

Language Features in *The Catcher in the Rye*

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The Catcher in the Rye was the first novel by Jerome David Salinger, published in 1951. The book is considered as one of American literature classics in the 20th century and releases six million copies in various versions in the world. This paper mainly introduces how Salinger uses the first person technique through the novel, the anti-tradition language features and it also introduces the usage of stream of consciousness in the novel.

Keywords: the first person technique, language feature, the anti-tradition feature

Introduction

Jerome David Salinger (1919–2010) is a very popular American author. He had not published any work in 34 years until 1999 when he published his new novel *Harper Watts*. He produced a lot of novels, short stories, and novellas, among which the most prominent is *The Catcher in the Rye*, which has been outstanding at three aspects: anti-tradition, first person technique, and stream of consciousness.

Shortly after its publication, writing for *The New York Times*, Nash K. Burger called it “an unusually brilliant novel” (Burger, 1951), while James Stern wrote an admiring review of the book in a voice imitating Holden’s. Up to the 21st century, *The Catcher in the Rye* has become a classic of contemporary American literature and has been selected as one of the hundred best English novels between 1993 and 2005.

Over a long time, criticism is centered on the novel on the moral degeneration, nihilism, sex description, and excessive use of vulgar language, etc. An angry parent applies statistics to the foul language in the novel: There are 237 “Goddamn”, 58 “bastard”, 31 “Chris sake”, and 6 “fuck”. In the 1970s, several American high school teachers were forced to resign because of teaching *The Catcher in the Rye*. But time is the most impartial judge. Up to the 21st century, this book has become famous all over the whole world and the total sales of all versions of the book have been up to 65 million copies.

Nowadays, the language style has become a characteristic of the novel. Many scholars study *The Catcher in the Rye*’s language features and artistic style around the world. This novel has a significant status in American literature. This thesis aims at revealing its language features: anti-tradition, the first person technique, and stream of consciousness.

Anti-Tradition

Language is a chronicler of the times. *The Catcher in the Rye* is not only a successful description of the status of the United States after the World War II and the mental state of the American youth, but also accurately and vividly record the language habits of the American youth. American critic Donald once said:

We can see the language of *The Catcher in the Rye* is informal and colloquial art show of American teenagers. It has

typical, common features and individuality; it is vulgar, slang and lack of accuracy, with imitation marks, without losing the creativity. (Donald, 1953, p. 53)

Firstly, the vulgar or crude words can be seen in any situations in the novel. Holden's mouth was closed with "damn", "goddamn", and "hell", for example, when he mentioned that he was fond of the red cap, he used "goddamn hunting cap" and called his luggage was "my goddamn bags".

In daily life, for the people and things which Holden did not like, he could not but to scorn. In the middle of the second chapter, Holden used such words to describe the principal of the original school:

They were coming in the goddamn window. For instance, they had this headmaster, Mr. Haas that was the phoniest bastard I ever met in my life. Ten times worse than old Thurmer. He'd be charming as hell and all. Except if some boy had little old funny-looking parents. You should've seen the way he did with my roommate's parents. I mean if a boy's mother was sort of fat or corny-looking or something, and if somebody's father was one of those guys that wear those suits with very big shoulders corny black-and-white shoes, then old Hans would just shake hands with them and give them a phony smile and then he'd go talk, for maybe a half an hour, with somebody else's parents. (Salinger, 1951, p. 15)

Holden said that the window was "damn" and former school Principal Mr. Haas was "the most hypocritical bastard in the life"; and Mr. Haas was buttering up people just like a whore and so on.

On the surface, the vulgar words that protagonist Holden used were informal, colloquial, and rude, but if think carefully, we can see the author Salinger dealt with the language in fine and innovation. On one hand, Holden lived in a corrupt, depraved, and hypocritical society, he was unconsciously and inevitably tainted with some bad habits such as smoking, drinking, lying, and talking about sex, etc. But he had to do so in order to integrate into such a society. On the other hand, he felt depressed and he expressed his dissatisfaction with the society in the crude words to unleash his inner bitterness. He looked down the phony adult society, which was full of pursuing money, right and emotional alienation interpersonal. Holden expressed his disgust for society through abusive language to alleviate the grievances of mind.

Secondly, the author used a lot of slang words. Holden used a large number of "old", for instance, he called his little sister as "old Phoebe"; called the elevator who forced to blackmail him, and he hated not to shoot six times as "old Maurice"; called his history teacher as "old Spencer" who he both had sympathy and disgust; and as "my old heart", "the old hunting hat" and so on. Holden had reverse psychology and he had some innovation ideas but a little cynicism. So the fuzzy slang was consistent with his identity and his character.

Thirdly, attachment language appeared in the novel, as "and all", "or something", and "or anything". For example, "she won't even talk or anything"; "I thought I was going to choke to death or something"; and "Then I finished buttoning my coal and all". This expression was ambiguous, as if there was still something to say but did not want to say more words. It abandoned the traditional expression such as "and so on", "and the like", and "etc.". In the twelfth chapter, there was a text described the pianist in the bar:

He's a terrific snob and he won't hardly even talk to you unless you are a big shot or a celebrity or something, but he can really play the piano. He's so good he's almost corny, in fact. I don't exactly know what I mean by that, but I mean it. (Salinger, 1951, p. 92)

This was the protagonist's hated to the corrupt society and holds indifferent and cynical attitude. Society was full of chaos and false, in turn, Holden used the vague and uncertain language to express his inner thoughts and emotions. There was some other attachment, like "I really don't", "I admitted it", and "no kidding" were

widely used in the novel. What Holden wanted to convey to the readers was that what he once said was reliable to a certain extent by using these words, because this society was full of a large number of false acts.

Meanwhile the hero also used the exaggerated language to strength his tone. When Holden returned home, he told his father such a description: "You can hit my father over the head with a chair and he won't wake up"; "That kills me"; "I take a long, long time to stop" (Salinger, 1951, p. 171). Holden uses hyped and exaggerating words to make others believe him, even though the world was phony and the youth was trying to seek a pure place.

Repeating language also used widely in the novel, such as "phony" and "depressed" occurred 42 times and 32 times respectively. In the seventeenth chapter, when Holden and Sally went to the movies, what he experienced let him mention the word "phony" several times: "You never saw so many phonies in all your life" and "It was the phoniest conversation you ever heard in your life".

In a word, language style in *The Catcher in the Rye* has its unique artistic charm and strong influence. It becomes an indispensable carrier for us to understand the theme of the whole novel. Reading the ideas that conveys by the novel and feeling the language's unique and charm, you will find that there are more things waiting us to discover, to interpret in *The Catcher in the Rye*.

The First Person Technique

The protagonist Holden in *The Catcher in the Rye* was a sixteen-year-old boy in high school. He had many bad habits-smoking, drinking, fighting, and lying, and he was a downright problem child. However, such a bad student, Salinger made him become a model image of everybody's understanding, compassion, and love or even sought after by many young adolescents. Meanwhile, Holden also led adults to think and explore deep social reasons behind this problem child. Why did he have such a big literary effect? Salinger skillfully used the first person narrative to achieve the effects.

Traditionally, the narrative perspective of a text is often simply divided into first person, second person, or third person. However, no matter what narrated from the perspective of "I" or "he, she, it", it is narrated from the perspective of the narrator in essence. The only difference lies in the narrator's different angles.

In the novel, Holden was the hero and the narrator of the story. The whole story was narrated by Holden that was to say and readers could only understand the plots in the story through the eyes of Holden. Salinger made the seventeen-year-old Holden as the narrator of the story and Holden was the narrator "I". In the story, Holden recalled three-day story before the winter vacation of the Christmas Eve one year ago. The sixteen-year-old Holden was "I". Such arrangement was very skillful. "The recalled Holden" experienced mental and physical torture in three days and his spirit was gradually collapsed and later he was admitted to a mental hospital. "The narrator Holden" received treatment for a year, but no one knew when he told the story whether his spirit was normal or not. Therefore, it was difficult to separate "the recalled Holden" and "the narrator Holden" from the narrative voice or the narrative vision. It meant that it would be freer for Salinger either from the narrative voice or the narrative vision. The novel made readers feel smooth and fluid.

The first person narration allows readers to understand the deep motivation and reasons why Holden had bad habits. It fully demonstrated Holden's pain, disappointment, longing, and fear for the adolescent emotion in subconscious. It made readers know that Holden was an honest, good-natured, and attentive boy. It allowed the characters in the novel to narrate their own stories and gave readers more space to think and could evoke readers' imagination and association.

A same story can tell from different angles and imply author's different purposes, which will produce different effects on literature reading. The same scenery if shoots from different angles has completely different effects. In the novel, Holden led readers into the story world of Salinger's to grasp an angle or line of the implied author.

One of the advantages of the first person narration is to allow readers to fully understand the narrator's inner world. It can shorten the psychological distance between the narrator and readers. Salinger let a villain Holden as the hero of the novel and employed the first person narrative technique to make direct dialogues between Holden and readers. It can vividly reveal Holden's inner world and make readers fully understand the narrator's true feelings.

Salinger uses the first person technique to make readers feel Holden is a cynical boy on the surface but he is a kind hearted and good-natured boy in essence. The result is that readers stand on Holden's position and deeply sympathize with him. Thus, the readers will go for social reasons, which cause Holden to change. So it will point to the ugly phenomena that Holden curse and it is the real intention of the implied author in the novel.

Stream of Consciousness

Though *The Catcher in the Rye* was not a work of stream of consciousness, Salinger widely used the skill of stream of consciousness to reveal the protagonist's inner world. There were many Holden's inner monologues and free associations in *The Catcher in the Rye*. For example, when Holden walked to wicker bar after watched the movie in New York he thought of the war.

Those war movies always make me blind and disorderly in mind. I feel if I have to go to the war I could not stand it. I really can't stand it. If they just let you die or something what and that's not too bad. The problem is that you have to stay long in the army. This is the biggest problem. My brother has stayed in the army for four years...I like The Great Gatsby. The old Gatsby is a lovely guy. I love him very much. Anyway, we invented the atomic bomb that made me very happy. If there is another war, I will simply sit on the top of the atomic bomb. I would be the first to sign up, I swear to God that I am willing to do so. (Salinger, 1951, p. 148)

It was Holden's personal feeling caused by war. Though the language was vulgar, it was dripping. It showed Holden was not willing to associate himself with the hypocritical society and his psychological rebellion to die with the false world.

Time montage combines many events and scenes together in different time and space. Thus, it gets the opportunity and freedom to rearrange the time. Time montage refers that people do not move in space, but the character consciousness was moving in time and ideological activities of character are superimposed in different time.

Well, anyway, here is a piece of Christmas. Thousands of children came to the city with their mothers and get in and out of the bus and the shop. I wish old Phoebe beside me. She is not the kind of naïve child that will be very happy when enter the toy department, but she likes to see the scene of bustle. I had taken her to downtown to buy something last Christmas. We were happy for a while. I think it was in Bumin Dyer. (Salinger, 1951, p. 152)

When Holden went for a walk in the Fifth Avenue, the place was not changed much, but his consciousness was stimulated by the Christmas atmosphere in front of him. What we have read is that the hero's thought is fluctuated among the present, future, and past and it looks very real.

Compared with the traditional picaresque novel, Salinger used the technique of stream of consciousness to

write out psychological activities that seemed relatively nature and real. It showed people's hidden inner world inadvertently that made readers deeply touched by the hero.

Conclusion

The Catcher in the Rye is a novel about the seventeen-year-old boy Holden's experience in school. The writer Salinger lets the whole life of Holden full of irony due to his action to pursue moral order in order to satire the phenomenon of the society and the adult world. Salinger uses the artistic style—anti-tradition in language features and lets Holden become the narrator and uses Holden's eyes to see and feel the adult world. It makes the story more genuine and attractive. The usage of technique of stream of consciousness made *The Catcher in the Rye* cause tremendous echo among the youth and also attracted the attention of adults. They took the book as a key to understanding the inner world of the young generation.

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