

# Analysis of Binary Opposite Personalities of Holden in *The Catcher in the Rye*

WU Yue-qin, ZHANG Xiao-yan

School of Foreign Languages, Wuhan University of Technology, Wuhan, China

The protagonist of *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden, is a classic and complex character which has binary opposite personalities. By means of employing Nietzsche's aesthetic theory of the Apollonian spirit and Dionysian spirit, Holden's personalities will be analyzed in this paper. As for his exterior ambivalent attitudes, he is considered as an honest liar and an obedient rebel; while as for his interior two-sided personalities, he can be seen as a brave coward, a childish mature and a cynical caring people. To gain an insight into the main courses of the Apollonian and Dionysian Holden, several important factors will be listed, thus, a new perspective and thinking for the study of *The Catcher in the Rye* will be recommended.

**Keywords:** *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden, Binary opposite personalities, Apollonian spirit, Dionysian spirit

## Introduction

Nietzsche's book *The Birth of Tragedy* explores tragedy from the origin of Greek tragedy, which not only involves art, but also indicates the philosophical meaning of life (Zhao, 2012, p. 116). If the Apollonian spirit refers to the principle of beauty as Apollo is the Sun God, then the Dionysian spirit signifies a deeper and contrasting principle as Dionysus is the Wine God. As a rebel teenager with a kind heart, Holden's personalities are very distinctive and usually appear in pairs, which make it possible to analyze his personalities by Nietzsche's theory about the two spirits. By using his aesthetic concepts, Holden's binary opposite personalities can be philosophically analyzed.

## Holden's Binary Opposite Personalities

### Exterior Ambivalent Attitudes

Holden is often seen, and sees himself, as a rebel teenager. And that is a reflection of his attitudes towards the outside world. Since the world has disappointed him, he expresses his dissatisfaction by his Dionysian actions.

#### *An honest liar*

The god of sun, Apollo, represents honesty and integrity. Affected by the Apollonian spirit, Holden remains a positive and sober person. At the beginning, the image of Apollonian Holden is portrayed with several events

---

WU Yue-qin, Master Degree, associate professor, School of Foreign Languages, Wuhan University of Technology.

ZHANG Xiao-yan (Corresponding author), Postgraduate student, School of Foreign Languages, Wuhan University of Technology.

revolving around him. For example, he calmly and objectively explains his expulsion without any complaint. He can even fairly speak for the school that has expelled him. It is his advantages that being honest and aware of his own mistakes, which bring the Apollonian Holden to life.

On the other hand, he is also influenced by the hypocrisy of the adult world. According to Nietzsche, the Dionysian spirit has the destructive power of impulse. Out of impulse and drunkenness, he lies to show his aimless rebellion against secular morality. By using fake praises of his classmate only to make his classmate's mother happy and "glued to her seat", he makes fun of it. His resistant behavior is like walking on the edge of a cliff, once he is not careful enough, he will fall and be crushed (Lian, 2021). The process of his resistance is like getting into a swamp, the more he struggles, the deeper he sinks, and finally he will be swallowed by the swamp.

#### *An obedient rebel*

Undoubtedly, Holden is a total rebel, who deeply disgusts with the hypocrisy of this society. Although Holden hates boring behaviors, he still keeps doing something that against his will, such as acting phony to be an accessible person: "Sometimes I horse around quite a lot, just to keep from getting bored" (Salinger, 2007, p. 22). In fact, The Apollonian spirit reminds him his conscience, while the Dionysian spirit stimulates him to compliance with phoniness, which makes his psychological condition more unstable.

Sometimes, Holden is forced by Dionysian spirit, which brings him ecstasy and mental satisfaction. During his three days in New York, he flirts with a girl Sally. He bears mixed feelings about her. He loves her beauty and vitality but hates her hypocrisy and fake. "...but I knew old Sally, the queen of the phonies, would start drooling all over the place when I told her I had tickets for that..." (Salinger, 2007, p. 126). They just flirt with each other in the cab casually. The two teenagers' immature love is actually childish and meaningless, for they both do not take the relationship seriously. According to Nietzsche, the essence of Dionysian spirit is "Add to this awe the blissful ecstasy which rises from the innermost depths of man, of nature, at this same collapse of the principal individualization" (Nietzsche, 2019, p. 53). Because of the inherent ecstasy, Holden can't help being immersed in temporary excitement and ecstasy.

On balance, Holden resists the society's hypocrisy with his own hypocrisy.

### **Interior Two-sided Personalities**

Despite Holden's rebellious image to the outside world, he struggled internally. This is a common puzzlement faced by teenagers. The world is not as good as he thought, and he is caught in a dilemma between fitting into the world and remaining himself.

#### *A brave coward*

Just like the sun brings light and warmth to people, Apollonian Holden is steadfast and courageous in defense of what he loves. This image is vivid occurs when his roommate, Stradlater, goes on a date with Jane. As Stradlater just fools around with her so frivolously that it drives Holden crazy and then fight over Stradlater bravely for Jane. This is the time when the Apollonian spirit gains the upper hand. Sometimes, the Apollonian spirit immerses him in dream and illusion, but once it is put into practice, it gives him unlimited energy to fight over evil things.

On the contrary, the existence of the Dionysian spirit is like dark clouds covering half of the sun, which weakens his valuable characteristics, such as bravery and toughness, but in the meanwhile, it protects him from

unnecessary harm. In most cases, He won't conflict with people, even he is right. Instead, he would act humorous to avoid verbal and physical fights with others (Lu, 2017). Driven by Dionysian spirit, he will subconsciously avoid trouble. For instance, if he finds out who stolen his gloves, he will "say something very cutting and snotty" to provoke others, rather than "socking him in the jaw" (Salinger, 2007, pp. 96-97).

#### *A childish mature*

As a teenager, Holden stands on the edge of maturity, with one foot has stepped into the adult world and the other foot remains in childish world to resist growth. On the one hand, he keeps his heart pure and innocent. On the other hand, he becomes mature when faces with evils and corruption of the adult world (Stefan, 2022).

Out of Apollonian spirit, he can analyze rationally like a mature adult. Holden's behaviors are not totally full of degradation and disillusionment. When he goes to Phoebe's school, he sees some curse words on the wall, which drives him crazy so he rubs them off, in which case, he wants to protect children's innocence. Though he himself usually uses curse words, he can't stand those words painted in front of children.

Salinger defines maturity as: "The mark of the immature man is that he wants to die nobly for a cause, while the mark of the mature man is that he wants to live humbly for one" (Salinger, 2007, p. 203). So, Holden's dream to be a catcher in the rye can be seen as a mark of mature. The greatest and most mature people are those ordinary people who struggle day after day for humble dreams. However, Dionysian spirit makes some of his ideas are too imaginative to realize, for he decides to dwell in the West and pretend to be a deaf-mute who never deal with people. It just serves a way for him to escape from real life in adolescence. As he grows older, he may not have such childish ideas.

#### *A cynical caring people*

It is reasonable for Holden to be cynical and doubt the whole society at his age. It is a period that Dionysian spirit drives him to be critical, while the Apollonian spirit helps him to remain a warm heart: When he comes across two nuns, he insists to donate some money even they are not raising donations at that time. It also depresses him when he sees they are eating simple breakfast and he feels sorry for he only gives them 10 bucks for their collection.

Just as Nietzsche said that "Apollo could not live without Dionysus", Holden cannot be surrounded by Apollonian energy and dream forever without entering the Dionysian world. So once Apollonian influence decreases, the Dionysian spirit will take its control and drive him irrational. That's why he hires a prostitute to proves himself an adult. Faced with the prostitute, instead of looking down on her, he shows sympathy. It makes Holden feel sad when it occurs to him that "her going in a store and there is nobody in the store knowing she is a prostitute" and "the salesman might think she is a regular girl" (Salinger, 2007, p. 104). At last, the Apollonian spirit gains the upper hand again and generates a complex feeling.

### **The Relations between Exterior Holden and Interior Holden**

As is shown in the picture below, the Dionysian spirit is the primary driver to Holden's exterior ambivalent attitudes while the Apollonian spirit is to his interior two-sided personalities.

On the one hand, Holden has witnessed the world's hypocrisy, so he hides his positive side, showing only his rebellious Dionysian self. Yet this spirit also makes him rational and mature, keeping him from falling into false Apollonian illusions. On the other side, Apollonian spirit keeps him true to himself. His values, such as

honesty, bravery, and kindness shield him from being tainted by society. But since these values are exactly what is lacking in the society, he is still trapped in inside struggle.

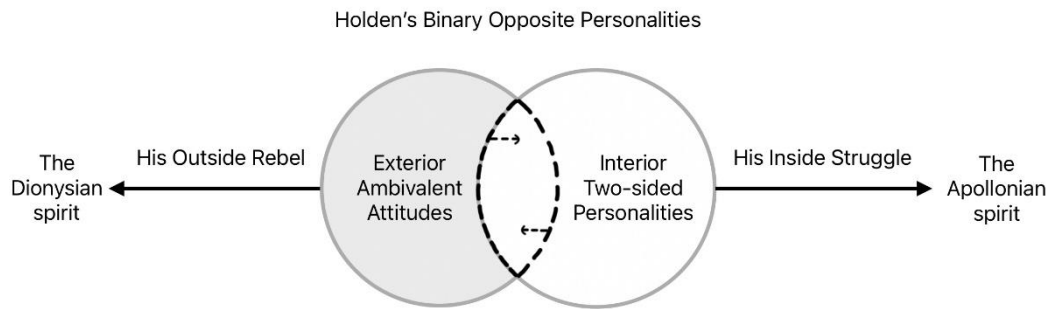


Figure 1. The Relationship between Exterior Holden and Interior Holden.

### Causes of the Apollonian and Dionysian Holden

#### Causes of Apollonian Holden: Siblings

Holden's sister Phoebe and his dead brother Allie give him pure love, which makes contribution to the Apollonian Holden. Throughout the book, Holden mentions Allie from time to time. He always values Allie's baseball glove as a comfort for him. As for his little sister, Phoebe, a very innocent and smart girl, supports Holden with heart and soul. She can even go to the West with Holden. It is the pure love from his sister and brother that to keep a warm heart. And that is why he wants to be a catcher in the rye to guard children's innocence.

#### The Causes of Dionysian Holden: Society, School and Parents

##### *American society*

In 1950s America, post-WWII economic recovery and the accumulation of wealth by the US government led to a rapid rise in the middle class, which fueled materialism and hedonism. Intellectually, the Cold War, Truman Doctrine, and McCarthyism caused a crisis, pushing teenagers to pursue modern entertainments, excessive drinking, and drugs. In this era of vanity and egoism, American teenagers, like Holden, who always refuses the "road to success" arranged for him by society (Cui, 2018). They kept resisting social norms, but they still struggled and sought an escape.

##### *Holden's school*

School is an important place to provide education for teenagers. Studying in a prestigious school, Holden expresses his dissatisfaction with the hypocrisy in the school. Some of the school's actions are purposeful, for students always have steak for dinner every Saturday night because their parents will show up. Besides, the school's evaluation system for students is too simple to create a comprehensive evaluation of students. It pays too much attention on utilitarian ideas without attaching importance to students' inner worlds.

The role of a teacher is indispensable in education. A German educator Jaspers once said: "Education is a tree shaking another tree, a cloud promoting another cloud, a soul awakening another soul." Taking his history teacher as an example, he considers life as a dog-eat-dog game. He is an epitome of some teachers, those who

only attach importance to grades. In their opinion, students are just a part of their work, which relate to their reputation and work performance.

The acceptance from peers is equally pivotal. If a teenager has trouble getting along well with his peers, he will feel lonely and uneasy. That is exactly what has happened on Holden. Holden's classmates don't care about Holden's expulsion from school at all, so that it is normal for him to feel lonely.

#### *Holden's Parents*

The family is between the individual and the society, which not only affects the individual who constitutes the family system, but also is affected by the larger social system. In addition to financial support, Holden's parents seldom give Holden enough love or care. Lacking of communication, a pathological parent-child relationship is shaped. Holden worries about the reaction of his parents when they get know his expulsion. In Holden's view, parents are easy to angry, especially his father, so he is afraid to tell parents his dilemma.

### **Conclusion**

Holden serves as a mirror for his peers during the 1950s. Throughout all his psychological struggle, depression, breakdown and disappointment, a typical image of a lost teenager stands vividly on the paper (Cui, 2018). Solutions to Holden's puzzlement will be listed as follows: first, society should be more inclusive and tolerant, embracing teenagers' curiosity, innocence and sensitiveness. Second, schools and teachers should pay more attention to teenagers. What are teachers to students is what are beacons to ships. Third, family is of primary vital. Parents should establish a secure parent-child relationship and give their children enough care. All the three factors should make a joint effort to provide a more comfortable and tolerant environment for teenagers and give them helpful guidance in time.

Through analyzing Holden's binary opposite personalities and the causes, this paper can help today's teenagers to understand themselves more clearly in order to solve the problems. Therefore, the study of *The Catcher in the Rye* is still of great significance. Everyone faces challenges while growing up. For today's teens, the key is not focusing on the world's imperfection, but learning how to deal with them.

### **References**

- Cui, H. (2018). An analysis on Holden's anti-hero image in *The Catcher in the Rye*. *Yangtze River Series*, (Z24), 17-36.
- Lian, W. (2021). A contrastive analysis of the youth images in *The Catcher in the Rye* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* based on image schemas (Dissertation: Hebei University of Science & Technology).
- Lu, Y. (2017). Interpreting Holden's anxiety dilemma in *The Catcher in the Rye* from the perspective of neo-psychoanalysis (Tianjin: Tianjin Normal University).
- Nietzsche, F. (2019). *The birth of tragedy* (G. Zhou, Trans.). Beijing: Beijing October Literature and Art Publishing House.
- Salinger, J. D. (2007). *The catcher in the rye*. London: Routledge.
- Stefan, L. B. (2022). Cinematic literature: Intermedial aesthetics, Juvenile Rebellion, and Carnal subjectivity in J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*. *Moveable Designs, Liminal Aesthetics, and Cultural Production in America*, 163-185.
- Zhao, G., & Liu, J. (2012). The tragedy of dionysus and Apollo in Western literary works. *Qiusuo*, (11), 116-117, 28.