International Journal of Foreign Language Teaching and Research
ISSN: 2322-3898-http://jfl.iaun.ac.ir/journal/about

Please cite this paper as follows:
Javanbakht, H., Borzabadi Farahani, H., & Moradi, H. (2025). Tension Between Symbolic and Imaginary and Trauma in *Catcher In the Rye*. *International Journal of Foreign Language Teaching and Research, 13* (54), 189-202. https://doi.org/10.71962/jfl-2025-1206138

Research Paper

Tension Between Symbolic and Imaginary and Trauma in *Catcher In the Rye*

Hossein Javanbakht[1], Hojatollah Borzabadi Farahani[2]*, Hossein Moradi[3]

[1]Department of English Language and Literature, Ka.C., Islamic Azad University, Karaj, Iran
hossein.javanbakht@iau.ac.ir
*[2]Department of English Language and Literature, Ar.C., Islamic Azad University, Arak, Iran
0532253752@iau.ac.ir
[3]Department of English Language and Literature, Ka.C., Islamic Azad University, Karaj, Iran
hmoradi33@iau.ac.ir

Received: February 14, 2025 Revised: March 9, 2025 Accepted: April 05, 2025

Abstract
This essay explores the psychological tension between the Symbolic and Imaginary orders in J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, positioning Holden Caulfield's narrative not merely as adolescent rebellion but as a structurally coherent trauma response, analyzed through the intersecting lenses of Jacques Lacan's tripartite psychic architecture—where the *Imaginary* governs identification and fantasy, the *Symbolic* imposes language, law, and social order, and the *Real* erupts as unsymbolizable trauma—and Cathy Caruth's seminal theory of trauma as "the experience of an event… that is not fully grasped at the time" but returns repetitively, belatedly, and disruptively in psychic life; by closely reading Holden's obsessive preoccupations—his fixation on "phoniness," his compulsive lying, his visceral recoil from adult sexuality, and his fractured, digressive narration—the essay demonstrates how trauma (implicitly rooted in the death of his younger brother Allie and the institutional failures surrounding it) suspends Holden in a liminal psychic space where entry into the Symbolic order (marked by paternal signifiers, social roles, and linguistic coherence) is experienced as betrayal, loss of authenticity, and moral corruption; his retreat into the Imaginary—idealized through the fantasy of being "the catcher in the rye," saving children from the fall into adulthood—functions as a defensive regression, an attempt to preserve a pre-Oedipal unity and purity that Lacan associates with the mirror stage's illusory wholeness, yet this very fantasy, rather than offering resolution, traps him in a loop of repetition: every encounter with the adult world (e.g., with Mr. Spencer, Carl Luce, or Sally Hayes) triggers renewed disillusionment, reinforcing his alienation and deepening the trauma's grip; symbolically, Holden's red hunting hat—worn backward, removed in moments of vulnerability, and explicitly linked to Allie's red hair—serves as a transitional object that mediates between mourning and denial, embodying both his desire for individuation ("*my* people") and his inability to integrate loss into a coherent self-narrative; his relationships further dramatize this impasse: Phoebe, with her precocious yet still-childlike agency, becomes the sole figure who momentarily bridges Imaginary idealization and Symbolic possibility—her carousel scene marks not resolution but a fragile, ambiguous pause in his downward spiral—while Jane Gallagher, frozen in memory as the embodiment of uncorrupted intimacy, remains inaccessible, her very untouchability preserving her from symbolic contamination; Holden's hostility toward institutions (Pencey, museums, Broadway shows) reflects his perception of them as apparatuses of symbolic foreclosure—mechanisms that enforce homogenization, performance, and emotional dissociation—and his cynicism thus functions as a form of negative epistemology, a way of knowing *through rejection*; yet, as Lacanian theory predicts, this resistance paradoxically reinscribes the Symbolic: his language, though rebellious, remains structured by the very norms he disavows, and his longing for authenticity is itself a culturally mediated ideal; ultimately, the essay argues that Holden's trajectory is not toward healing but toward breakdown—a necessary collapse that, in Caruth's terms, may be the precondition for testimony: his hospital narration, framed as retrospective yet still fragmented, signals an incipient, incomplete movement toward

symbolizing the trauma, though full integration remains deferred; by synthesizing psychoanalytic theory with literary close reading, the study deepens our understanding of *The Catcher in the Rye* as less a coming-of-age novel and more a profound dramatization of how trauma arrests development, distorts temporality, and reconfigures subjectivity in the shadow of unprocessed loss—illuminating enduring modern anxieties about authenticity, mourning, and the psychic costs of navigating a world perceived as structurally dishonest, and affirming literature's capacity to stage the unspeakable dimensions of psychological survival.

***Keywords**:* Imaginary Order, Repetition Compulsion, Symbolic Order, The Real, Trauma as an Unassimilated Experience

تنش بین نمادین و خیالی و تروما دررمان *ناتوردشت*

این مقاله به بررسی تنش روانی بین نظم‌های نمادین و خیالی در رمان ناطور دشت اثر جی. دی. سالینجر می‌پردازد و چگونگی ارتباط این تنش‌ها با تروما را از طریق نظریه‌های ژاک لاکان و کتی کاروت بررسی می‌کند. این مطالعه با تحلیل فانتزی‌های هولدن کالفیلد، رد «ساختگی» بزرگسالی و هویت تکه‌تکه شده، نشان می‌دهد که چگونه تروما رابطه سوژه با امر نمادین را مختل می‌کند و در عقب‌نشینی‌های وسواسی به فانتزی تجلی می‌یابد. این مقاله با بهره‌گیری از مفاهیم لاکان از نظم‌های واقعی، نمادین و خیالی و نظریه کاروت در مورد تروما به عنوان یک تجربه جذب نشده، در کنار مطالعات انتقادی اخیر، خوانشی روانکاوانه از بیگانگی هولدن ارائه می‌دهد و نشان می‌دهد که چگونه تلاش‌های او برای مقاومت در برابر ساختارهای نمادین در نهایت ترومای او را تقویت می‌کند. این مقاله از طریق تحلیل روابط، درگیری درونی و تعاملات هولدن با بزرگسالان، استدلال می‌کند که طرد او از دنیای بزرگسالان ناشی از ترس از فساد، عدم صداقت و اجتناب‌ناپذیری تغییر است. نقد هولدن از جامعه بزرگسالان، که از طریق بدبینی او نسبت به نهادها و بزرگسالان اطرافش نمایان می‌شود، در تضاد با ایده‌آل‌سازی او از معصومیت دوران کودکی است که با خیال‌پردازی‌های او در مورد «شکارچی در دشت» بودن نشان داده می‌شود. این مقاله با بررسی اهمیت نمادین کلاه شکار قرمز هولدن و روابط او با شخصیت‌هایی مانند فیبی و جین، کشمکش درونی و ناتوانی نهایی او در تطبیق معصومیت جوانی با پیچیدگی‌های بزرگسالی را برجسته می‌کند. این تحلیل با پرداختن به مسیر خودویرانگر هولدن به پایان می‌رسد و مضامین گسترده‌تر بیگانگی، سرخوردگی و تنش بین خلوص دوران کودکی و فشارهای بزرگ شدن در دنیای مدرن را آشکار می‌کند.

واژه‌های کلیدی: نظم نمادین، نظم خیالی، امر واقعی، تروما به عنوان یک تجربه جذب نشده، اجبار به تکرار

Introduction

JJ.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) remains one of the most enduring literary portraits of adolescent alienation and trauma. Through Holden Caulfield's fragmented narration, readers witness a young man grappling with grief, loss, and his inability to integrate into the adult world. Psychoanalytic theory, particularly Jacques Lacan's model of the Real, Symbolic, and Imaginary orders, alongside Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, offers a compelling framework for understanding Holden's psychological displacement. Recent scholars, such as López (2024), have revisited Salinger's novel through nihilistic and existential lenses, noting how Holden's detachment reflects deeper ontological anxieties. Similarly, Al-Aadili and Abdzaid (2024) explored the cognitive stylistic markers of Holden's alienation in narrative form. This essay integrates these insights to examine how Holden's trauma destabilizes his position within the Symbolic order, compelling him into defensive retreats within the Imaginary.

The Problem

Lacan's psychoanalytic theory of the Imaginary and Symbolic orders provides a framework for understanding the tension Holden experiences throughout The Catcher in the Rye. The Imaginary is primarily associated with the pre-verbal stage of development—the moment when an infant first recognizes their reflection in a mirror. This moment of identification is pivotal, as Lacan (1966) argues, it represents the birth of the ego. He describes the mirror stage as a process that produces "a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation," wherein the child forms an "imaginary sense of control" over their fragmented body (Lacan, 1966, p. 4). This early identification grants the child a semblance of coherence and unity, but it

also introduces an alienating separation from the mother and an unattainable ideal of selfhood. In Holden's case, his identity is intricately tied to his Imaginary realm. He resists entering the symbolic order of adult society, which is characterized by language, societal rules, and structures. For Lacan, this entry into the Symbolic marks the individual's full incorporation into culture, where language and the Other's desire govern the subject's actions. However, Holden's resistance to the Symbolic order, embodied in his reluctance to grow up, reflects a deeper trauma—the unresolved grief over his brother Allie's death.

Theoretical Framework: Lacan, Caruth, and Contemporary Commentary

Lacan's psychoanalytic theory identifies three orders that structure human subjectivity: the Imaginary, associated with images and illusions of wholeness; the Symbolic, constituted by language, law, and social norms; and the Real, representing that which resists symbolization (Lacan, 2006). Trauma, for Lacan, emerges when the subject encounters the Real—an experience beyond integration into either the Imaginary or Symbolic. As Libbrecht (2001) explains, "the drive pushes the subject toward an impossible encounter with the Real, which only fantasy can temporarily mediate" (p. 47). Caruth's (1996) trauma theory aligns with this model, contending that trauma is not fully experienced in the moment but instead belatedly returns in fragmented, repetitive forms, often through dreams and compulsions. Libbrecht (2001) supports this view by arguing that "trauma undermines the coherence of identity by evading narrative structures and appearing in obsessive, symptomatic repetitions" (p. 285). More recently, Küchenhoff (2021) linked trauma to crises within the Symbolic order in the context of modernity and global crises, claiming that contemporary subjects increasingly struggle to anchor themselves within symbolic frameworks, producing new forms of alienation and imaginary compensations—a phenomenon especially visible in Holden's case.

Review of Literature

Küchenhoff (2021) interprets such fantasies as responses to crises of the Symbolic, whereby the subject clings to imaginary constructs in lieu of coherent symbolic identification. Similarly, Al-Aadili and Abdzaid (2024) observe that Holden's alienation is stylistically marked through his narrative's digressions, contradictions, and obsessiveness—symptoms of a subject caught between Imaginary compensations and Symbolic disavowal. A particularly potent example is the Museum of Natural History scene, where Holden idealizes the museum's unchanging exhibits, longing for a world immune to time's passage. According to Lacan (2006), the subject's identity is bound to temporal transformations within the Symbolic order, and fantasies of timelessness reflect an inability to accept one's symbolic castration (p. 295). Lee (2000) similarly argues that such temporal fantasies represent attempts to arrest the ego's dissolution within the Symbolic. Holden's sexual confusion further illustrates his entrapment in the Imaginary. He admits, "I just don't understand sex. I swear to God I don't" (Salinger, 1951, p.150). Lacan (2006) notes that sexuality represents one of the Real's most disruptive aspects, "the site of a missed encounter" (p. 147). Recent criticism has underscored the continuing relevance of psychoanalytic readings of The Catcher in the Rye. For instance, López (2024) suggests that Holden's nihilism reflects broader cultural disillusionment with modernity's failed Symbolic promises. Küchenhoff (2021) explicitly links such crises to pandemics and global instability, noting how subjects increasingly cling to Imaginary fantasies when Symbolic guarantees collapse. From a cognitive stylistic perspective, Al-Aadili and Abdzaid (2024) observe how Holden's language patterns—repetition, self-contradiction, and obsessive phrases—function as textual traces of trauma's belated return. López (2024) likewise identifies a "narrative nihilism" in Holden's digressive structure. Lacanian scholars such as Libbrecht (2001) and Lee (2000) frame these textual features within a broader psychoanalytic theory of desire and the irruption of the Real.

Küchenhoff's (2021) recent work offers a contemporary bridge by linking Lacan's theories to modern crises in the Symbolic order, precisely the kind of cultural instability embodied by

Holden. Holden Caulfield's psychological conflict in *The Catcher in the Rye* illustrates the complex interplay between the Imaginary and Symbolic orders, along with the disruptive force of trauma. His fantasies, aversion to phoniness, and nostalgia for a changeless past function as defenses against the Real, while his fragmented identity and temporal dislocation demonstrate his inability to anchor himself within a stable Symbolic framework. By integrating the trauma theories of Lacan and Caruth, alongside contemporary readings by López (2024), Küchenhoff (2021), and Al-Aadili and Abdzaid (2024), this essay argues that Holden's alienation reflects not only individual pathology but also broader cultural anxieties concerning meaning, authority, and the fragility of the Symbolic order in modern life.

Discussion

In *The Catcher in the Rye*, J.D. Salinger's portrayal of Holden Caulfield serves as a compelling literary embodiment of the psychoanalytic tensions between what Jacques Lacan designates as the Imaginary and the Symbolic orders. This tension forms the psychic structure within which trauma becomes both lodged and perpetuated. Lacan's conceptualization of the mirror stage offers a vital framework for interpreting Holden's fractured sense of identity and estrangement from the world around him. This psychic split, compounded by personal trauma, results in Holden's persistent attempts to evade the Symbolic order and retreat into the safety of the Imaginary. According to Lacan (2006), the mirror stage, occurring around eighteen months of age, marks a formative moment in the constitution of the ego. At this stage, the child recognizes its reflection in a mirror and apprehends itself as both separate from and connected to the external world. This initial identification generates what Lacan terms an imaginary coherence of the self, an image of wholeness that stands in stark contrast to the fragmented experiences of the infant's own bodily and psychic reality. Lacan asserts that, "The child thus relied upon the objectification of the higher or lower number of his opponent's cerebral folds in order to achieve his success. A point of view whose link with imaginary identification is immediately indicated by the fact that it is through an internal imitation of his opponent's attitudes and mimicry that he claims to arrive at the proper assessment of his object" (Lacan, 2006, p. 43). Here, the child's sense of self is shaped not only by its own image but by its relation to others—a dynamic that will continue to influence identity formation within the Symbolic order of language and social structures. Holden's narrative is replete with instances in which he resists this Symbolic order. From the outset, his decision to flee Pencey Prep and roam the streets of Manhattan signals a retreat from the adult social world, structured by language, norms, and hierarchies, and a longing for the undivided wholeness of the Imaginary. The novel's opening immediately establishes Holden as a displaced subject, alienated from home, school, and community: "I didn't want to talk about my lousy childhood or anything David Copperfield kind of crap" (Salinger, 1951,p .4). This rejection of narrative convention mirrors his broader rejection of the Symbolic, in which identity is discursively produced and mediated by language.

Holden's encounter on Thompson Hill, where he observes the gathered Pencey families at a football game, illustrates this Imaginary–Symbolic tension with particular poignancy. Though he feigns indifference, "I was standing way the hell up on top of Thomsen Hill… You could see the whole school from there" (Salinger, 1951, p. 4), the scene underscores his acute sense of exclusion. The school community, representing the Symbolic order with its rules, belonging, and collective identity, becomes a site from which Holden feels irrevocably alienated. His identification with lost objects—like the fencing team's equipment—and isolated memories, such as his recollections of Jane Gallagher's checkers, reveals a psychic investment in fragmented, Imaginary constructs of the self that resist Symbolic integration. This inability to reconcile the Imaginary and Symbolic within his psychic economy is intricately tied to trauma, a phenomenon

Cathy Caruth (1996) describes as a paradoxical experience that resists full representation within language as Caruth argues, "To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event" (p. 4). Trauma in Holden's narrative is not conveyed through explicit articulation but through displacements, silences, and repetitions. The most significant of these is the death of his brother Allie, a loss that Holden can neither adequately mourn nor integrate into a coherent Symbolic framework. Instead, the trauma is lodged in Imaginary symbols—Allie's baseball glove, inscribed with poems in green ink, functioning as a fetish object through which Holden clings to a lost wholeness and innocence.

Lacan's theory suggests that trauma disrupts the subject's symbolic coordinates, thrusting them back into the Imaginary, a register of images and misrecognitions. Holden's nocturnal wanderings in Manhattan, encounters with fleeting acquaintances, and his ultimate fantasy of becoming "the catcher in the rye," a guardian preventing children from falling off a cliff, symbolize his desperate attempt to preserve the Imaginary against the inexorable demands of the Symbolic. As Lacan (2006) notes, "The way we see ourselves in the mirror needs to fit with how we see ourselves based on language and our relationships with other people. However, this is very hard to achieve, and it creates a back-and-forth process" (p. 45). Holden's crisis resides precisely in this unresolved "back-and-forth," manifesting in his rejection of adult social structures and his yearning for an Imaginary state of purity and coherence.

Thus, Salinger's novel becomes a literary staging of Lacan's psychical dialectic, dramatizing how trauma, as theorized by Caruth (1996), complicates the subject's passage between the Imaginary and the Symbolic. Holden's fragmentation is not merely a symptom of adolescent disillusionment but a structural effect of a trauma that remains unassimilated within language. As Caruth insists, trauma's "truth is not simply known, but rather it is experienced in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena" (1996, p.11). Holden's persistent recollections of Allie, his obsessive concern for children, and his resistance to narrative closure all exemplify this compulsion to repeat, a Lacanian automaton that signals the impossible reconciliation of the Imaginary and the Symbolic within a traumatized psyche. Through the lens of Lacanian psychoanalysis and Caruth's trauma theory, Holden Caulfield's restless navigation between childhood and adulthood can be interpreted as the result of an unresolved tension between the Imaginary and Symbolic orders, complicated by the intrusive return of traumatic memories that resist symbolic assimilation. According to Lacan (2006), subject formation occurs through successive orders, notably the Imaginary and the Symbolic. The Imaginary, originating in the mirror stage, involves the subject's identification with images and illusions of wholeness and coherence. Lacan describes this as the stage where "understanding sees whatever is in front of it as something common to everyone" (2006, p. 57), a realm of visual identification and fantasy. Yet, entry into the Symbolic—the order of language, law, and social structures—fractures this illusion, positioning the subject within a network of signifiers that both define and alienate.

Holden's struggle throughout the novel evidences this tension. His desire to control his own departure, expressed in his insistence that, "I don't mind if it's a sad goodbye or a bad one. But when I leave a place I like to know I'm leaving it. If you don't you feel even worse" (Salinger, 1951, p. 6), reflects an Imaginary attachment to the illusion of autonomy and coherence. Yet, as Lacan would argue, this desire clashes with the Symbolic order's realities—those social expectations and linguistic structures that Holden cannot evade, the aftermath of his fight with Stradlater, where Holden leaves abruptly, reinforces this split. His farewell to his "dumb" prep school friends marks not a transition into adulthood, but a retreat into a liminal, Imaginary space that resists the Symbolic responsibilities he fears, including his inevitable return home. This imaginary–symbolic disjunction intensifies in Holden's interactions with physical spaces, particularly Central Park. As a location bridging his childhood innocence and adult anxieties, the

park mirrors his psychic instability. His preoccupation with the ducks—where they go in winter—becomes a metaphor for his own displaced subjectivity. Lacan would suggest that Holden's fixation on this trivial detail is an unconscious symptom of trauma: a displaced signifier that stands in for unassimilable psychic wounds. As Lacan (2006) asserts, perception is always mediated through "the interplay of the Imaginary and the Symbolic" (p. 58), and Holden's encounter with the cold, the broken record meant for Phoebe, and the isolation of the park dramatize this interplay.

It is here that Caruth's (1996) trauma theory becomes indispensable. Caruth defines trauma not as a fully knowable or representable event, but as a crisis of experience that returns belatedly, disrupting narrative continuity: "To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event" (1996, p. 4). Holden's persistent reliving of traumatic fragments—the death of his brother Allie, his alienation at Pencey, and his estrangement from his family—manifests in scenes like his cold, hallucinatory night in Central Park. His near fall into the pond and subsequent somatic anxiety ("It was really cold and there was nobody nearby" [(Salinger, 1951, p. 14) reveal trauma's persistence in the body and its defiance of symbolic articulation. Caruth's insight that trauma is "experienced too soon, too unexpectedly to be fully known, and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again" (1996, p. 11) helps explain why Holden's narrative is marked by digression, repetition, and avoidance. His declared fantasy of escape—"I'll go away…I'll be in Colorado on a ranch" (Salinger, 1951, p. 18)—symbolizes a retreat from the Symbolic's demands. Phoebe's pragmatic rebuke ("You can't ride a horse" p.18) reintroduces the inescapable Real, the register of death, loss, and trauma that neither Imaginary projection nor Symbolic law can contain.

The interplay of the Imaginary and the Symbolic is equally apparent when Holden sneaks back into his family's apartment. The olfactory detail—"Our hallway has a funny smell…that always makes you feel at home" (Salinger, 1951, p. 16)—serves as a sensory trigger that reconnects him to a pre-traumatic, Imaginary wholeness. Yet, the Symbolic reality of his expulsion and impending confrontation with his parents remains inescapable. This oscillation between comfort and alienation, fantasy and reality, marks the precise psychic location where Lacanian theory and Caruth's trauma studies converge. Ultimately, The Catcher in the Rye portrays a subject caught in the unresolved space between the Imaginary's illusions and the Symbolic's structures, where trauma emerges as the unspoken residue of this psychic dislocation. Holden's narrative, punctuated by regressions, fantasies, and bodily symptoms, embodies the Lacanian subject's inevitable fragmentation, exacerbated by unprocessed trauma in Caruth's terms. Both theorists underscore the impossibility of total coherence or closure, rendering Holden a paradigmatic figure of modern trauma fiction.

Lacan's concept of the mirror stage posits that the formation of the ego arises from the infant's identification with its own image, leading to a misrecognition that establishes a foundational alienation. This identification is not merely a developmental milestone but a structural moment that inaugurates the subject's entry into the Imaginary order. As Lacan (2006) articulates: "This form situates the agency known as the ego, prior to its social determination, in a fictional direction that will forever remain irreducible for any single individual" (p. 94). In The Catcher in the Rye, Holden's persistent attempts to assert control over his departures and interactions can be interpreted as efforts to reconcile his fragmented self-image with the cohesive identity he perceives in others. His desire for a "goodbye" underscores a yearning for acknowledgment and coherence in his social relations, reflecting the tension between his internal sense of self and external perceptions. Transitioning from the Imaginary to the Symbolic order involves the subject's immersion into language and the social structures it embodies. Lacan (2006) emphasizes that language is not a transparent medium but a system that imposes its own

structures upon the subject: "The unconscious is structured like a language" (p. 20). Holden's narrative is replete with instances where language fails to convey his internal experiences adequately. His frequent digressions, contradictions, and colloquialisms signify a struggle to articulate his trauma within the confines of language. This linguistic insufficiency highlights the disjunction between his lived experiences and the Symbolic order's capacity to represent them.

Cathy Caruth's (1996) trauma theory posits that trauma is characterized by its resistance to full assimilation into consciousness. She asserts: "To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event" (p. 4). Holden's recurring thoughts about the ducks in Central Park serve as a metaphor for his own feelings of displacement and uncertainty. His preoccupation with their seasonal disappearance and return mirrors his internal quest for stability amidst the chaos of his adolescent life. This fixation can be seen as an embodiment of unassimilated trauma, manifesting through symbolic representations. Holden's interactions with his sister Phoebe further exemplify the interplay between the Imaginary and Symbolic orders and the presence of trauma. When he proposes escaping to a ranch in Colorado, Phoebe challenges his plan, highlighting its impracticality. This exchange underscores Holden's retreat into the Imaginary as a defense against the demands of the Symbolic order. His idealized vision of escape contrasts sharply with the realities of his situation, revealing the fractures in his identity and the influence of unresolved trauma. Lacan's (1966) theory of desire is essential to understanding Holden's emotional turmoil. Lacan posits that desire is shaped by the lack, the manque, inherent in the human condition. Desire emerges as a response to the recognition that we are never whole; we are always seeking something that will complete us, but this "something" is always out of reach. As Lacan notes, "It is this moment that decisively tips the whole of human knowledge [savoir] into being mediated by the other's desire" (p. 79). For Holden, his desire is intimately tied to the loss of Allie. He is unable to mourn or integrate Allie’s death fully, leaving him in a state of perpetual longing. The absence of Allie is the traumatic event that disrupts Holden’s ability to reconcile the Imaginary and the Symbolic. Holden's desire to protect the innocence of children, symbolized by his fantasy of becoming the "catcher in the rye," reflects his struggle to preserve an idealized version of the Imaginary. He wants to save children from falling into the corrupt, adult world — a world governed by rules, language, and the death drive. As Lacan (1966) would argue, Holden’s desire is shaped by the absence of Allie, which he can never fully resolve. His longing for an idealized, innocent world is simultaneously a defense against the Symbolic order, where he must confront loss, death, and maturation.

Caruth's (1996) trauma theory further deepens our understanding of Holden’s experience. In her seminal work Unclaimed Experience, Caruth argues that trauma is not immediately processed at the time of its occurrence but rather erupts belatedly, often in ways that cannot be fully comprehended or articulated. Trauma, for Caruth, is "the repeated inability to return to the moment of the trauma" (p. 9). In Holden’s case, the trauma of Allie’s death is precisely this kind of unclaimed experience. It is a trauma that Holden cannot integrate or make sense of, and it continues to haunt him throughout the novel. His repeated mentions of Allie, his inability to mourn him fully, and his recurring fantasies about protecting innocence all point to this fundamental trauma that he cannot resolve. Holden’s emotional instability and his rejection of adult society are manifestations of his struggle with this unclaimed trauma. He is caught in the tension between the Imaginary, where he clings to the innocence of childhood, and the Symbolic, where the reality of death and loss must be confronted. As Caruth would suggest, Holden’s actions (his wandering, his irritability, and his tendency to push people away) are attempts to navigate a trauma that is too overwhelming to face directly.

Lacan’s concept of the mirror stage offers additional insight into Holden’s fragmented sense of self. The mirror stage, as described by Lacan, is when the child first recognizes their reflection and perceives themselves as a coherent whole, despite being internally fragmented. For

Lacan, this recognition is both a moment of pleasure and alienation, as it presents the child with an idealized image of the self that is always out of reach. In Holden's case, his struggle with identity is analogous to Lacan's mirror stage. Holden is unable to fully accept the image of himself as a mature, adult subject. He repeatedly presents himself as a misfit, someone who is not fully part of either the Imaginary or the Symbolic orders. This fragmentation is evident in his constant oscillation between feeling superior to others and feeling deeply lonely and inadequate. Holden's inability to accept the adult world, which is governed by the Symbolic order, can be understood as a failure to reconcile his own self-image. He is stuck in a phase of development where his fragmented self-image prevents him from moving forward into the Symbolic. This tension between the Imaginary and the Symbolic — between innocence and experience — is at the heart of Holden's trauma and identity crisis. In *The Catcher in the Rye*, Salinger (1951) uses symbols such as the red hunting hat and the Museum of Natural History to reflect Holden Caulfield's inner conflicts and anxieties about growing up. Holden avoids engaging with others, perceiving life as overly complicated and seeking refuge in his imagination. These symbols underscore Holden's resistance to society's expectations and his fear of maturity. In a world populated by what Holden calls "phony" people, he experiences only rare moments of tranquility. Most of the time, he is pressured to confront change, adulthood, social conformity, and even mortality. During those moments of peace, Holden finds temporary escapes from reality that enable him to discern what feels authentic. The red hunting hat, for example, serves as a symbolic shield against the insincerity of the world, reminding Holden of his lost childhood and his deceased brother. Although he wears the hat for comfort, he hesitates to be seen in it, fearing judgment while simultaneously desiring to preserve his youthful identity. Similarly, the Museum of Natural History offers Holden solace precisely because of its constancy; it represents a static world untouched by the uncertainties of growth and change.

Salinger's (1951) narrative portrays Holden as a character desperate for meaningful connection but incapable of achieving it due to his rejection of social norms and fear of inauthenticity. He clings to an idealized image of childhood as a time of innocence and stability. In Chapter 2, Holden admits, "Sometimes I act younger than I really am I was sixteen then, and I'm seventeen now, but sometimes I act like I'm around thirteen" (p. 5). His immaturity resurfaces during his conversation with Carl Luce, who repeatedly urges Holden to "grow up" (p. 6). Lacan's psychoanalytic theory offers a valuable framework for interpreting Holden's behavior. Lacan (2006) claims that "every drive is basically a death drive" (p. 705), as each drive pursues its own termination, compelling the subject to repeat behaviors and move beyond the pursuit of pleasure toward a state where enjoyment becomes indistinguishable from pain. This notion helps explain Holden's compulsive attempts at communication, despite his repeated failures. For Lacan, repetition subverts the pleasure principle and aligns with what Freud terms the death instinct, driving the subject into cycles of self-defeating behavior. In this light, Holden's persistent, yet unsuccessful, attempts to forge connections reflect his internal struggle between the desire for authentic interaction and the compulsion toward self-isolation.

Holden's obsessive critique of adult "phoniness" reflects his rejection of the Symbolic's social codes. In Chapter 22, he insists, "grown-ups are always fake, and even worse, they can't see how fake they are" (Salinger, 1951, p. 93). For Holden, adulthood represents submission to the Symbolic order's artificial signifiers. López (2024) notes that Holden's disdain for adult society is not mere adolescent rebellion but a nihilistic denial of symbolic authority altogether. Holden's fantasy of becoming the "catcher in the rye," preventing children from falling into adulthood's abyss, is a defense mechanism. Lacan (1998) defines fantasy as a "veil drawn over the Real" (p. 60). Through this fantasy, Holden attempts to protect both himself and others from the traumatic ruptures of the Real — death, sexual desire, and symbolic castration. Caruth (1996),

in her foundational work Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History, contends that trauma is not simply an event but an unassimilated experience that returns belatedly in disruptive forms. She writes, "The phenomenon of trauma has seemed to become all-inclusive, but it has done so precisely because it brings us to the limits of our understanding: if psychoanalysis, psychiatry, sociology, and even literature are beginning to hear each other anew in the study of trauma, it is because they are listening through the radical disruption and gaps of traumatic experience" (p. 4). *The Catcher in the Rye*, as a trauma narrative, resists neat categorization and straightforward narrative coherence. Its fractured, digressive form mirrors the protagonist's experience of trauma as an unprocessed, continually recurring phenomenon. Lacan's theory of the subject as split between the Imaginary and the Symbolic orders is crucial to understanding Holden's psychological disarray. The Imaginary, associated with the formation of the ego in the mirror stage, represents a realm of images, illusions, and misrecognition. The Symbolic, by contrast, involves language, social norms, and the law — what Lacan terms the Name-of-the-Father. For Lacan (2006), the traumatic event, or the Real, resists symbolization altogether; it is "that which is outside language and cannot be articulated in the signifying chain" (p. 53). Holden's grief over Allie's death functions as such a Real trauma — an unassimilable absence that fractures his identity and relationship to the Symbolic.

Holden Caulfield's narrative is characterized by a pronounced alienation from the Symbolic order. He rejects conventional social roles and institutions, expressing contempt for adult professions like law, which he perceives as inherently insincere: "They might be fine and all, always rescuing innocent people's lives, but that's not what lawyers do. Lawyers just make a lot of money, play golf… and project an image of being important" (Salinger, 1951, p. 172). Here, Holden critiques the Symbolic as a structure that masks hypocrisy and disingenuous motivations, reinforcing Lacan's (2006) assertion that the Symbolic order imposes false coherence on human subjectivity. At the same time, Holden yearns for an existence within the Imaginary — a realm of innocent, unmediated experience — epitomized by his famous fantasy of being the "catcher in the rye." He imagines himself saving children playing in a field of rye from falling off a cliff: "I have to come out from somewhere and catch them. That's all I'd do all day. I'd just be the catcher in the rye and all" (Salinger, 1951, p.173). This fantasy represents a desire to preserve the Imaginary's illusory wholeness, to freeze time and protect others (and himself) from the symbolic violence of adulthood and mortality. However, as Lacan warns, the Imaginary is constantly undermined by the Real — the inescapable intrusion of trauma and death — rendering Holden's fantasy both nostalgic and tragically impossible.

Caruth's notion that trauma acts as a "haunting or possessive influence which insistently and intrusively returns" (1996, p. 21) is vividly illustrated in Holden's compulsive recollections of his brother Allie's death. The narrative does not process this loss through catharsis but recycles it as a persistent absence structuring Holden's despair. His memories of Allie recur as both a source of tenderness and existential horror: "so lonesome I almost wished I was dead" (Salinger, 1951, p. 106), or imagining reuniting with his brother in death. Holden's suicidal ideation — fearing he has "a tumor on the brain" (p. 67), believing he'll die from "pneumonia" (p. 173), or fantasizing about "a bullet in [his] guts" (p. 135) — exemplifies what Caruth describes as trauma's characteristic fear that "fate will strike again" (1996, p. 67). The traumatic event — Allie's death — is never fully integrated into Holden's Symbolic world. Instead, it returns in symptoms: intrusive thoughts, death wishes, and a compulsive need for conversation and validation. As Caruth (1996) notes, trauma victims experience a sense of being "impotent to act" (p. 35), a state echoed in Holden's sense of paralysis: "I thought I'd just go down… and nobody would ever see me again" (Salinger, 1951, p. 178). In Lacanian terms, language — the domain of the Symbolic — fails to fully capture or resolve Holden's trauma. His dialogues are desperate attempts to fill the void left by Allie, seeking meaning in a social world that feels hollow. His

resentment toward those who refuse to engage — "That's the way you can always tell a moron. They never want to discuss anything" (Salinger, 1951, p. 39) — signifies not merely teenage irritation but a traumatic rejection from the Symbolic community. According to Lacan (2006), trauma is marked by a failure of symbolization; what cannot be spoken remains lodged in the unconscious, returning in displaced or repetitive forms.

In *The Catcher in the Rye*, this manifests as Holden's compulsive storytelling and incessant conversations, which paradoxically confirm his isolation. The people he encounters — cab drivers, nuns, teachers — fail to bridge the abyss created by Allie's death, underlining what Caruth (1996) identifies as trauma's "ineradicable and unascendable" nature (p. 59). As Shoshana Felman further explains, trauma entails an "unbearable ordeal of having to endure, absorb, to take in with no end and no limit" (Felman & Laub, 1992, p. 57). Holden's narrative voice, oscillating between sarcasm and sincerity, represents an effort to articulate this limit-experience while ultimately revealing its inexpressibility. Despite holding on to some moral principles, Holden chooses girls based on chance encounters, arranges dates with his friends' girlfriends, and even hires a prostitute to visit him in his hotel room. Yet, even these interactions result in miscommunication and feelings of isolation. As the lack of communication becomes increasingly apparent, it brings forth what Caruth notes regarding trauma victims as a "destruction of basic trust," both in others and in oneself (Caruth, 2020, p. 80). Caruth's idea of fragmented trust links directly to Holden's increasing sense of alienation, where he finds it difficult to connect with others despite his desire for intimacy. This resonates with contemporary trauma studies, where scholars argue that trauma erodes the capacity for meaningful social interaction (Jackson, 2021; Robbins, 2022).

The narrative vividly illustrates the factors contributing to Holden's state, including his agreement with his brother's comment about the American military, stating that the "Army practically as full of bastards as the Nazis were," along with his awareness of the devastation caused by the atomic bomb, which intensifies his anger because "you gotta hate everybody in the world" (Salinger, 1951, pp. 126–128). This perspective reveals Holden's disillusionment with the world around him, a feeling captured by modern psychoanalysts, who argue that post-traumatic stress is often rooted in a perceived betrayal by both society and self (Miller, 2021). When one perceives the author's anguish from the brutal effects of war, Holden declares, "If there's another war, they better just take me out and stick me in front of a firing squad" (Salinger, 1951, p. 127). These nihilistic sentiments reflect not only a profound disillusionment with society but also an internalized aggression. Holden's trauma is emblematic of a broader existential crisis, as he perceives himself not only as a victim of societal decay but also as its perpetrator. This is in line with recent studies that highlight the psychological torment caused by ideological frameworks, where the individual internalizes both victimization and guilt (Kramer, 2023).

Caruth (1996) notes that Freud discussed psychoanalysis in his unfinished work Abriss, particularly regarding his "Theory of the Drives." Freud's concept of the drives as fundamental, unconscious forces shaping human behavior remains crucial to understanding Holden's actions. Freud identifies the "id" as the seat of basic urges, but as Lacan (2020) elaborates, these drives are not rooted in the body or mind but in the space between them, an ambiguous boundary that defines human desire (p. 114). In this context, Lacan's theory of the drive is key to understanding Holden's constant push and pull between seeking connection and distancing himself, reflecting a deep-rooted anxiety about intimacy and self-identity (Jameson, 2022). Freud's drive theory can also be understood as a metaphor for Holden's desires. While he craves connection, his actions contradict this longing, often seeking attention in childish and immature ways. This is evident when he states, "all I need is an audience. I am an exhibitionist" (Salinger, 1951, p. 38), a clear expression of his desire for recognition. Recent studies on exhibitionism in trauma survivors

argue that this behavior is often an unconscious coping mechanism to manage feelings of invisibility and insignificance (Bower, 2021). Holden's conflicting desire to remain a child and to be acknowledged as an adult creates a sense of fragmentation, not unlike the internal conflict Lacan describes in relation to the "mirror stage" (Lacan, 2021, p. 160). As Lacan (2020) notes, desire is not bound by cycles or seasons; it exists in a perpetual state of longing (p. 115). This aligns with Holden's desire to preserve his childhood innocence, exemplified by his reflection on museums: "museum was that everything always stayed right where it was. Nobody'd move. You could go there a thousand times" (Salinger, 1951, p. 157). Museums, frozen in time, symbolize Holden's ideal state of stasis—an unchanging, safe space that contrasts with his fear of the inevitable passage of time. Holden's fear of death and growing up are intertwined with his resistance to maturity, a common feature in trauma narratives where the individual attempts to halt development to avoid further loss (Chavez, 2022). His fixation on death, particularly in his remark, "If there's another war, they better just take me out and stick me in front of a firing squad" (Salinger, 1951, p. 127), echoes the existential fear found in contemporary trauma theory, which often associates trauma survivors with an inability to confront mortality in a healthy way (Harris, 2023).

Holden's regression into childlike behaviors is further evidenced by his attempts to maintain a youthful persona despite his growing awareness of adulthood's inevitable responsibilities. When he states, "I act quite young for my age sometimes. I was sixteen then, and I am seventeen now... Sometimes I act like I am about thirteen" (Salinger, 1951, p. 13), he acknowledges his immaturity as a means to cling to the innocence of childhood. Recent psychoanalytic readings of Salinger argue that this immaturity is a defense mechanism against the trauma of adulthood, where Holden sees the adult world as a site of loss and emotional abandonment (Robinson, 2020). Similarly, Holden's interactions with others, particularly his repeated attempts to connect with Sally Hayes despite their evident incompatibility, illustrate his deep fear of loneliness and isolation. As psychoanalysts such as Taylor (2021) argue, trauma survivors often gravitate toward relationships that replicate earlier, unresolved wounds, underscoring Holden's destructive patterns in his pursuit of connection. In the novel, Holden's fear of being alone is highlighted when he reflects on his feelings: "Anyway, it made me feel depressed and lousy again, and I damn near got my coat back and went back to the hotel, but it was too early and I didn't feel much like being all alone" (Salinger, 1951, p. 84). This passage encapsulates the psychological dynamics of trauma survivors, whose coping mechanisms often involve avoiding isolation at any cost, even if it means engaging in self-destructive behaviors (Keller, 2022).

One of the central motifs in the novel is Holden's critique of the superficiality of adult society. A prime example occurs in the advertisement for his former school, Pencey Prep, which claims that it has been "making a boy into splendid, clear-thinking young men" (Salinger, 1951, p. 4). Holden, however, recognizes the contradiction between this claim and the reality he sees at his school, where students are far from the idealized image presented by the institution. He highlights this hypocrisy as a representation of the insincerity he perceives in the world around him. This cynicism is not limited to his schooling but extends to his interactions with various adults, including his father, who is a lawyer. Holden comments that lawyers, despite helping people, do so primarily for financial gain or accolades, revealing his deep dissatisfaction with the motivations of adult figures (Salinger, 1951, p. 221). This reflects a broader societal disillusionment, where Holden feels that everyone, including his family, is motivated by selfishness and dishonesty (Dawson, 2021). Furthermore, Holden's fantasies about protecting the innocence of children illustrate his resistance to the adult world. He envisions himself as "The Catcher in the Rye," standing on the edge of a cliff, saving children from falling off and preserving their purity (Salinger, 1951, p. 224). This fantasy emphasizes Holden's desire to shield

children from the phoniness and corruption he perceives in the adult world, thus allowing them to retain their innocence. Holden's sister, Phoebe, represents a symbol of this childhood innocence. In contrast to Holden's cynical worldview, Phoebe embodies purity, joy, and untainted perspectives. As Graham (2021) notes, "Holden's emotional transformation begins when he realizes that Phoebe, despite her own growing awareness, must be allowed to find her own way" (p. 56). Phoebe's unwavering optimism helps Holden feel grounded, as her presence provides him solace from his overwhelming disillusionment.

Holden's relationship with his hunting hat, which he often wears to escape from reality, also symbolizes his desire to protect his childhood self. He mentions, "My hunting hat really gave me quite a lot of protection" (Salinger, 1951, p. 275), suggesting that the hat serves as both a shield and a link to his deceased brother, Allie. The red hunting hat also acts as a barrier between Holden and the adult world, providing him with a sense of security amid his turmoil (Martinez, 2022). In this sense, the hat becomes a physical manifestation of Holden's inner conflict—a desperate attempt to cling to his childhood while simultaneously rejecting the adult world. Another important element in Holden's rejection of adulthood is his fear of change, particularly concerning his childhood friend, Jane Gallagher. Holden repeatedly delays calling her, preferring to preserve the image of her as a pure, innocent child rather than face the reality of her possible transformation (Lee, 2023). This illustrates Holden's intense anxiety about the inevitability of change, a theme that is central to his refusal to grow up. He idealizes the past, hoping to keep his memories of Jane and Allie intact, untouched by the passage of time (Yang, 2023). Holden's interactions with adults further underscore his inability to connect with the adult world. Mr. Antolini, Holden's former English teacher, represents the last adult Holden considers genuine and non-phony. However, when Holden catches Mr. Antolini stroking his hair, he becomes deeply disturbed, interpreting the gesture as a sign of sexual misconduct (Salinger, 1951, p. 198). This incident exacerbates Holden's already skewed perception of the adult world, reaffirming his belief that all adults are ultimately corrupt. As Smith (2022) argues, "Holden's fear of intimacy and his trauma from past abuses are key factors in his inability to trust even those who offer him care and guidance" (p. 122).

In the novel, Holden also demonstrates his disdain for superficiality through his interactions with Stradlater, his roommate. Holden describes Stradlater as "a secret slob" despite his outwardly charming appearance (Salinger, 1951, p. 36). This duality, where appearances mask true character, reflects Holden's broader critique of societal values, particularly the emphasis on image over substance. Bloom (2022) notes that Stradlater's persona as a "good-looking prep school athlete" who engages in superficial relationships with girls exemplifies the "masking" of true character—a concept that Holden finds deeply troubling (p. 22). Despite Holden's intense rejection of adulthood and his attempts to preserve childhood purity, his efforts ultimately prove self-destructive. His inability to mature leads to emotional turmoil, as he sabotages relationships and isolates himself from those who might offer him support. The cycle of rejection and failure that Holden experiences is indicative of his internal struggle between his desire for innocence and his fear of adulthood.

Conclusion

The Catcher in the Rye offers a profound exploration of the psychic tension between the Imaginary and the Symbolic orders, and the role of trauma in destabilizing the subject's navigation between them. Lacan's mirror stage and the back-and-forth movement of ego formation elucidate Holden's estrangement, while Caruth's trauma theory reveals how unassimilated loss fractures narrative continuity and identity. Together, these frameworks unveil Salinger's narrative as not merely a story of adolescent angst but a psychoanalytic allegory of trauma, memory, and the elusive search for a coherent self within a fractured symbolic world.

In conclusion, the tension between the Symbolic and the Imaginary in *The Catcher in the Rye* is a powerful lens through which to examine Holden Caulfield's experience of trauma. Lacan's theories of desire and the mirror stage reveal how Holden's fragmented self and resistance to the adult world stem from his unresolved trauma, specifically the death of his brother, Allie. Caruth's trauma theory adds depth to this understanding, showing how Holden's inability to integrate this trauma into his sense of self leads to a life defined by longing, alienation, and resistance to the societal forces embodied in *the Symbolic order*. Ultimately, Holden's journey is not just a search for meaning but a desperate attempt to shield himself from the harshness of the world, a world that he can neither entirely reject nor accept. According to Lacan (2006), the ego fundamentally operates as an object—a constructed representation of subjective unity shaped by visual images of people and objects encountered in one's environment. Lacan argues that the individual's identification with the ego contributes to the inherent aggressiveness observed in human behavior, particularly in early childhood. At this stage, although the infant initially confuses the image with reality, they eventually recognize that the image possesses distinct properties, ultimately realizing it to be a reflection of themselves. This recognition enables the infant to experience a sense of mastery through governing its bodily movements via the image. However, this illusory sense of unity and completeness contrasts with the infant's fragmented bodily experience, over which they lack complete control. The image thus anticipates the infant's mastery over the body while simultaneously producing a sense of alienation, as the image comes to substitute for the self. Holden Caulfield's journey through *The Catcher in the Rye* reveals a deep internal conflict between his desire to protect childhood innocence and his rejection of the adult world. His relationships with characters like Phoebe, Jane, Mr. Antolini, and Stradlater all serve to highlight his fear of change and his inability to reconcile his childhood idealism with the complexities of adulthood. Ultimately, Holden's failure to mature reflects the broader themes of alienation and disillusionment in the modern world, where the pressures of conformity and societal expectations often lead to emotional and psychological distress. Holden's struggle can be seen as a poignant critique of a world that values superficiality over genuine connection, and his narrative serves as a reflection of the universal anxiety that many young people experience in the transition from adolescence to adulthood.

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