

# Nihilism in Modern Literature: The Case of The Catcher in the Rye

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## Abstract

The present research examines cultural implications of the 1951 novel *The catcher in the rye* by J. D. Salinger. The paper analyses the intradiegetic sentences made by the novel's main character, Holden Caulfield, and investigates on the inferences drawn from them. To this end, it would be used a structuralist methodological approach created by Gérard Genette and Roland Barthes in the 1970s. The conclusions reached indicate that around the date the book was written, a new type of nihilism was common for new generations in themes, characters, and symbols found in literary productions. In such manner, it is suggested that realist literature with intimate and existentialist characters, as well as other cultural objects, allow us to infer which are the daily life conditions. In the case of our work, those conditions are based on social discontent and cultural alienation of adolescents, which is in this research outlined as a new type of nihilism.

**Keywords:** Caulfield, nihilism, oppression, Salinger, textual analysis

## 1. Introduction

*The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) by J. D. Salinger is considered to be a particularly representative cultural object in relation to a new historical type of social nihilism. A good way to understand why Salinger's work represents this movement or historical epoch can be found, paradoxically, in the itinerancy of its manifestations. At the beginning of the 21st century, novels with adolescent protagonists (*Bildungsromane*) have been exhausted, a question that is extraordinarily relevant for our writing. Nancy Armstrong's *Why the Bildungsroman no longer works* (2020) affirms that novels with main characters representing teenagers showing social aversions, individual despair and misanthropy, have become normalized to an extent unknown in history. This is the reason why this paper argues that the social nihilism, for the new generations, can be observed in cultural objects (in our case a novel) such as Salinger's literary production. In Salinger's work it is possible to observe desperation, rebellion and a profound problem regarding the possibilities of their cultural reaffirmation. In his article, Armstrong wonders in this regard why flat characters are now so recurrent, pitifully concluding that characters in narrative works that were once categorized as «round» or «full,» now go unnoticed in the plots —what warns us of their suffering—.

The problem addressed here is relevant since our society has been characterized as nihilistic by different scholars (Cunningham, 2002; Offord, 2016; Gertz, 2019). For more than a century several authors have described our society as nihilistic, considering that it oscillates between illness and despair to schizophrenia and suicide. Few works have focused, however, on the literary capacity to manifest how teenagers feel nihilistic «symptoms» such as hostility, indifference and cultural distancing.

Prior to 1951, when Jerome David Salinger's (1919–2010) *The Catcher in the Rye* was published in full, many other literary works featured main roles manifesting nihilistic attitudes. From social distancing of norms, ideas and politics to desperation and the utopia. The intradiegetic first-person protagonist narrator allows us to access to first-hand judgments and assumptions of characters such as the «post-romantic» Kurtz, protagonist of Joseph Conrad's (1857-1924) *Heart of Darkness* (1899), the superimposed and «modern» characters of John Dos Passos (1896-1970) in *Manhattan Transfer* (1925)—through the eyes of journalist Jimmy Herf—or the «avant-gardist» of Jack Kerouac's (1922-1969) semi-autobiographical novel *On the Road* (1957), who develops the plot through an interior monologue. Other characters contemporary to Salinger's protagonist, Holden Caulfield, were also characterized as «absurd,» «brutal» or «postmodern» in relation to their nihilistic attitude of social detachment.

Salinger's work represents the nature of contemporary nihilism in a different way than other works did —this happens because the conditions of the main character seem connatural to his thought. Holden Caulfield does not seem to respond to a particular situation but to his way of life, a way that positions him frontally before existential disbelief and that makes him deploy his actions through the feeling of failure and the consequent moral discomfort (Baer & Gesler, 2004; Bloom, 2009; Benson, 2018). His memories of the past and his anticipations of the future are externalized in a decadent way *per se*. Through the plot we can see how his initial

personal position is negative and tends to desolation. The psychological tinge of Salinger's work allows us to appreciate an artistic representation in which the protagonist unfolds his actions through a disoriented and wandering spirit typical of a historical moment where a lost generation (a cohort born between 1883–1900) and the silent one (a cohort born between 1928–1945) coexist.

It is hoped, therefore, to develop an original interpretation of a work that, while maintaining a literary nature *sine intentio*, an ulterior significance that surpassed its own expectations, is still capable of offering new theoretical perspectives. It is presupposed, in this sense, that it can show a form of nihilism already present in 1951, to appreciate the reasons that make it a valid object of interest and that are capable of manifesting a vital reality for millions of Western adolescents and adults both in its time and today.

## 2. Method

This case study aims to reflect the weaknesses and strengths presented by J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*. In order to determine the form that contemporary nihilism can take, the case study conducts an in-depth analysis of the significant nature of the behavior of its main character, with the objective of finding the social reactions that allow us to appreciate the development of a vital emptiness manifested through the suppression of social participation. A single but representative case, however, can offer us the natural state of the issue under analysis. By «natural» in this sense we mean a phenomenon that, precisely because it is fully accepted, is perceived in a standardized way by the public and can therefore go unnoticed.

The inductive task used in the case study presents problems not only related to prediction and its uniqueness, but it can also present disadvantages with respect to causality if it evades the question of the origin, motives and especially the normalized lifestyle by the fictitious character. The original complete edition published in 1951 by the reputable publisher Little, Brown and Company (published in New York and Boston, United States), has varied slightly with its new versions, but in general terms all of them are able to offer us the same idea about the psychology of the main character of the novel. The case study is not based on the nature of the terms themselves but on the topics that are susceptible to be appreciated through the repetition of the attitudinal behaviors that the character has at a basic level of social coexistence. Holden Caulfield's consciousness, as an element of study, constitutes the final question of analysis. This analysis is carried out through the objective interpretation of the character's inner monologue, which separates him from his own external material reality.

The nature of the case study, therefore, cannot be coherently reduced to a simply quantitative or qualitative question (although the same has an aspect and mode of analysis more based on the latter than on the former), but the latter form of analysis is probably more convenient when we study a cultural object such as a novel. The theoretical level used within the case study to analyze the way a literary character acts is not based, at least not solely, on the recurrence of certain types of reactions that he presents. The recurrence is just a little part of the examination. The data collected within the literary fragments of the work itself, in any case, can become operative only when they are interpreted as the character's reaction, which will be more discernible and relevant for the present work than the quantitative aspects. In fact,

given the recurrence of the same forms of reaction, it will be possible through the case study to observe carefully and meticulously how the behavioral reaction patterns of the main character are repeated. The data collected will be based on the objective interpretation of sentences in which the main character of the work shows his ideas from an internal perspective through his intradiegetic monologue, so that the analysis will not depend on complex observations or a secondary and subjective analysis from the eyes of the researcher.

Understood in this way, the methodology used on literary composition bases the literary analysis on a great multitude of commonly disjointed approaches.

### *2.1 Thematic and Modal Approach*

The thematic analysis of Narratology, developed among others by Vladimir Propp (1895–1970), Algirdas Greimas (1917–1992) or Claude Bremond (1929–2021), is however not a standard model of analysis. Although during the last decades a quasi-formal difference has been established on thematic and modal (also called argumentative) analysis, the basic difference emanates from a conceptual issue produced by Russian formalism between 1910 and 1930. This difference refers to the *фабула* (fable) or outline of the narrated and the plot (*сюжет*, romanized as *syuzhet*) in reference to the purpose and the chronological structure of events. Over the decades, however, the formal difference between fable and plot has narrowed until the difference between the thematic (*фабула* or fable) and modal (*сюжет* or plot) has been practically diluted. What do both thematic and modal analyses ultimately seek? Primarily, to find a methodology capable of formalizing the meaning of the analyzed sequences of a narrative (Propp, 1928; Bremond, 1973; Greimas, 1983).

In the second half of the twentieth century, several authors combined what had previously been called both thematic and modal analysis. However, the present research develops a process close to the traditional thematic narrative analysis, to a greater extent given its counterposition to modal meaning than its closeness, *sensu stricto*, to the thematic. This occurs given the existing formal difficulties in strongly dividing the «thematic» and «modal» modes as purely formal investigative aspects. Thematic analysis of narratology is understood as the study of the structural units of folk sense in which they were conceived both by Boris Tomachevski (1890–1957) and Vladimir Propp as a balance (*баланс*) between the traditional and cultural understanding of what is expressed (the «thematic») coupled with the form of the transmission of the sequences (the «modal», «argumental» or «morphological»). It is evident, in this sense, that our analysis is thematic.

### *2.2 Textual Analysis*

The narrative analysis used in this dissertation is based on a notion that communicative systems include interpretable units capable of meaning only or at least mainly through context, that is, through the relationship between the sign as a physical entity or «mark»—the signifier (*le signifiant*)—and the conventional meaning constructed and collectively arranged—the conceptual meaning (*signification conceptuelle*). This is the reason for speaking of a thematic analysis. Likewise, the narrative analysis used presupposes that context units create final meanings through the expansion of senses and their association

within abstract conceptual schemes (Petrov, 2019; Baxter, 2020; Frow, Hardie, & Smith, 2020). Structural narratology, thus, centrally estimates conceptual plasticity, that is, the capacity of a textual «event» to incorporate, in a weak sense, commitments to other meanings external to the «text» itself, such as theme, rhythm or the necessary perspectives of the prose content. The Soviet formalist Yuri Tynyanov, for example, in his article *De l'évolution littéraire* (On Literary Evolution, 1927), translated by Tzvetan Todorov (1939-2017), put it this way. The textual fact, understood in this way, includes parallel and adjacent ideas, which are neither «deliberate» nor a premeditated part of the story, but which are nevertheless indispensable for understanding its symbolic meaning.

### 2.3 Historical Symbolism

The renowned author Todorov was the one who first emphasized the role of historical symbolism when analyzing narrative. Todorov's ideas—which were perhaps only matched by those of Genette in his time—were joined in the 1970s by a crucial structuralist concept of Roland Barthes (1915–1980), «historical symbolism.» By it Barthes meant the prior, traditional and cultural figurative forms necessary to realize the union between sign and meaning. Although these were pioneers, others also examined the «minimal» entities of textual analysis as different units of communicative meaning because they were not associated with signs, even though they were essential for the latter. The use of textual analysis as a methodological tool was for semiotics, thus, a basic but at the same time auxiliary strategy for textual analysis by identifying what underlies the basic lexical representations assigned and explicit. Its objective has been to emphasize intertextual comprehension, ideal possibilities and everything that is part of the so-called subtext, understanding by subtext that which is susceptible to create connections beyond the plot, links with the imagined story and the extratextual and historical sense of the final composition (see Barthes, 1968, 1973, 1977). This is the reason why the present work relies directly on the historical symbolism that emanates from Salinger's work.

### 3. Results

The aim of the present chapter is to present the nature of the extratextual meanings that can manifest the social behavior of a literary character, as well as a large number of questions related to his consciousness. To this end, it is necessary to note that the simple concept «extratextual» (as well as other «subtext», «index» or «function») is as rich as it is complex when there is not enough inherited theoretical background regarding the types of analysis and theoretical frameworks capable of interpreting characters in literary works.

On occasions Holden manifests aversive ideas such as «Oh, how I hated him», «but not for all the gold in the world would I have gone to visit that son of a bitch Morrow», or «if there is one word I hate, it is that one»; he uses the word «hate» assiduously and recursively and does so in contexts in which he subordinates his personality to the needs of his environment. This places him in a particular position that oscillates between participation and rejection of his own social participation, something that Barthes insists on when he considers in *Writing Degree Zero* (1953)—within the section *New critical essays* entitled *Fromentin: Dominique*—, and in *The Rustle of Language* (1984)—within the chapter *Languages and*

*style*—that the signs are capable of manifesting underlying states about the dynamics of power that a character's consciousness can undergo.

What happens with Holden Caulfield is not, in fact, a kind of indication that cannot be easily appreciated in characters who manifest high degrees of existential exhaustion, as can be seen in Ferdinand Bardamu of Céline's (1894–1961) *Journey to the End of the Night* (1932) when he states, when recalling his visits to the Parisian cabaret Folies Bergère, that life is developed by hating or adoring; or as seen in the Antoine Roquentin of Sartre's (1905–1980) *The Nausea* (1938) when he expresses that hatred (as well as disgust) is, like others, a way of existing, which in turn is similar to the meaning found when the Meursault of Camus' (1913–1960) *The Stranger* (1942) expresses the last word of the novel.

Hatred in Holden as a clue to the dynamics of oppression that concur between the semantics emanating from the textual and the underlying symbolism, brings us closer to the coherence that its function sustains with respect to the general structure of the narrative. Terms such as «hatreds», «anger» and «rage» (and all their derivatives) are common in the text and constitute both clues and elementary indexes for the integration of the story in its own development.

### 3.1 *The Relative Protagonist*

The first presupposition of the thesis holds that contemporary literature that complies with certain guidelines is characterized by the use of «relative» or «descriptive» characters. The referred guidelines constitute attributes such as the typification as realistic narrative, the intimate and existentialist features in the plot and a manifest nihilistic attitude on the part of a young protagonist in the literary work (Felman & Laub, 1992; Felman, 2002; Filerowicz, 2016). The «relative character» of realist narrative literary works is characterized by being flat even though he is the main character, given his nihilistic attitude towards life, which places him in a secondary place in the story even though he occupies a central space in it. His conscience and behavior resemble the «superfluous man» that Ivan Turgenev presents in *Diary of a Superfluous Man* (1850) and its hints are not only or originally found in *The Catcher in the Rye*, but are reversible in different works, beyond Russian literature between 1850 and the early twentieth century, as in Flaubert's *Memoirs of a Madman* (1901), whose protagonist immerses himself in his own ideal personal world and moves away from the real one—a behavior similar to the unknown protagonist of Dostoyevsky's *Memoirs of the Underground* (1864)—, the Jimmy Herf who acts as a pure narrator of reality in Dos Passos' *Manhattan Transfer* (1925), a model similar to *USA* of 1930-36 in which Dos Passos remarks facts without affecting the moral or reflection of the characters.

### 3.2 *Breaking the Expectation-Failure Dynamic*

The meaning of decadence for the human lifestyle seems to indicate that, in the absence of exemplary and prosperous relationships, it is more acceptable to fall into moral disorientation and the impossibility of promoting satisfactory attitudes of desire and motivation. This is the fundamental characteristic of cultural decadence and of the consequent creative impossibility in the face of the pretension of instituting, *eo ipso* (by itself), a form of individual existence

based on happiness. Faced with the collapse of existential development, both the literary character of the realist and existentialist narrative and the young individual he represents socially, will find themselves in a situation prone to nihilism and, therefore, in a position of what this paper has come to qualify as the rupture of the literary dynamics of classical realism between expectations and disappointments, that is, between great motivations and great failures.

We find in the loss of dynamics what the sociologist Ulrich Beck (1944–1915) defines as intrinsic to the Second Modernity: the absence of an integrative task in the face of the natural disintegration of the cultural development of the moment. Faced with this situation, the individual commonly feels a profound and deteriorated lack of spontaneity in his search for meaning in social life. However, the classical conception of «nothingness» in relation to human anthropology cannot be explained, at least not solely, through the conception of becoming, that is, of difference as the essential element of vitality, as the essential psychological distance between act and potency that crystallizes in social facts. Dynamics based on expectations and disappointments cannot overcome the meaning that the absurd has taken on for human life. Conceiving existence as an irrelevant fact, far from a final meaning, erodes the final meaning of individuality.

### *3.3 Absence of Plot Triggers*

Ulrich Beck's Theory of Individualization (consolidated in the 1980s) is introduced because it is modern, young and original, but above all because of its precarious academic and media repercussion, which offers us the possibility of extracting novel interpretations from it, and above all because it allows us to establish a theoretical framework of reference on the new form of nihilism prevailing—inheritable—in contemporary Western societies.

This can be estimated, for example, from its capacity to explain the paradox of the search for individuality as a cause of destruction of individuality itself, as well as from its capacity to have empowered a reflexive society, that is, a society that constantly reflects through opinions and criticism of all kinds to solve its problems when, again paradoxically, by becoming fully reflexive, it only increases exponentially the levels of concomitant cultural anguish, and eradicates the natural capacity for social agreement (Beck, 1983, 1986, 1998). This is the reason why it can be accepted that, as a consequence of a new type of literature, of existentialist character and with intimate features, a protagonist shows a behavioral and fully social attitude related to nihilism. And given this situation, it will not be necessary to notice triggers in the plot of the story itself. This means that the protagonist of a novel with existential and intimate features does not need causes, at least not easily recognizable ones, to display a nihilistic attitude. Which, in a reverse way, through a literary analysis, will allow us to observe characters who are unmotivated, anguished and desolate simply because they exist.

## **4. Conclusion**

The social organization, although institutionally stable, contradictorily develops through its own capacity to isolate its members through disaffection, with the aim of capitalizing on their discontent. In a paradoxical way, the modern Western adolescent has already accepted within

his conscience, and in an unpremeditated way, that individuality constitutes a «way out» of his feelings of desolation. This situation of social alienation, which is both psychologically and morally desolating for the adolescent, is characterized in this work as a situation of social hopelessness, a type of hopelessness similar to what is defined by ontology (especially Heideggerian ontology) as «the experience of nothingness».

The experience of nothingness refers to a phenomenological situation deeply linked to the peculiarities that sustain social nihilism, to existential anguish and to how the world is conceived and experienced by the protagonist and internal narrator of the work as the expression of an existential plane of consciousness and human interrelation. The experience of nothingness differs from other types of nihilism historically characterized but can expose the subordination and the processes of sublimation, evasion and inhibition that the protagonist of a fictional literary work can show. The conclusions will be related to the representativeness of an epoch and the new interpretations of existential anguish that have been given, in addition to the work used, in other literary constructions of a realist nature.

Thus, the functional disorganization of the social system, paradoxically, increases the perceived need for its existence. The process, however, entails a form of destruction of trust that crystallizes in the feeling of absurdity of most of its members. Given this situation of social decadence that the protagonist of the work used as an object of study can experience, it is acceptable to argue that Salinger chose to draw on the inherited hopelessness emanating from the post-World War II period and the moral life of post-industrial New York, where he could easily experience existential emptiness as a form of essential maladjustment with social reality.

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