

Holden Caulfield -- American Whiner

By George F. Will

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If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you'll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don't feel like going into it, if you want to know the truth.

With those words, 16-year-old Holden Caulfield slouched into American life 50 years ago this month. He was feeling entitled to feel quite sorry for himself. His feelings fascinated him, and his creator, J. D. Salinger, thought readers should sympathize with them. By now, many millions of them have. Holden was a new social type that subsequently has become familiar -- the American as whiner.

Anyone who doubts that the supposedly bland 1950s were pregnant with the undoubtedly stimulating 1960s should reread "The Catcher in the Rye." Published in July 1951, it has sold more than 60 million copies worldwide and is considered a "classic," a designation usually reserved in America for a variant of Coca-Cola.

This mildly picaresque novel -- reviewers then considered it risqué -- recounts a boy's flight from prep school to an eventful weekend in New York. Like Ulysses he was a wanderer. And that exhausts Holden's resemblance to anyone heroic.

He found almost everyone -- except children; this was Holden's class solidarity -- and everything unworthy of him. By declaring reality a terrible disappointment, he helped teach America's youth how to pout, a talent refined by a Hollywood Holden, James Dean, in 1955 in "Rebel Without a Cause." But at least the adolescents in "Blackboard Jungle" (1955) were interestingly menacing. Holden's emotional range matched that of Katherine Hepburn in a Broadway performance about which one critic wrote, "She ran the whole gamut of emotions from A to B."

Holden was forever denouncing "phonys" and "phoniness," which put him squarely on the side of the advanced thinkers. Such thinkers were then understood, by the folks at the serious quarterlies, as people "alienated" by the shallowness of American society, but bravely seeking "authenticity" and rather relishing the pleasure of despair. However, Holden's rebellion was somewhat, shall we say, unfocused, as was Marlon Brando's in the 1954 movie "The Wild One," in which a local girl asks Brando, the leader of a motorcycle gang, "What are you rebelling against?" and he replies, "Whadayah got?"

Fears about the invisible shackles of social pressure in an opinion-worshiping democracy are as old as de Tocqueville's "Democracy in America," and Fitzgerald's "The Great Gatsby" (1925) subtly explored how the integrity of personality is problematic. But in the 1950s, worry about "conformity" became the conformity of the intellectuals, in novels such as "The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit" (1955) and sociology treatises with such telling titles as "Organization Man" (1956) and "The Lonely Crowd" (1950).

Six years after Holden appeared as the Sympathetic Adolescent Misfit, Leonard Bernstein set "Romeo and Juliet" to music among sentimentalized youth gangs in "West Side Story." Clearly, Holden the nonconformist -- this nonconformity novel was a main selection of the Book of the Month Club; think about

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that -- was part of the herd of independent minds, happily "alienated," together.

Comparisons of Holden and Huck Finn are inevitable. Huck comes off better. Huck understood freedom in the American way, as the absence of social restraints, and did something about it by lighting out for the territories. Holden merely pioneered a new fashion statement with his baseball cap: "I swung the old peak round to the back." In case you were wondering about the pedigree of that bit of contemporary infantilism.

Huck was American literature's first character to speak naturally. Holden, too, was a literary pioneer, inventing inarticulateness as a token of adolescent "sincerity." ("I shook my head. I shake my head quite a lot. 'Boy!' I said. I also say 'Boy!' quite a lot. Partly because I have a lousy vocabulary." Partly.) Sixties adolescents, who were Holden's siblings, punctuated utterances, often of unknowable meaning, with "you know"; today's lace their locutions with swarms of "like."

The social ambiguities and hormonal turbulence associated with coming of age, and the theme of tragically "sensitive" youth -- Holden is too exquisitely sensitive for friendship -- have been the stuff of much fiction, some of it fine. However, critics, confusing self-absorption with sensitivity, invest Holden's banal discomfitures with more meaning than they can bear, and Byronic dash.

Byron was at least a youth "mad, bad and dangerous to know." Holden was -- is -- just as limited and tiresome as his vocabulary.

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