

Holden caulfield, the sexual psychopath?

[Literature](#), [American Literature](#)



J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* is set against the lavender scare and the sexual psychopath laws of the 1950's. During this time, the United States at large was horrified by the apparent rise in sex crimes in the country.

Holden Caulfield, Salinger's protagonist, was no doubt heavily influenced by these events; in fact, such events would have been almost unavoidable with the amount of media attention they received at the time. Homegrown anxiety about sexual psychopaths was a major factor that contributed to Holden's mental breakdown, which ultimately led him to be placed in a rehabilitation center.

Beginning in the 1930's, there were growing concerns among United States citizens about sexual deviants and dangerous perverts infesting New York City. Several tragic murders of young girls were highly publicized in 1937, horrifying parents across the nation. Concerns about public safety continued to grow until over a decade later in 1949, when John Edgar Hoover published his article in *The American Magazine* titled "How Safe is your Daughter?" According to Hoover and the slew of articles about sex criminals that followed, American young women were not safe at all. In fact, between 1935 and 1965, the *New York Times* published hundreds of articles about rising homosexuality and sex crime across the United States. Until 1952, criminal offenses were significantly underreported in New York City.

Starting in 1949, New York began to improve its collection system so that, by 1950, more and more sex crimes were properly reported; however, to the residents of New York, it appeared that sex crimes in the state had skyrocketed, thereby fueling the country's fear of the "sexual psychopath" (Lave 553). Newspapers and politicians used this new data to their

advantage and the ensuing propaganda urged support for the policing of a wide range of sexual non-conformists. In 1950 the District of Columbia defined a sexual psychopath as an individual with a “lack of power to control his sexual impulses” (Sutherland 548), or “anyone who commits several serious sex crimes” (Sutherland 549). These sex crimes include but are not limited to: molestation, statutory rape, forcible rape, homosexuality, distribution or possession of pornography, and prostitution. Anyone thought to be a sexual psychopath would be subject to extensive psychiatric examination, rehabilitation, and imprisonment. The country’s anxiety about sexual psychopaths led the United States into the Lavender Scare in 1950. In April of 1950 Guy George Gabrielson made his famous accusation that homosexual people are “perhaps as dangerous as the actual communists”. Gabrielson, who was the Republican National Chairman from 1949 to 1952, spoke out against these “sexual perverts” who he claimed were “working against their country.”

The nationwide panic about sex crimes was quickly spiraling out of control, and in the middle of it was Holden Caulfield. Holden demonstrates a strange fascination with people he deems perverts and flits throughout *The Catcher in the Rye*. He enjoys watching various sexual encounters from the window of his hotel room and, despite his discomfort with “flits” and “perverts,” he repeatedly seeks out people whom he considers sexually ambivalent, first when he meets up with Carl Luce, then when he visits Mr. Antolini in his apartment. Holden spends his first night in New York at the Edmont Hotel, where he sits and looks out the window a while. First, he describes a cross-dressing man, seen through the window of his hotel room, then right above

him he briefly describes a couple he sees squirting water at each other: “ You’d be surprised what was going on on the other side of the hotel. They didn’t even bother to pull their shades down. I saw one guy, a gray-haired, very distinguished-looking guy with only his shorts on, do something you wouldn’t believe me if I told you. First he put his suitcase on the bed. Then he took out all these womens clothes, and put them on. Real women’s clothes – silk stockings, high heeled shoes, brassiere, and one of those corsets with the straps hanging down and all. Then he put on this very tight black evening dress. I swear to god. Then he started walking up and down the room, taking these very small steps, the way a woman does, and smoking a cigarette and looking at himself in the mirror. He was all alone too” (62-63). Holden prefaces this set of observations by explaining that the room was “ very crumby” and that he had nothing else to look at, but was too depressed to care or to do anything other than watch the “ perverts” from the window.

Yet as depressed as he is, Holden is clearly captivated by the cross-dressing man in particular. It took time for the man to get all dressed up in women’s clothing, and seeing him strut around the room would have taken much more than a simple glance out the window. Holden is fascinated by the cross-dressing man, and he then admits that he feels that there is something wrong about his sexuality: “ I mean that’s my big trouble. In my mind, im probably the biggest sex maniac you ever saw. Sometimes I can think of very crumby stuff I wouldn’t mind doing if the opportunity came up” (63). He even expresses a sort of envy for the couple he can see squirting liquid on each other. He admits that it may be a fun thing to do, but then corrects

himself and says it would be a crumby thing to do to a woman you cared about. Holden is actively repressing his sexual desires because he knows that it is unwise for him to admit to deviating from society's sexual norms (Beslagic 19). Holden then declares that everyone in the hotel is a pervert and that he must be the most normal person in the building, thereby completely dismissing any connection he may have felt with these people.

Later on, Holden decides to call his student advisor from when he attended Whooton. Carl Luce agrees to meet with Holden at the Wicker Bar. Holden thought he might like to spend some time with Luce because he used to enjoy his stories about homosexual people: " He knew quite a bit about sex, especially perverts and all" (145). Luce used to scare all of Holden's classmates with his stories about men who turned into flits over night. Holden, however, suspected that Luce himself may be homosexual. Its interesting that Holden would seek out Carl Luce's company at all, considering that he suspected that Luce was homosexual, and considering that Luce made him uncomfortable by goosing him and using the toilet with the door open. When Holden meets up with Luce at the bar, Holden instantly tries to bring the conversation to gay men, but Luce is unamused. Their conversation doesn't go well. Luce wasn't interested in talking about perverts or flits, and Holden continues to force the conversation in that direction. Luce suggests that Holden receive psychoanalysis, which suggests that Luce believes Holden to be queer, as psychoanalysis was a common method of treatment for homosexuality in the 1950s. As Luce leaves the bar, Holden asks him if he was ever psychoanalyzed. Luce responds that he was merely " adjusted" and Luce recommends that, if Holden is so interested in

it, he should consider going to a psychoanalyst himself. After Carl Luce leaves Holden at the bar, Holden continues drinking and pretends he has been shot. He keeps his hand under his jacket as though he is trying to stop the bleeding from a bullet wound: “ I didn’t want anybody to know I was even wounded. I was concealing the fact that I was a wounded sonuvabitch” (153). This is an obvious symbol for Holden’s insecurities about his sexuality. Holden is trying to conceal his growing concerns that he may not be “ normal” and he is worried that he may need to be psychoanalyzed or adjusted, just like Carl Luce had been.

Later that night, Holden phones an old family friend and teacher, Mr. Antolini, who tells him he is welcome to come over right away. Holden makes his opinion of Mr. Antolini clear in chapter twenty-four. He compares Mr. Antolini’s intelligence and wit to the virtues of his older brother DB, and says that Mr. Antolini was the best teacher he had ever had. Yet when he arrives at the apartment there is an obvious level of discomfort, although Holden never explicitly mentions these feelings. Holden describes Mrs. Antolini’s unkempt appearance and the dirty drink glasses from a party the couple had had; he makes it clear that Mr. Antolini has been drinking heavily. Holden and Mr. Antolini have an uncomfortable conversation. Holden is frustrated with Mr. Antolini’s questions about school and Mr. Antolini predicts Holden’s coming breakdown: “ This fall I think you’re riding for – it’s a special kind of fall, a horrible kind. The man falling isn’t permitted to feel or hear himself hit bottom. He just keeps falling and falling. The whole arrangements designed for men who, at some time or other in their lives, were looking for something their own environment couldn’t supply them with. So they gave up looking.

They gave it up before they ever really even got started” (190-191). Mr. Antolini’s prophecy is unsettling for Holden. Mr. Antolini can see that Holden is headed for a terrible breakdown and this statement hits a little too close to home for Holden. Holden is already feeling conflicted about his sexuality and Mr. Antolini’s vague predictions of Holden’s great fall only create more uncertainty. Holden tries to view himself as someone who needs to protect other people, yet Mr. Antolini can see that Holden is the one who needs protecting (Beslagic 22). At this point, Holden is exhausted, confused, and depressed. So Mr Antolini suggests that they make up a bed for Holden on the couch. As they’re making the bed, Mr Antolini asks Holden about the girls he’s been dating. Then, Mr. Antolini makes a comment about Holden’s long legs and calls him “ handsome,” a description which Holden makes no comment on. Holden wakes up to Mr. Antolini drunkenly patting his head while he sleeps, something most people would interpret as a harmless, affectionate gesture. Holden hurries out of Mr. Antolini’s home, scared that Mr. Antolini has just made a pass at him.

Holden is just as concerned that Mr. Antolini has made a pass at him as he is that Mr. Antolini may have perceived him as homosexual, thereby realizing any homosexual desires Holden may be harboring (Beslagic 24). As he walks around and calms down a little, Holden considers that he may have overreacted and thinks about returning to Mr. Antolini’s home. Yet Holden doesn’t return to Mr. Antolini’s home and several days later he “ gets sick” and is sent to some kind of institution to be psychoanalyzed (216). Holden’s growing concerns about his sexuality, here and elsewhere, were no doubt a contributing factor to his illness. He demonstrated severe anxiety regarding

his sexual desires, perhaps most dramatically in his final encounter with Mr. Antolini. Some of those desires manifested themselves that night, leading Holden to finally fully realize his ongoing conflict with his sexuality.

Works Cited

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