

ENGLISH B

EXTENDED ESSAY

Category 3

Title: Catching & Creating: A comparison of the protagonists of *Frankenstein* and *Catcher in the Rye* in their shared fear of sexuality and attachment to childhood

RQ: How are the attempts to persevere innocence and deny adulthood portrayed by Holden Caulfield in *Catcher in The Rye* by J.D. Salinger and Dr. Frankenstein in *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley?

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Introduction

Two world-wide known novels: one fiction, the latter not. One written in the 1900s, the other during the post-WW2. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in The Rye* have shaken down the world of literature in distinctly different ways. A gothic attempt to Romanticism with the horrific creation Dr. Frankenstein bears life upon, compared to the diary-like narration of teenager Holden and his three-day journey after being expelled from Pencey Prep School does not seem to hold much resemblance at first glance. Yet the widely misunderstood nature of *Frankenstein*, seen only as a nightmarish science fiction story, and Holden's gloom and pessimism being passed on as "typical teenage angst" since the book's publication, undermining the true dilemma he beholds, only make the similar motives of the two novel's protagonists more valuable to spot. Dr. Frankenstein's obsessive desire to take up the role of God by his obnoxious studies dedicated to creating a being "with an ardor that far exceeded moderation" (Shelley, 50) and Holden's stubborn yet subconscious desire to forever stay as a child, "The best thing, though, in that museum was that everything always stayed right where it was. Nobody'd move. Nobody'd be different. The only thing that would be different would be you." (Salinger, 131), share the same set of intentions: attempts on persevering their innocence, hence being able to avoid adulthood and its responsibilities.

"This man's future really is the past."

-F. Scott Fitzgerald, The Great Gatsby

Adulthood has been glamorized, feared, sought out and yet simultaneously despised throughout history. Individuals' own personal struggles with the accepting of leaving what they had once been behind in order to reach the world of adulthood have been a prominent theme in

literature. The anxieties of entering this once seeming magical, but now only terribly horrifying world is meticulously put between the lines, revealing the protagonists' subconscious desires, in the two famous novels *Frankenstein* and *The Catcher in The Rye*. Two characters locked in their own world, living in a self-made isolation: from a reader point of view it is obvious that with the privileges they have, they can have a brighter life than the most. Yet here they are, going through life with deliberately chosen torments and self-destructive ways, because they don't want to proceed into what is ahead of them: adulthood and loss of innocence.

In *Frankenstein*, Victor Frankenstein "does God's work, creating a man" (Cantor) and aspires to give life to a human being. From the very first pages of the book it is established that Victor loves Elizabeth, a person that he knew he would marry ever since he was a child. And although he repeatedly claims to be loving Elizabeth more than anything, he continues his days aloof and disconnected from the rest of the world. This self-made isolation is perhaps his deepest motive in creating a living being from nothing, and he desires to become a father: "*No father should claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve theirs.*" (Shelley, 60) says he, right after listing the agonizing hours that went into his experiment. Why wouldn't he satisfy this desire by simply marrying Elizabeth and having a family in the normal manner? This question is answered when later in the novel, his creature seeks vendetta against Victor and tells him to "beware of his wedding night" (Shelley, 101). With the rest of the story indicating that his creation's psyche is the surfacing of Victor's repressed feelings, the creature's threats are a product of Victor's sexual anxieties and fears that he tries to suppress but regardless hold him back from uniting with Elizabeth, hence having a child of his own. The novel approaches the notion of innocence from a sexuality focused point of view. Rather than tackling the detonating morals and ethics of adulthood and running away from it because it would be a loss of innocence, Victor avoids

adulthood because of sexual fears as well as his desire to be alone and not form emotional connections, which is one differentiating aspect considering how “innocence” was established in both novels.

Holden Caulfield in *The Catcher in The Rye* looks like a sulky, pessimistic and rebellious teenager from the outside. And how can the reader ever think a person who is so cynical, so angry and cranky actually longs to stay as a child? The cues are everywhere in the novel: from him finding all adults “phony” to his overt reproach towards anyone who seems to be growing up, it is clear that he fears adulthood. Throughout his narration in the span of three days following his expulsion from Pencey Prep, -which is the fifth school he has been expelled from for “not applying himself”- it is understood that Holden either views adults as “phony”, “corny” or corrupt. He doesn’t trust the adults around him, he even wanders around New York for three whole days instead of going to his parent’s house, he finds every grown up fake and insincere. In fact, he makes exactly seven generalizations about *people* every time he comes across something that only makes his views on adults worse. Like Victor in *Frankenstein*, Holden definitely has anxieties circled around sexuality as well, Chapter 13 is the narration of him calling up a hooker and then not going through with it when she arrives, because he “felt much more depressed than sexy.” (Salinger, 158). Unlike *Frankenstein* however, Holden’s fears around adulthood doesn’t come from a desire to avoid responsibility but rather because he has a distorted view on it. He associates evil, immorality and corruptness with the world of adulthood and tries to run away from it in horror of becoming everything he detests himself.

In this essay, the curious nature of both protagonists will be examined in aims of unraveling the intentions behind their actions: from Dr. Frankenstein bearing life upon the inanimate to

Holden recklessly strolling the streets of New York, literature's two misunderstood heroes deserve an investigation on how do they perceive the world of adulthood and why do they try to avoid it.

“People never notice anything.”

One of the seven assumptions of Holden in *Catcher in the Rye*

Chapter 1 View on Innocence: *If a body catch a body coming through the rye*

As one area of life that deals the most with emotion and thought, literature has always included innocence, or rather the loss of it, as a prominent theme in its works. The two novels' protagonists Holden Caulfield and Victor Frankenstein progressively put immense effort into avoiding adulthood throughout their stories. As *Catcher in the Rye* is the infamous coming of age story, and hence the more obvious example for this particular theme, one ought to start the analysis of the protagonists' view on innocence with Holden.

The title of the novel is a misjudgment on Holden's part, as he wrongfully recalls Robert Burns' poem "Coming Through The Rye" while him and Phoebe, his little sister, are having a heated discussion on whether there is any job in the world that Holden would actually want to have. Even this discussion that takes up only a few pages of the novel is a fitting representation on how Holden perceives adulthood. When Phoebe suggests that he could be a lawyer, like their father, for example, he says "All you do is make a lot of dough and look like a hot shot. And besides, even if you did go around saving guys' lives, how would you know if you did it because you really wanted to, or because you really just wanted to be a terrific lawyer with everyone slapping you on the back." (Salinger, 185) Especially with his own father being a lawyer, Holden's strict generalizations just go more to show how corrupt he views each adult. Following this, he gets exhilarated by "something crazy" and tells his sister that the only thing he really would like to be is a "catcher in the rye", like the one in Robert's poem. He reveals his inner fantasy of being the only "big" person among thousands of little kids, and how the only thing he would be doing all day is "to catch everybody if they start going over the cliff".

*Gin a body meet a body, comin thro' the rye,
Gin a body kiss a body, need a body cry;
(Burns)*

“Gin” is the Scottish word for “should”, and Holden’s misinterpretation of Robert’s poem is childishly innocent considering that the actual aim of the poem is to establish whether casual sex is alright to engage in. Having sexual connotations, Holden’s flawed memory on recalling the poem holds even greater value as it conveniently allows him to ignore any cause for an exploration of sexuality- his or anyone else’s. While the original line “meeting a body” suggests welcoming sexual relationships, Holden chooses to remember it solely as catching all the children who come too close to the edge of the cliff, the cliff of adulthood.

Chapter 2 Sexual Anxieties’ Manifestation

For both protagonists, any exploration or physical manifestation of one’s sexual desires is the equivalent of losing one’s innocence. This notion alone is not the cause for their problems though, but every misfortune they bear upon themselves is rather because of the wrongful association of innocence with childhood. Hence, both Victor and Holden holding the concept of childhood to holy standards and idealizing it causes them to never want to leave it behind, which of course is unavoidable.

Apart from abstaining from sexual relations in hopes of avoiding the perceived loss of innocence, the reason for protagonists’ celibacy might also be rooted in their shared fear of intimacy. Holden’s most prominent feature is his aloofness, and while he seems to take pride in his ability to recognize phony people and hence justify his unwillingness to form emotional connections with those around him, there are times where he deeply longs for intimacy. One of the significant examples of this desire is when he repeatedly is tempted to give “old Jane a call”, a girl who he likes and would like to spend time with. Jane is one of the few people Holden speaks

positively of, yet every time he longs for companionship, instead of reaching out to her, he proceeds to engage with other acquaintances whom he doesn't even like and ends up regretting the whole encounter. Along with his restraint to call Jane, simply because "you have to be in the mood for these things", also his absurd refusal to go to his parents' house when he has nowhere to stay shows two conflicting desires of Holden's inner world: longing for intimacy and human connection while also fearing it due to potential emotional turbulences and pain. Among all the candidates in his life whom he could confide in and form a meaningful relationship, Holden chooses to create the illusion of connection with strangers. He calls up a hooker to his motel room when he is feeling lonesome in hopes of achieving some level of, even physical, intimacy. But when Sunny, the hooker, refuses to engage in small talk with him he starts to feel "more depressed than sexy" and makes up some absurd injury to abstain from any sexual act. Or when he visits his parents home to see Phoebe, as soon as his parents arrive he hides and goes away, spending the night at his old teacher's house instead of his own. The lengths Holden goes to in order to avoid depending on anybody but himself showcases how unreliable he finds the adults around him, hence his everlasting fantasy of being the "catcher" in the rye. By constantly engaging in this fantasy, he is able to provide but also receive the protection he desperately always needed. Him having to catch every child who come close to the edge of the cliff means that he too has to stay in the rye field, standing somewhere between childhood and adulthood, never having to take the leap.

The case of being withdrawn from society is also observed in Victor Frankenstein's case. Not unlike Holden, Victor too has only a few people he is close to, and apart from them he seems to avoid any other member of the society he lives in; "I loved my brothers, Elizabeth, and Clerval; these were old familiar faces, but I believed myself totally unfitted for the company of strangers." (Shelley, 37) In reality, his lack of social bonds is what allows him to pursue his frantic mission

of recreating life to the extents that he does, but even that is not enough and knowing his heart doesn't have any room for anything other than his scientific pursuit, he wishes to "procrastinate all that related to my feelings of affection, until the great object, which swallowed up every habit of my nature, should be completed." (Shelley, 48) Being a scientist, "Victor is the epitome of the isolated Romantic genius, living on the fringes of society, losing touch with his fellow even as he works to transform their existence." (Cantor) At this point, the "creature's" psyche becomes increasingly important as it is revealed in several instances that it is the resurfacing of his creator's repressed emotions and thoughts. When the creature becomes a murderer and a true "monster" due to his creator's parental neglect but also his lack of acceptance in society, Victor "seems to know intuitively what the monster has done, even before he receives confirmation of the facts." (Cantor). Not only is he able to conduct that the monster is the one who killed his brother, "Could he be the murderer of my brother? No sooner did the idea cross my imagination than I became convinced of its truth.", he also seems to be able to predict the creature's intentions. The reason for Victor's accurate insight into his creation's murders is because the monster's intentions are deep down his own. Every repressed thought and fear takes on living form with the creature, "something in Frankenstein wants to kill anyone who comes close to him so that he can maintain his willful isolation." (Cantor). In this aspect, Holden and Victor differentiate in their reasons for being detached from society and unable to engage emotionally: Holden, having lost his younger brother, is afraid of the pain getting close to someone may cause; while Victor limits human contact because he believes that emotion and affection for another weakens one. Not only is Victor's "bestowing animation upon lifeless matter" (Shelley, 45) an attempt on playing the role of God, him succeeding in this pursuit illusions him into believing that he has already replaced him. Now identifying as "creator", Victor desperately tries to reject all of his humanly aspects; his impulses,

desires and emotions. But in trying to run away from his own consciousness and repress its products, “Frankenstein’s emotions run wild in the externalized form of his monster.” (Cantor).

Having established both protagonists’ fear of intimacy, although due to different reasons, the question of sexuality resurfaces. Doubtlessly, a lack of ability for emotional closeness therefore brings an unwillingness for the physical as well, although also in this regard do the protagonists separate once again. In *Catcher in the Rye*, there are a considerable amount of allusions to Holden’s abstain from sex being more than just a childish desire to protect one’s innocence and purity. In Chapter 24, when he stays over at his old professor Mr. Antonoli’s apartment, he wakes up in the middle of the night, finding him patting his head in a homosexual manner. Holden panicking and then following up with thinking, “I know more damn perverts, at schools and all, than anybody you ever met, and they are always being perverts when I’m around.” (Salinger, 207) suggests other unpleasant experiences he has had before, instances that ended up making him feel violated and possibly broke his trust in those he was expecting protection from. By reading between the lines, the reader can understand that what Mr. Antonoli does to Holden only empowers his views on adulthood and sexuality being corrupt and even destructive. One of the reasons why Holden calls every grown-up either a “phony” or a “fraud” may also be due to this: Because adulthood stereotypically begins with the engagement in sexual relations, and because sexuality is “perverse” and evil, every adult is only pretending to be innocent, guiltless; as they have long before lost their purity and sinlessness the moment they gave in to their sexual desires. In the eyes of Holden, the world of adulthood is fraudulent for masking the darkness of what it brings with it.

Victor Frankenstein’s sexual abstinence, however, is not limited to the perseverance of innocence, although it does still bear a childish obsession similar to Holden’s to avoid adult world and therefore its responsibilities. The most significant question in order to unravel the

symbolisms in this product of the Romantic movement, one should keep asking themselves why Victor, seemingly so eager to create a living being and do God's work, doesn't choose the natural course of life to fulfill his desire to become a father by simply procreating. Even when this desire to create life becomes the demise of him, isolating him from those he loves and makes him lose "all soul or sensation but this one pursuit" (Shelley, 47) he doesn't stop. Instead of him and his "beloved" bringing a child to the world, he torments himself trying to create one from deceased beings. He works, detached from any connection to the outside world, for nearly two years, and when he narrates his sufferings to the reader, as Robert Kiely writes on Frankenstein, "we may wonder why he does not marry Elizabeth and with her cooperation, finish the job more quickly and pleurably" (Kiely).

Victor's choice on the matter is, of course, not coincidental nor mere irrationality. He "uses the energy he derives from repressing his normal feelings, especially his sexual desires, to fuel his intellectual and scientific pursuits" (Cantor) and while doing that not only does he find himself outcasted, but he actually needs to restrain from any emotional contact in order to fulfill the goals he has set for himself. This is the part where Victor and Holden differentiate in their subconscious desire to persevere their innocence and correspondingly, abstain from sex. Victor goes to the lengths of the world in order to become a father and, is "obsessed with the idea of creating human life" yet ironically refuses to create life in the simplest and natural pattern. His fear of sexuality pushes him to the limits of human knowledge and capacity, because he believes that sexual union "poses a threat to his independence, integrity and delicacy of character." (Kiely).

Unlike Holden, who views most sexual desire as "perverse" and refrains from it in the hopes of thereby being able to hold onto his childhood, Victor's abstain is caused more because of an aversion against sex rather than horror towards it. Victor's desire to become a

creator himself rather than simply staying as God's creation, makes him want to give up all his humanly aspects, including and most specifically the need for emotional and physical union. Attempting to replace God, he too shall become independent, unneeding of a companion, not having any sexual desires and therefore, not having to require another person, a female, to procreate. His need and desire to be the sole receiver of his "creation's" devotion and affection is ironic when one contemplates all of his attempts in trying to avoid any emotional relationship. In that sense, even his motives behind dedicating himself to the creation of life is inhuman. He does not want to be loved like a parent, but desires to be worshipped like God. Yet even in a pursuit as grand as his, this "urge to create life by himself shows a longing to do something never before attempted by man, but also a fear of growing up, of taking his place in the world of adult responsibility" (Cantor). And as the prime establishment of entering into adulthood is sexual in nature, whether this is as simple as engaging in sex or comes down to the principle human responsibility of procreating and nurturing for the sake of the continuance of the species, Victor's realization of his inability to avoid becoming an adult eventually makes his anxieties to settle on his wedding night. Being the live form of Victor's repressions, the monster tells him to "beware of his wedding night" and later on, kills Elizabeth on the untried bed, conveniently relieving Victor from the obligation of sexual union and therefore adult responsibility. Having his own creation to blame for his beloved's death, he subconsciously reveals his "childish fears that have long delayed his union with Elizabeth, whom he in some sense regards as his *real* enemy." (Cantor)

Conclusion

Both *Catcher in the Rye* and *Frankenstein* portray a protagonist's unhealthy attachment to the concept of childhood and inability to follow the natural course of life by stepping into adulthood. Holden Caulfield wanders the streets of New York for three whole days, doing nothing but seeing all the wrong things with the world—all things wrong because of the adults, while Dr. Frankenstein orchestrates his own ruin by giving into his idealism, turning his human nature against him.

The prime focus of this essay has been the sexual fears both protagonists subconsciously have, leading them to avoid any instance where they will have to confront their anxieties: adulthood being the most fundamental and, unfortunate on their part, the least escapable. The two novels being so different in style, subject and even time, Victor and Holden sharing the same terrors regarding what adulthood has in preparation for them shows how human of an impulse it is to never let go of one's childhood and hence, innocence. What has made this analysis on unraveling the protagonists' attempts to persevere their innocence essential is due to their differentiating attitude towards realizing the inevitability of it at the end of the both novels. In *Frankenstein*, after murdering his creator, the monster claims that he too shall die, "and what I feel be no longer felt" (Shelley, 230). While Victor is unable to bear the agony of his powerlessness against mastering nature and therefore denying adulthood, Salinger brings his protagonist a far more peaceful ending: At the end of *Catcher in the Rye*, Holden watches Phoebe "going around and around" in the carousel, trying to grab the gold ring. It is at this point that he comes to terms with the ending of one's childhood, when he fears that Phoebe will fall off her horse trying to grab the ring but nevertheless doesn't say anything because "If they fall off, they fall off but it is bad if you say anything to them." (Salinger, 221). Holden gives up his fantasy of being a "catcher" in

this instance and solely finds joy in Phoebe enjoying her childhood, without trying to persevere it forever. As the carousel goes around and around, it starts raining and parents run under to the roof in order to not get wet. Holden gets soaked but “doesn’t care anyway”, stands between the carousel and the roof, between the parents and the kids. He finally accepts that he is too young to ride the carousel, and too young to join the parents, and that all he can do is follow the natural course of life. He realizes that leaving one’s childhood behind is a necessary step to take if one longs to enjoy life as it is. Hence, after spending 3 days -and perhaps a lot longer- fearing, avoiding and slandering adulthood, he finally accepts it: while watching Phoebe go around and around in the carousel, all he has left to say is “I felt so damn happy, if you want to know the truth. God, I wish you could have been there.” (Salinger, 225).

“I don’t care if it is a sad good-by or a bad good-by, but when I leave a place I like to know I’m leaving it. If you don’t, you feel even worse.”

Catcher in the Rye, page 4

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