The Catcher and the Soldier: Hemingway's "Soldier's Home" and Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye

By Cynthia M. Barron

J.D. Salinger and Ernest Hemingway both succeeded in capturing the essence of an entire generation. Hemingway's The Sun Also Rises was to the Lost Generation what Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye was to the children of the 1950's and 1960's. The two authors met when stationed in Europe during World War II; Hemingway was a war correspondent and Salinger was with the 4th Infantry Division. Salinger sought out Hemingway, who agreed to read his work. As the story goes, Hemingway was so impressed by Salinger's work that he pulled out his Luger and blew a chicken's head off. The admiration was mutual. In a letter from Salinger to Hemingway, Salinger humorously attributes his hospitalization in Nürnberg to an attempt to find a nurse like Catherine Barkley. He also mentions that he has just completed two of his "incestuous" short stories and a part of a play about a boy named Holden Caulfield and his sister Phoebe. In light of this mutual admiration, it is not surprising that one should find similarities between their works.

William Goldhurst, in "The Hymenated Ham Sandwich of Ernest Hemingway and J.D. Salinger: A Study in Literary Continuity," asserts that both Salinger and Hemingway are continuators of a literary tradition originating with Mark Twain. Expanding on Philip Young, Goldhurst views Huckleberry Finn as the prototype for the composite characters of Nick Adams-Harold Krebs and Seymour Glass-Holden Caulfield. He also notes that the idea of "child-as-refuge," a major component of Salinger's works, was first introduced in Hemingway's short story "Soldier's Home." It is my contention that "Soldier's Home," more than any other single work of Hemingway's, exerted the greatest influence upon Salinger's novel The Catcher in the Rye. Although the idea of the "child-as-refuge" provides solace to many of Salinger's older characters, in the case of Holden, as in the case of Harold, it is an attempted retreat to childhood itself that provides the refuge. Because of their ages—Holden is sixteen and Harold is slightly older—both protagonists are in a unique position, caught in the limbo between childhood and adulthood. Thus, faced with their inability to adapt to an adult world that is hypocritical and corrupt, both boys seek a return to the realm of childhood.

The protagonists' reluctance to leave the realm of childhood manifests itself in, as Salinger himself noted, the incestuous overtones of the relationships between the boys and their respective sisters. In "Soldier's Home," Helen asks Harold if he is her beau and he replies "Sure. You're my girl now." In The Catcher in the Rye Holden compliments a girl

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by telling her that she dances almost as well as Phoebe. Although Holden normally objects to adults dancing with children, he makes an exception for himself and Phoebe because "It's different with her. . . . She can follow anything you do." Phoebe's ability to "follow" Holden is not simply confined to dancing, though, for he explains that "If you tell old Phoebe something, she knows exactly what the hell you're talking about" (p. 67). The girls themselves help to maintain this type of relationship. Helen asks Harold to watch her play softball, telling him that "If you loved me, you'd want to come and watch me play indoor" (p. 150). Similarly, Phoebe seeks Holden's approval and attention and is very adamant that he come to see her perform in the school play.

The quasi-romantic feelings both boys possess for their sisters represent a rejection of the artificiality represented by girls their own age and the artificial world they belong to. Harold describes the girls in the town as forming "a pattern" (p. 147). They all dress exactly alike, much as he and his fraternity brothers did before he went to war. Now that he has broken out of the mold, however, their emptiness and conformity hold little appeal for him. "They lived in such a complicated world of already defined alliances and shifting feuds that Krebs did not feel the energy or the courage to break into it" (p. 147). This, then, explains his attraction to Helen. She lives in a child's world with its connotations of simplicity, honesty, and innocence—qualities that Harold's world lacks.

Just as Harold rejects the intrigues of the town girls or an intrigue of his own with one of them, Holden spurns the services of the prostitute he has hired, telling her that he is ill. He is disturbed by her youth, and her well-rehearsed techniques make him feel "much more depressed than sexy" (p. 95). Holden's aversion to adult sexuality is partly due to his fear of adulthood and partly due to his identification of adult sexuality with the duplicity of people like the egotistical Stradlater. By turning to Phoebe, Holden symbolically rejects the corrupt adult world in favor of the more innocent world of children. Holden cherishes innocence and strives to preserve it whenever he finds it. He wishes to erase all the "Fuck You's" of the world, and fantasizes about becoming a "catcher in the rye" and saving children from adulthood and the accompanying fall from innocence.

This cherishing of innocence is due to both boys' strong aversion to the hypocrisy of the adult world. When Harold returns from the war he finds that in order to be listened to, he must invent melodramatic war stories. These lies soon destroy any meaning the experiences had for him, and even make him physically ill. "Krebs acquired the nausea in regard to experience that is the result of untruth or exaggeration" (p. 145). Krebs had been a soldier during the war and, while this is not an innocent occupation, it is, in some respects, an honest one. During the war Krebs had behaved as a good soldier ought, doing what was necessary for survival. Thus, Harold is able to retain a certain amount of integrity during the war, in contrast to the hypocrisy and artificiality of the world he comes home to.
Holden's and Harold's disgust with the adult world causes them to turn not only to their sisters, but also to the innocence and order provided by childhood games. In "Soldier's Home," Harold goes to watch Helen play indoor baseball. In The Catcher in the Rye, Holden describes his brother Allie playing baseball and even writes a composition about Allie's baseball mitt. He watches two boys play ball while waiting for Phoebe, and later he describes the gym where indoor baseball is played. These games are significant because while they mirror the artificiality and restrictions of the adult world, the chaos of the adult world is absent. The rules are logical, fair, well-defined, and do not change radically with time. Thus, for Holden and Harold, they represent a world far more sensible and comprehensible than the real world. Harold symbolically chooses this world over the adult world when he decides to watch Helen play [baseball] rather than visit his father. "He would not go down to his father's office. . . . He wanted his life to go smoothly. . . . He would go over to the schoolyard and watch Helen play indoor baseball." (p. 153). The notion of shelter is reinforced here by the emphasis on indoor baseball rather than outdoor. Holden, too, prefers the world of children, and he resents the march of time that is forcing him to grow up and enter the world of adulthood. "Certain things they should stay the way they are. You ought to be able to stick them in one of those big glass cases and just leave them alone" (p. 122). Hence, Holden's desire to make time stand still and Harold's search for a simpler, more honest world lead them both to the realm of children and childhood games.

It is specifically pointed out in Catcher that games are an inaccurate metaphor for life because they are ordered and comprehensible, while life is not. When Spenser explains to Holden that life is a game which must be played according to the rules, Holden replies:

Game, my ass. Some game. If you get on the side where all the hot-shots are, then it's a game all right—I'll admit that. But if you get on the other side, where there aren't any hot-shots, then what's a game about it? Nothing. No game. (p. 8)

Spenser's romantic view of life is mirrored in "Soldier's Home" when Harold's mother tells him that he must get a job because "There can be no idle hands in God's Kingdom." To this Harold replies "'I'm not in His Kingdom'" (p. 151), just as Holden is not on the winning team in the game of life. The war has stripped Harold of any romanticism he may have possessed, and he has no use for his mother's platitudes.

This cynical view of life is perhaps why Holden and Harold are both considered misfits by society's standards. Both realize that they are on the side without the hot-shots, and consequently they refuse to play the game according to the rules, even though they nostalgically look back on games with affection. Evidence of their alienation abounds. Harold doesn't have a job. Holden can't stay in school. Harold returns from the war after everyone else is already back. "People seemed to think it was rather ridiculous for Krebs to be getting back so late, years after the war was over" (p. 145). Holden leaves the fencing team's equipment on the subway, causing them to be disqualified from the meet. He also is afraid of fighting and describes himself as "yellow" (p. 89). Holden's dilemma is accurately perceived by Mr. Antolini, who warns him that his present method of coping with the world will only result in a terrible fall.

I have a feeling that you're riding for some kind of a terrible, terrible fall . . . The man falling isn't per-
mited to feel or hear himself hit bottom. The whole arrangement's designed for men who, at some time or other in their lives, were looking for something their own environment couldn't supply them with. (p. 187)

Antolini's remarks are equally applicable to Harold.

Thus Holden and Harold, alienated from the adult world, turn to the world of children. Childhood, with its connotations of innocence and simplicity, stands in direct contrast to the adult world. Childhood games symbolically provide the sense of order so noticeably lacking in the real world. Even romance in the adult world is tainted with artificiality and corruption; consequently both boys reject girls their own age, engaging instead in quasi-romantic relationships with their sisters. The latent incest represents a lack of mature development, an unwillingness to go beyond the comforting realm of the family, and constitutes a symbolic rejection of the adult world. It is significant that one of Holden's favorite fictional characters is Jay Gatsby who, like Holden, is also trying to turn back time. However, a retreat to childhood can only provide temporary relief from the chaos of the adult world. In the end, one sees that both protagonists, convinced of the environment's inability to supply their needs, are "heading for a terrible fall." Circumvention of this fall will depend on their ability to find a more suitable method of coping with a world that is hypocritical, corrupt, unfair, and often absurd.