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“I’m the most terrific liar you ever saw in your life.” Authenticity and Unreliable Narration in J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*

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In J. D. Salinger’s novel *The Catcher in the Rye*¹, the first-person narrator Holden Caulfield displays strong ideas on what literature should be like: “What really knocks me out is a book that, when you’re all done reading it, you wish the author that wrote it was a terrific friend of yours and you call him up on the phone whenever you felt like it. That doesn’t happen much, though.” (16) Holden’s narration is a personal act of communication, one in which he wants to establish a link between himself and his audience. That is why he frames his story through the regular use of direct address, as in his opening lines: “If you really want to hear about it [...]” (1), or in the last sentence of his actual re-telling of the events: “God, I wish you could’ve been there.” (191) In addition to that, his use of language indicates resistance towards the norms of written language, and it is difficult to find paragraphs that refrain from using at least some elements of spoken language.² Holden regularly uses repetition, colloquialisms such as the frequent use of the epithet “old”, and a limited vocabulary to describe his emotional state: “that depressed me” (46), “that killed me” (49). He uses hyperboles, simple syntactic structure, incorrectly formed sentences. However, these techniques make Holden’s narration appear more realistic: “The informality of Holden’s discourse is the guarantee of his spontaneity and authenticity.”³ This sense of authenticity has regularly been mentioned in criticism of the novel since the time of its first publication. Costello notes that as early as 1959, most reviews of *The Catcher in the Rye* at the time refer to this effect; “only the writer for the *Catholic World* and the *Christian Science Monitor* denied the authenticity of the book’s language, but both of these are religious journals which refused to believe that the ‘obscenity’ was realistic.”⁴

This realism, in return, often exposes Holden’s insecure use of language, for instance when he talks about life in New York City: “In New York, boy, money really talks—I’m not kidding.” (62) This informative sentence reveals two linguistic registers Holden uses simultaneously; he assumes economic experience (“money talks”) while at the same time subverting his attitude through the use of the childish phrases “really” and “I’m not kidding”. As a result, his attempt to assume the diction of the grown-up world is thwarted by elements of his restricted linguistic code. Lodge observes that this authenticity is artificial by default: it is a literary device, as naturally spoken language tends to

¹ Salinger 2010; in-text references in brackets.

² For the following examples, cf. Lodge 2011, 19.

³ Lodge 2011, 19.

⁴ Costello 1959, 172.

be considerably less grammatical than the language Holden uses throughout the novel. “A narrative style that faithfully imitated actual speech would be virtually unintelligible, as are transcripts of recorded conversations. But it [Holden’s language] is an illusion that can create a powerful effect of authenticity and sincerity, of truth-telling.”⁵

Nonetheless, Holden’s use of teenage “skaz”⁶ is not the only reason why we commonly associate *The Catcher in the Rye* with a high degree of authenticity. Although the verbal mode of presentation is a rather obvious source of authenticity inscribed in the text, I argue that Holden’s status as an unreliable narrator is a more pervasive source of authenticity in the novel, and that this is closely linked to Holden’s perspective, with all its limitations.

For that purpose, I will first address the narrative devices of unreliable narration and apply them to *The Catcher in the Rye*. Following this, I will analyse the ramifications of Holden’s unreliable narration, using the episode in Mr Antolini’s flat to show how Holden’s ambiguous depiction of and his commentary on his host’s behaviour have a profound influence on the interpretation of the novel as a whole. I will conclude that it is the limitation in Holden’s perspective that constitutes his role as an unreliable narrator and at the same time contributes to the story’s authenticity beyond mere linguistic parameters.

Unreliable Narration in *The Catcher in the Rye*

The concept of the unreliable narrator has been subject to debate for nearly six decades, since its inception by Wayne C. Booth in his book *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. There, Booth defines *unreliable narration* as follows:

For lack of better terms, I have called a narrator reliable when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author’s norms), unreliable when he does not. [...] Unreliable narrators thus differ markedly depending on how far and in what direction they depart from their author’s norms.⁷

More recent approaches have criticised Booth’s definition due to its one-sided “text-immanent model for unreliable narration”⁸, which focusses on the relation between the implied author and the narrator as it “disregard[s] the reader’s role in the perception of reliability and [...] rel[ies] on the insufficiently defined concept of the implied author.”⁹ Through this phenomenological shift, critics have recently focussed more on the reader’s response to the text than to the “norms of the text.” Unreliable narration is no longer viewed as a phenomenon displaying a gap between different sets

⁵ Lodge 2011, 18.

⁶ “Skaz is a [...] Russian word [...] used to designate a type of first-person narration that has the characteristics of the spoken rather than the written word. [...] He or she uses vocabulary and syntax characteristics of colloquial speech, and appears to be relating the story spontaneously rather than delivering a carefully constructed and polished written account. [...] Needless to say, this is an illusion, the product of much calculated effort and painstaking rewriting by the ‘real’ author.” (Lodge 2011, 18)

⁷ Booth 1983, 158–159.

⁸ Olson 2003, 93.

⁹ Olson 2003, 93.

of *values* (i.e., the implied author's and the narrator's, "both intratextual entities"¹⁰), but rather relies on the reader's ability to discern two sets of potential *factuality* in the text and to negotiate their opposing implications in their interpretation.¹¹

In this essay, I consider a narrator to be unreliable when his primary, explicit discourse is being undermined by a second, implied discourse that must be supplied or reconstructed by the reader. In this definition, it is the conflict between the explicit and the implied discourses that constitute unreliable narration. It is often a psychologically affected first-person narrator who displays signs of unintentional unreliability, such as the anonymous narrator in Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* (1996), or a narrator with a limited perspective on the world, such as the eponymous *Forrest Gump* in Winston Groom's novel (1986). In these cases, for the majority of the text it is up to the reader to detect the breaches in reliability: "A secret communion of implied author and reader is thereby created behind the narrators' back"¹², and the reader is required to employ his own hermeneutic progress in order to discover the double discourse of the text. *The Catcher in the Rye* stands in one line with these examples.

A key aspect to the novel's effect of immediacy and authenticity is the way Holden addresses his unspecified listener/reader. "[A]lthough it is never quite clear who 'you' might be—a psychiatrist, fellow patient?—the effect of this strategy is that the reader feels personally addressed by Holden".¹³ Moreover, the text eliminates traces of an intradiegetic listener altogether. Early on in the text, Holden mentions his size and a patch of grey hair on his head: "It's really ironical, because I'm six foot two and a half and I have gray hair. I really do. The one side of my head—the right side—is full of millions of gray hairs." (8) The complete lack of deictic markers that would imply a listener in Holden's presence creates an empty spot that can be filled by the factual reader, which strengthens the link between narration and audience.

One thing the reader only discovers gradually is Holden's limited perception and understanding of the world, which is deeply embedded into the text. Even the title of the novel refers to this device: The reader has read more than two thirds of the novel before the eponymous "Catcher in the Rye" is being mentioned for the first time, although, as Holden's sister Phoebe later on reveals, Holden's rendition of Robert Burns's poem "Comin' Thro' the Rye" is incorrect. On his way through New York City, Holden encounters a boy singing the verses—in Holden's rendition—of the poem: "If a body catch a body coming through the rye" (104). Holden imagines himself as an adult "catcher" in a field of rye full of children, whom he has to protect from falling off a cliff. Phoebe later corrects him, telling him that the lyrics actually say "if a body meet a body coming through the rye" (156). It remains unclear whether Holden misheard the lyrics or the boy singing the song recited it incorrectly in the first place. Nevertheless, the title of the novel is linked to a potential unreliability. This ambiguity is a central motif in Salinger's novel, and one of the most ambiguous episodes is the one in which Holden takes Sally Hayes skating. In their conversation afterwards, Holden suggests

¹⁰ Olson 2003, 96.

¹¹ The complicated nature of the discussion is also represented in Gerald Prince's article in *A Dictionary of Narratology*, where he defines the unreliable narrator as "[a] narrator whose norms and behaviour are not in accordance with the implied author's norms; a narrator whose values (tastes, judgments, moral sense) diverge from those of the implied author's; a narrator the reliability of whose account is undermined by various features of that account". (Prince 1988, 101) This definition exemplifies how entirely different the two main approaches to the phenomenon are, and how contradictory they are in their application.

¹² Riggan 1981, 13.

¹³ Graham 2007, 19.

they both run away and get married. Sally is obviously uncomfortable with the discussion, and in two situations she asks Holden not to scream at her, which puzzles Holden: “Which was crap, because I wasn’t even screaming at her”. (119) This episode illustrates the programmatic ambiguity of Holden’s narrative reliability:

This contradiction leaves the reader with two possibilities: one is that Sally is self-conscious about Holden’s behaviour and is worried that he will be overheard; the other is that Holden is, in fact, out of control and shouting, so distressed that he cannot see the truth about his own behaviour. The former explanation leaves us safely on Holden’s side; the latter has much more troubling implications.¹⁴

Again, the reader is not given any textual signals that would strongly indicate either possibility, making it difficult to determine the extent of Holden’s unreliability.

This ambiguity alone does not constitute Holden as an unreliable narrator, but we find several hints at Holden’s mental instability throughout the novel. In the first chapter, Holden crosses a road from his school to his teacher, Mr Spencer’s house, after which “I felt like I was sort of disappearing. It was that kind of a crazy afternoon, terrifically cold, and no sun out or anything, and you felt like you were disappearing every time you crossed a road” (4). We find this situation mirrored at a significant point later on, towards the end when Holden is on his way to meet Phoebe during her lunch break: “Every time I came to the end of a block and stepped off the goddam curb, I had this feeling that I’d never get to the other side of the street. I thought I’d just go down, down, down, and nobody’d ever see me again” (178). These two examples are among the most prominent which indicate that Holden may suffer from mental problems, and strongly undermine the narrator’s reliability, as his perception of the world and society would be affected.

The narrative frame generally holds a special significance in most stories that involve unreliable narration. Quite often it is the ending, or a chapter near the ending, that ultimately unveils the unreliability as a narrative device. This is the case in the classic short story *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge* by Ambrose Bierce. The story, set in the times of the American Civil War, tells of Peyton Farquhar, a “man who was engaged in being hanged” from a bridge over Owl Creek.¹⁵ Instead of dying during the hanging, he falls unconscious and “was as one already dead,”¹⁶ after which he regains consciousness and learns that the rope that was meant to kill him broke and made him fall into the river. The story follows his close and tiring escape from his henchmen. In the end, he finds himself back home with his wife, who awaits him “with a smile of ineffable joy, an attitude of matchless grace and dignity.”¹⁷ Only Farquhar has never escaped his execution:

“He is about to clasp her as he feels a stunning blow upon the back of the neck; a blinding white light blazes all about him with a sound like the shock of a cannon—then all is darkness and silence! Peyton Farquhar was dead; his body, with a broken neck, swung gently from side to side beneath the timbers of the Owl Creek Bridge.”¹⁸

¹⁴Graham 2007, 28.

¹⁵ Evans 2003, 4.

¹⁶ Evans 2003, 6.

¹⁷ Evans 2003, 10.

¹⁸ Evans 2003, 10.

Bierce's short story does not reveal its unreliable narration until the last few sentences.¹⁹ The storyline between his hanging and the arrival at his home are the thoughts of a man about to die in the last seconds of his life. The ending of the short story thereby prompts the reader to re-evaluate the text as a whole.

In *The Catcher in the Rye*, however, the final chapter does not hold any information that would help to specify the unreliable narration in the novel. The text rather reiterates and thereby refreshes the information given in the very first chapter: Holden has experienced some sort of psychological trauma and he is now recovering in an unspecified institution: "I got pretty run-down and had to come out here and take it easy" (1). In the final chapter his words mirror what he had said in the first chapter: "I got sick" (192), and he mentions "this one psychoanalyst guy they have here" (192), implying that he is in an institution to receive treatment for psychological problems, though this is never specified, and only inferred through the fact that he seems to have regular meetings with said psychoanalyst. Instead of revealing a major twist at the end, the narrative mode of *The Catcher in the Rye* provokes the reader to gradually revise the events Holden retells.

This framing projects a narrator whom the reader has to consider to be *potentially* unreliable, not in the sense that he may or may not be unreliable (for it is obvious in several occasions that he actively withholds information that would help to better understand his biography), but that his unreliability is selective and thereby even harder to detect. Unlike Peyton Farquhar in *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge*, he is not a *deus ex machina* of unreliability—his unreliability is woven into the fabric of the narrative and only becomes obvious on various occasions throughout the narration. This technique permanently hinders the reader from reaching a homogenous interpretation of the novel as a whole.

However, I argue that the novel does not aim to provide either *one* reading of the text or *multiple* readings, but that the central point behind Holden's unreliable narration is a different one. The ambiguity caused by his mode of narration, which sometimes offers room for two or more possible interpretations, is a central aesthetic device of the novel. I will illustrate this by focussing on one chapter that highlights the narrative features of the book: Holden's representation of his night-time encounter with Mr Antolini in Chapter 24.

The Encounter with Mr Antolini

Holden's former English teacher Mr Antolini is his final refuge in New York City after Holden has spent almost all his money and paid a secret visit to his sister Phoebe. After a heart-to-heart talk, in which Mr Antolini assumes the role of mentor for Holden (and during which he also drinks considerable amounts of alcohol), Holden goes to sleep on the sofa in Antolini's living-room. Holden later wakes up as he feels Mr Antolini patting his head and behaving awkwardly afterwards, until Holden leaves the flat distraught.

The reader's insight into the situation is once again limited by Holden's perspective. Interpretations of this scene, thereby, must necessarily be conditional on the reader's perception of Holden's reliability in recounting the events. It can be argued that this scene depicts mostly what Holden sees:

¹⁹ It is noteworthy that the fact that the story is told by a third-person narrator does not diminish the effect, due to the close focalisation on Farquhar it maintains most of the time.

a transgression by an intoxicated adult: “He was still boozing, too. I could see his trusty highball glass in his hand” (173). In this reading, the adult tries to establish inappropriate sexualised contact with a teenager.²⁰ Another reading would suggest that Mr Antolini simply cares for Holden and is patting his head as a paternal, caring gesture, or that he checks his forehead for a fever. After all, Holden depicts Antolini’s empathy towards his students in detail when he remembers that nobody except Antolini went to pick up the shattered body of James Castle, a fellow student of Holden’s who committed suicide at their former school. In this case, the reader would have to distrust Holden’s perception and would attribute his reaction to his general mental state, his drunkenness, or his overall fatigue after two stressful days. Again, there are no textual signals that offer a tendency towards one reading or the other, although arguments can be found in favour of both.²¹ Holden, on the other hand, clearly interprets the event in a way that casts himself as the victim, although he later reflects on the event and considers that he might have misinterpreted the situation: “I mean I wonder if just maybe I was wrong about thinking he was making a flitty pass on me” (175). However, he relativizes this option through the absurd notion that “maybe he just liked to pat guys on the head when they’re asleep.” (175). Yet, neither of his interpretations seem to reflect an adequate assessment of the situation.

Holden’s night-time encounter with Mr Antolini contains one sentence that carries weight beyond the scene itself, which can influence the reader’s interpretation of the novel. Holden admits that he “was shaking like a madman. I was sweating, too. When something pervert like that happens, I start sweating like a bastard. That kind of stuff’s happened to me about twenty times since I was a kid. I can’t stand it” (174). By the time we reach the final chapters, we already know that Holden is prone to exaggeration; this statement is still puzzling. How are we supposed to understand his statement “That kind of stuff’s happened to me about twenty times since I was a kid”? Under the condition that he is merely exaggerating and that he simply summarises every awkward encounter regarding sexuality or gender roles under the term “pervert stuff,” it would again show us that Holden has unresolved issues with everything concerning sexuality. At the same time, we know that Holden is extremely selective about his narration—he even introduces his story by telling the reader that he will not tell his whole biography: “[M]y parents would have about two hemorrhages apiece if I told you anything pretty personal about them. They’re quite touchy about anything like that, especially my father.”(1) While this statement after the episode with Antolini could indicate an exaggeration typical of Holden’s style, it is worthwhile seeing the ramifications of this sentence under the premise that Holden is actually truthful here. This sentence could then be a Freudian slip, unveiling a biographical detail otherwise repressed by Holden (and the fact that he seems to suffer from mental issues suggests looking for details such as Freudian slips). Could Holden be referring to a history of sexual abuse in his biography?

As much as approaches such as “queering the text” can shed a different kind of light on the episode in Mr Antolini’s flat,²² a reading of Holden’s thoughts on this transgression as reliable would have a fundamental effect on the way we should read the novel—significantly through the things he does not mention or refuses to tell. This revised interpretation would first include his relationship to his parents, who are ostentatively absent throughout the novel; they are only mentioned a few times

²⁰ Hekanaho even argues that “Holden is attracted to—and attracts—gay men.” Hekanaho 2007, 93.

²¹ Cf. Graham 2007, 31. Some critics, however, fail to see the ambiguity of this episode altogether: Takeuchi, for example, frankly speaks of “Antolini[’s] attempts to seduce him”. Takeuchi 2002, 324.

²² Cf. Hekanaho 2007, 92.

within Holden's account, such as when they appear as a threat hovering above—Phoebe repeatedly mentions that the father might “kill” Holden for dropping out of Pencey (149, 150). While Holden mentions nothing that would suggest a link between his parents and sexual abuse, it is curious that he hardly mentions them at all.

This reading would also provide a different perspective on Holden's relationship to Jane Gallagher, as there are hints of an abusive history in her biography as well. In one of Holden's memories, Jane's step-father, described as “this booze hound her mother was married to,” (71) comes home and asks her if she knows whether there were any cigarettes in the house. Her stepfather asks a second time, and when she still doesn't reply, he walks out of the room. Jane would not even answer Holden, who seems puzzled over the scene. She rather stares at the checkers board in front of her, “like she was concentrating on her next move in the game and all” (71). She starts crying, leaving Holden (and the reader) clueless about the exact reason, leaving room for interpretations including a background of domestic abuse. In any case, this episode sheds new light on what Holden had mentioned earlier, that “all I ever saw him do was booze all the time and listen to every single goddam mystery program on the radio. And run around the goddam house, naked. With *Jane* around, and all” (28). When Holden asks Jane after she had started crying if her step-father “had ever tried to get wise with her,” “[S]he said no, though. I never did find out what the hell was the matter” (71). Holden's interest in Jane, his persistent desire to call her and his agitated behaviour when his roommate Stradlater takes her out could stem from the sympathy he has with someone who shares traumatic experiences. His attitude towards Jane could be described as over-protective. Yet, the narrator does not give us any certainty on that matter as he himself does not have too much inside into Jane's biography.

A history of sexual abuse would further explain Holden's obvious discomfort regarding sexual intercourse. His whole encounter with Sunny the prostitute suggests that his issues with sexuality and sexual intercourse stem from a history of psycho-sexual abuse. Even before she arrives at his room, he “just wanted to get it over with” (84). When Sunny sits on a chair, he seems to have problems reading her gestures. He mentions that “she crossed her legs and started jiggling this one foot up and down. She was very nervous, for a prostitute.” (85). Also, to Holden she appears “young as hell” (85), and when she finally tries to initiate intercourse by taking off her dress, Holden loses interest altogether: “Sexy was about the last thing I was feeling. I felt much more depressed than sexy” (86). Moreover, there seems to be a pattern of failed attempts at intercourse in Holden's biography, as he implies while waiting for Sunny to arrive, saying “I came quite close to doing it a couple of times, though. One time in particular, I remember. Something went wrong, though—I don't even remember what any more.” (83) This statement seems unusual for a narrator who is rarely at a loss for words or anecdotes. Rather than forgetting what happened, Holden's speech seems to indicate suppressed issues. While it may be perfectly valid to explain his difficulties with sex and sexuality as immaturity and emotional problems, Holden's behaviour implies a special significance. He depicts himself as a very sexual person: “In my mind, I'm probably the biggest sex maniac you ever saw.” (56) The idea of him forgetting his lack of sexual experience and his failures sounds more like either voluntary concealment or the repression of memory than like a plausible forgetfulness.

Besides Jane Gallagher, the only female character that holds any special significance to Holden is his little sister Phoebe. The most obvious explanation for his obsession with her is the special role his sister assumed after his brother Allie had died. There are parallels suggested between Phoebe and Sunny, particularly in relation to their sexuality. As mentioned above, Holden believes that Sunny

“was around my age” (85), and she sounds “like a little kid” (85) when she talks to him. “While Holden knows he could have sex with Sunny, his shock at the realization that he is probably no older than he creates in him a resistance and a form of pity,”²³ with the link to Phoebe established in retrospect when “she sleeps in the bedroom of the ‘prostitute’ brother.”²⁴ Salinger’s naming choices connect the two characters as well; *Sunny* (referring to the sun) and *Phoebe* (the female version of the Greek god *Phoebos* (*Apollo*), god of light and the sun) are both names associated with innocence and light. Holden’s deeply rooted issues with sexuality and childhood could also explain why he gets so aggravated when he finds the graffito “Fuck you” in both in Phoebe’s school (his own former school) and in the museum (180–183). These spaces are linked with his and Phoebe’s childhood, which is violated by such an aggressive, sexually charged statement.

Of course, all these cases could stand by themselves as unconnected examples of Holden’s unresolved issues: again, the text does not offer strong indications toward any specific reading. A key issue in the critical debate over *The Catcher in the Rye* is Holden’s mental and physical state during the gap between Chapter 25 (where he watches Phoebe on the carousel) and Chapter 1 (where he commences his narration). There have been arguments for two main interpretations: that Holden suffers from a final breakdown while he watches Phoebe or shortly thereafter;²⁵ the other being that those three days he spends on his way from Pencey to his home have a cathartic effect on him and that he is simply spending time at a hospital due to his physical health.²⁶ His hint at “this one psychoanalyst guy” (192), however, seems to suggest otherwise. What effect would our above reading of the events in Mr Antolini’s house have on the understanding of the frame story?

Under the hypothesis that there is an (untold) history of sexual abuse in Holden’s biography, it is striking that he mentions similar events ranging back to his childhood. This would make deeply-rooted psychological problems seem plausible. In fact, Holden displays signs of post-traumatic stress disorder, which *The ICD-10 Classification of Mental and Behavioural Disorders*, published by the World Health Organization, defines as follows: Post-traumatic stress disorder

[a]rises as a delayed or protracted response to a stressful event or situation (of either brief or long duration) of an exceptionally threatening or catastrophic nature, which is likely to cause pervasive distress in almost anyone. [...] Typical features include episodes of repeated reliving of the trauma in intrusive memories (“flashbacks”), dreams or nightmares, occurring against the persisting background of a sense of “numbness” and emotional blunting, detachment from other people, unresponsiveness to surroundings, anhedonia, and avoidance of activities and situations reminiscent of the trauma. There is usually a state of autonomic hyperarousal with hypervigilance, an enhanced startle reaction, and insomnia. Anxiety and depression are commonly associated with the above symptoms and signs, and suicidal ideation is not infrequent. The onset follows the trauma with a latency period that may range from a few weeks to months. The course is fluctuating but recovery can be expected in the majority of cases. In a small proportion of cases the condition may follow a chronic course over many years, with eventual transition to an enduring personality change.²⁷

²³ duMais Svogun 2009, 700.

²⁴ duMais Svogun 2009, 701. Holden first refers to his brother as a prostitute on the first page of the novel, expressing his disapproval of the fact that D.B. “sells” himself off as a writer.

²⁵ Cf. Graham 2007, 33–34.

²⁶ Cf. Graham 2007, 33–34.

²⁷ World Health Organization 2015, F43.1.

It is evident how many of these features can be found in Holden's behavioural patterns. "Flashbacks," or a steady reliving of the past; "a sense of numbness and emotional blunting," "detachment from other people," "anhedonia," "avoidance of activities and situations reminiscent of the trauma" (in Holden's case: sexual intercourse?), "insomnia," "anxiety," "depression," just to pick the most obvious ones—the list almost reads like a characterisation of Holden Caulfield.

As stated above, none of these observations are strictly certifiable. However, they amount to a plausible and valid interpretation of Holden's psyche. Considering his tendencies as a narrator and based on the axiom that one of Holden's statements is reliable, it is certainly legitimate to think through the consequences of a single sentence that is not explained by Holden in detail, as it might hold more consequential meanings than can be seen on the surface.²⁸ This example illustrates the extent to which a reader's interpretation of *The Catcher in the Rye* depends on the reliability we attribute even to single sentences.

The Authenticity of the Unreliable

Holden Caulfield is a complex narrator: the on-going scholarly interest in this topic over the past six decades verifies that. He shows many traits of an involuntarily unreliable narrator, such as mental instability and an obviously warped perception of reality. But at the same time, he seems to be at least partially aware of his own mental processes. He chooses to filter his account (as he already indicates in the first chapter) and thereby tries to gain agency over his own narrative—in which he does not always succeed. But does this make his narration authentic?

Authenticity does not equal truth—"it will never be possible to identify the 'truth' of the novel, because no such single truth exists."²⁹ The novel does not claim that authenticity is spawned from truth. On the contrary: it is the lack of a singular objective truth in Holden's selective narration that captures the authenticity of human experience. The reader cannot gain any conclusive reading of the plot or Holden's account of events; the narrative in *The Catcher in the Rye* is constructed to explore the possibility of multiple and competing interpretations. By using an ambiguous, insecure, often disoriented narrator, the text mirrors the adolescent experience.

The authenticity in *The Catcher in the Rye* does not purely stem from the mode of Holden's narration on a *linguistic* level. Holden's ambiguous young adult experience is depicted on a *psychological* level as well. His account signifies the insecurities of an adolescent who must navigate the constraints of language to communicate his experience—and often fails. Holden's biography includes a range of interpretations for his narrative, be that a history of abuse, the trauma of his elder brother's death, or the pressure to succeed in life according to his parents' plans. The ambiguity of Holden's account is the opposite of "all that David Copperfield kind of crap," (1) as his selective narration imitates the potential unreliability of a troubled and disoriented adolescent.

²⁸ Considering Lodge: "Holden's language implies more than it states. [...] The pathos of Holden Caulfield's situation [...] is more effective for not being explicitly spoken." (Lodge 2011, 20)

²⁹ Graham 2007, 59.

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Summary

Holden Caulfield is a noticeable narrator. As the protagonist of J. D. Salinger's novel *The Catcher in the Rye*, he displays a multitude of narrative idiosyncrasies: he contradicts himself, exaggerates his recount of events, and often leaves the reader half-informed on his motivations and emotional life. Much of his narrative style hints at him as a potentially unreliable narrator, although it is widely impossible to determine when his narrative account is unreliable and when it is not. This creates interpretative problems as the reader can never know for sure whether they are supposed to take Holden's account literally or to look for a veiled meaning beyond his statements.

This essay explores the consequences of potentially unreliable narration in a specific episode of the novel: Holden's night-time encounter with his former teacher Mr Antolini. When Holden sleeps on Mr Antolini's sofa after spending exhausting days in Manhattan, he awakes to find Mr Antolini petting his head. Holden interprets this behaviour as a "flitty pass," as a sexual transgression on his former teacher's part, stating that "[t]hat kind of stuff's happened to me about twenty times since I

was a kid.” But what exactly is Holden referring to, and can the reader trust this statement, considering that Holden’s narration regularly borders on unreliability?

Due to the fact that the text rarely reveals the truth behind Holden’s account, I argue that multiple interpretations of this chapter are not only possible but are at the stylistic heart of the novel. On the one hand, this reading of the novel offers an interpretation of a key episode, by considering a history of sexual abuse in Holden’s biography. On the other hand, it indicates that Holden’s account mirrors the mode of narration that would be expected from a troubled and disoriented adolescent—a factor that despite the potentially unreliable mode of narration adds to the sense of authenticity in the novel.