 1972. According to Proffer it was not unusual for translators to take the initiative in suggesting foreign books for publication in the Soviet Union. He states that translators often started a translation anyway, and afterwards persuaded editors to print their work.

In this case one can indeed assume that Rait herself was probably amongst the people that requested this translation, because of a statement made by

S. A. Dangulov, the zamglavy (general deputy) of the editorial board at Inostrannaya Literatura. During a board meeting he mentioned that 'this work did not show up by accident (...). It was a request from several translators. Moreover, this (book) has been mentioned often at reader conferences: we certainly have to pay attention to this (work).'

Unfortunately, to find any documents from the reader conferences was impossible Dangulov is referring to, because the RGALI archive has not preserved them over the years. Since *The Catcher in the Rye* quickly became an international bestseller and was published almost a decade before it was first printed in the Soviet Union, it is maybe not so surprising that the journal considered its translation.

This novel, which features a young protagonist, seemed to fit Inostrannaya Literatura's November issue of 1960, which was about the life of foreign youth and devoted to the Soviet Union's younger generation. Aside from *The Catcher in the Rye*, the issue contained amongst other things the second half of the German novel *Die Brücke* by Manfred Gregor, two short stories by Mongolian writers, poetry by the Hungarian writer Antal Hidas, and some articles on Russian literature abroad. *The Catcher in the Rye* was as central piece of this edition positioned as one of the first items.

The translation of Salinger's novel was done by Rita Rait-Kovaleva. She was a respected translator, mostly known for her translations of American writer Kurt Vonnegut, which some claimed to be even better than the original works. It is unclear who exactly gave the green light to Rait for the

translation, or whether she had already started by herself. In general, Dangulov was quite involved in the whole process.

As the communist ideology was evident in all aspects of society, translated Western books were seen by critics and publishers not just as interesting stories but also as carriers of bourgeois values. During the 1940s the tendency emerged for foreign literature to be more than translated: they should be transformed into substantive Russian literary works, so good that they could replace the original. Therefore, translations of foreign literature were treated not only with caution, but were transformed and had to meet certain language requirements to receive approval for publication.

Rait translated *The Catcher in the Rye* as *Over the Abyss in the Rye*. She made her translation understandable for Soviet readers by finding Russian equivalents for untranslatable or unknown aspects of American life. For example, since hamburgers did not yet exist, Holden goes for kotlety (meatballs) instead. But she did more than finding equivalents. Most of Holden's foul language is censored, and all references to homosexuality are changed: