

## Holden Caulfield from the Perspective of a Guardian Angel Or: How an Old Subject Receives a New Twist

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Holden Caulfield motivated me to let go of a principle - namely never to discuss a full length text more than three times in the classroom in order to avoid the danger of a mere routine treatment. However, the experience that the students in "my" German classes or courses always showed a special interest in the complex protagonist of J.D. Salinger's

*The Catcher in the Rye*

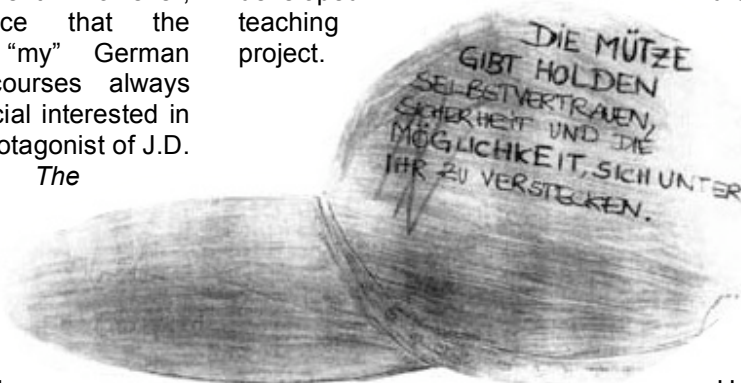
(as well as my own fascination for this work)

let me fall prey to the

temptation to suggest the novel for a fifth time (!) as a reading in the thematic category "Growing Up."

This time the addressees were pupils in a tenth grade German complementary course<sup>1</sup> who had been traditionally trained in text analysis. Many of them had experiences with role-plays and the school theatre; they were open for experiments and very critical. In addition, they eagerly and openly discussed the values that adults present to them as being worth learning and living by. The difficulties in working with this group were mainly that the less verbal students felt overwhelmed by the eloquence of their classmates.<sup>2</sup> In class they quickly became silent and were too shy to present what they had prepared in written form

because they were too afraid that it would not match the standards of the "good" students. This problem formed the outset of my newly developed - or rather to be developed - teaching project.



**Holden's Hat** - an important prop (Drawing of a student - the text reads: "The hat gives Holden self-confidence, security and the opportunity to hide beneath it.")

### Intentions

My desire was to teach the *Catcher in the Rye* in such a way that not only students with a high linguistic competency would be able to access the text but also that everybody could bring his or her questions concerning the content and farther reaching issues into the discussion. This project necessarily involved experimenting with new ideas. The goals for teaching the content remained largely the same as in previous lessons, however, my decision to employ the methods discussed below made further restrictions necessary.

I wanted to focus on the following:

- characterising the protagonist in more detail
- distilling the motivations for his actions, his thinking and his dreams

- understanding the questions the text offers as stemming from Holden's mind with respect to the issue of growing up
- encouraging the young people to ask questions about the future

- drawing conclusions about Holden's future life that exceed the reading

### Realisation

#### Opening<sup>3</sup>

As an opener I chose a performative exercise that allows participants to become actively involved: I asked the students to illustrate the relationship between the three characters Holden, Stradlater and Ackley (protagonists in the first chapter) in *tableaux vivants*. The students prepared their presentations in groups of three and four, discussing their opinions before transforming them into visual products. The presentation of the *tableaux* happened in a large area outside of the classroom so that it became possible to walk around the groups and to grasp the image(s) from various perspectives.

In response to the performance the viewers were asked to line up the performers with the characters in the book. Discussions on the design emerged as well as about individual gestures, and the small groups gave each other criticism and feedback. The first step was done. Everybody had contributed to the class.

#### *Who is Holden?*

The next step was to find an approach to the character of Holden Caulfield. Both the authority he exhibits on the outside as well as the hypersensitive and fearful child on his inside were to be addressed. The question “*What impression of Holden do you get through his encounters with Mr Spencer and Mrs Morrow?*,” guided the reading and analysis of two scenes in chapters 2 and 8, followed by a characterisation of the main character that consisted of the multifaceted perceptions of various people. Everybody wrote a description of Holden from either the perspective of another figure in the novel or of a fantasy figure, for instance, the red hunting hat (see below) or a guardian angel (see box on this page), etc. The learners could freely choose the style of approach; I suggested the following genres: dialogue, letter, journal entry, inner monologue, written or performative presentation. (Due to time constraints this task had to be completed as homework so that the students were able to choose a written assignment.) The fantasy brought about an amazing variety of features that created a colourful yet nonetheless “truthful” image of Holden.

#### *The Red Hunting Hat*

Following this exercise, the class continued to work in

smaller groups. The goal was to determine the symbolic meaning of the red hunting hat. The “peg” was a photocopied sketch of the hat which the pupils decorated, coloured

#### **Holden from the Perspective of the Guardian Angel**

*First of all I have to say that I am not one of these old-fashioned angels that get their hearts fluttering at every little lie. Otherwise I would already have had a heart attack. Overall Holden is quite a nice boy (...). Besides his unusual character makes it easier for me to accompany him on his daily paths without getting distracted. Since I am an – albeit modern – angel I have to confess how happy it makes me when I see how honest and upright Holden is deep inside. When he sometimes mentions that he is advanced for his age, I have to agree with him. He has an extraordinary ability to observe things, he is very polite and usually he can respond to his fellows. I always try to whisper into his ear that it is not a shame not to hit back which he doesn't quite want to believe. I can relate quite well to his desire to sleep with a girl once, I've known that feeling in my youth. And here he is definitely different than guys like Stradlater who only follow their desires without taking care of the girls' desires or listening to them. Holden surprises me again and again with his spontaneity and fantasy...*

Anne-Grit

#### **Material 1: Description of Holden (text by a pupil)**

(red) and cut out before gluing it onto a poster. The following assignment defined the task: “*Formulate a hypothesis on the symbolic meaning of the hat!*” In preparation the group members discussed passages

that I had assigned (on pages 17, 19f., 25, 36, 41, 66, 90, 113, 132), and formulated a thesis during their conversation which they then tried to place in the poster on a very eye-catching spot. The results were so clear that longer presentations and explanations became unnecessary.

The students experienced the hands-on work as a creative break, which was an important concession during the otherwise very dense work with this book.

#### *Holden's First Day in New York*

Some of the young people developed a remarkable zeal when they were asked to literally map Holden's unsteady paths through Manhattan. The task was to capture and illustrate Holden's uneasiness, aimlessness and loneliness that characterise his situation after leaving Pencey College.

Again the students were free to choose the formal execution of the assignment. The written contributions were mainly traditional interpretations of the problematic aspects emerging in chapters 6 through 19. One girl and a boy designed an interesting variation by presenting a kind of “bird view.” Holden's guardian angel is flying above him and contemplates his behaviour and experiences in Manhattan. An alternative suggestion to the written contributions was the following: “*Draw your own map of Manhattan and illustrate Holden's paths and stops during his first 24 hours after arriving in New York!*”

The drawing was to be fictional as not all of Holden's whereabouts are so clearly delineated in the text that the students could have found them on a real map of Manhattan.

I briefly introduced the American grid-street-system in larger cities. Finally, we compared the fictional drawings to the real map and, retrospectively, tried to find the public places mentioned.

Although this task required far more time than a written contribution, a quarter of the class decided to prepare detailed drawings. The results were outstanding and the choice of method was convincing:

Holden's helplessness seemed to be jumping right at you! The question of why he is so helpless emerged much more quickly after looking at the city maps than after only a single or even double reading of the respective chapters in the book. The results illustrated that the book merely provides a linear succession of impressions which can become apparent as a concentrated whole when they are graphically displayed.

#### *Holden and the Children*

After this creative period we continued with a sequence of about 3 lessons during which Holden's special relationship to children and his relation to adults were discussed through the analysis of certain parts of the text (chapters 16 and 21ff.). I regarded these lessons as a bridge to the complex topic of "Holden and growing up" which was to be at the centre of the second unit of working with this text.

#### Holden and Growing Up

Who would not be aware that a somewhat intimate and open discussion of beginning adulthood would not be very successful in a setting of 20 adolescents of similar age in the presence of a teacher. However, I regard the opportunity of discussing the

personal issue of "growing up" as the justification for talking about the novel with the age group of 15-17 year olds in the first place. How then should such a discussion be possible? I regard the method of a dream journey as a meaningful tool for the individual to gain insights. It also addresses other levels than the rational one which is usually emphasised in a class-room setting. At first the students were surprised when they saw this special form of experience on the schedule for the following two German lessons. Those who were familiar with the exercise were excited about the prospect; other responses were more hesitant but still curious. Consequently everybody pursued the journey that involved one important condition: everybody is *allowed* but nobody is *forced* to follow the images provided.

The grid for the images I used stemmed from the cliff scene.<sup>4</sup> The topics of contemplation were to be pleasant childhood memories as well as the ideas of each individual with regard to his or her further growing up.

Text of the dream journey:  
*"It is a beautiful summer day. You are lying on a lawn.*

...  
*Now you are getting up, you are wandering around and soon you are discovering a ripe cornfield.*

*While you are slowly walking towards it, you realise that you are getting younger.*

...  
*After having arrived at the cornfield, you are smelling the ripe spikes.*

*You are diving into the field; it is rustling. The spikes are crackling in the heat, the stalks are higher than you are because you have become a child.*

...

*Beautiful memories from your childhood days are emerging.*

...

*While you are wandering around, your step is held up. You are standing on the upper edge of a cliff.*

*Careful yet curious you are looking down:*

*Below yourself you can see a landscape.*

*It is the future, the time of being a grown up.*

*Unhurriedly, you are contemplating this landscape.*

...

*What does it look like to you:*

*Open, light and friendly or rather blurry, disguised in a fog or perhaps even dark?*

...

*Down there is a human being. It is an adult who you recognise as yourself.*

...

*In front of your feet you discover a path. It is a comfortable footpath. Follow it and approach that person. Watch him/her for a while: How does he/she move? What is he/she doing? What does he/she look like?*

...

*Turn to this adult person that is you. Talk to him/her, have a conversation.*

...

*Finally ask the person for a piece of advice.*

*Remember that guidance well.*

...

*Say farewell to your image..."*

(The dots in between the lines mark the speaking pauses.) As expected, the comments on what kind of memories, fantasies, light and dark images had emerged during the dream journey were rather reluctant. I suggested that those who wished to speak could do so. However, only a few students felt like it. Their faces revealed that most of them wanted to have some

time for themselves to work through the experience.

At this stage it is a good idea to ask the students make a drawing of the images that the dream journey produced and to work through them in this way. According to experience, the drawings that are created in a peaceful and quiet environment provide a good start for further discussion.

It proved important to specifically address a few students one or two days later.<sup>5</sup> If and whether images of adulthood emerged during this exercise however could only partially reconstructed. Nonetheless, I considered it more important that the participants of this dream journey knew that their private sphere was protected. They didn't have to share their experiences with the outside world and it was up to them how much they wanted to communicate.

After these preparations it was significantly easier to analyse the cliff scene, the key moment in the novel, and we did so in a traditional way.

The discussion of the question "Is Mr. Antolini gay?" was similarly traditional but very engaged since the question points to the function this worry fulfils for Holden: it provides the protagonist with a seemingly objective reason to withdraw from Mr. Antolini's relentless questions.<sup>6</sup>

#### *What happens to Holden?*

In the final section of this unit we focused on possible perspectives for Holden's future life that might open up. Mr. Antolini points to some of them, the students were asked to derive further ideas from the opinion they had been able to form.

First I employed a technique that I borrowed from the field of

creative therapy.<sup>7</sup> Like the dream journey it requires a fundamental familiarity within the group because it is crucial that the distribution of the roles happens in a conscious and meaningful way. The most important aspect for the teacher is to judge which student (regardless of gender) can be assigned the role of the protagonist because he or she is asked to share a potentially problematic inner monologue with the class. In the following I would like to briefly outline the method. The group is sitting in a circle: two people represent Holden. These two sit with their backs to the group. The interviewer moves from the centre of the circle to individual group members and questions them taking on the role of a particular character from the novel, e.g. Jane Gallagher, Mr. Spencer, Phoebe, Mr. Antolini, etc.<sup>8</sup> The questions are concerned with the interviewees relationship to Holden and their insights on his current sensitivities. After about half of the questioning is over, "Holden 1" (and at the end "Holden 2") is asked to address his perception of the interviews and what effect they had on his feelings and thoughts.

The goal of the questioning was to guide Holden into the world of adults with a new self-confidence and with ideas on how to shape his future life after having heard the opinions of people he accepts and trusts. This unit of the class impressed the students. The interviewees spontaneously had to adopt the role of a character which required the ability to understand and perform this character's emotional relationship to Holden. The condition for the success of this exercise was that the addressed students

had thoroughly worked with the text before. One female student informed me that she learnt through this exercise quite closely that her engagement with the figure she was to represent had been superficial. Hence she felt unable to do justice to "her" character during the interview. One student who had been assigned the role of Holden had been grappling with the protagonist from the very beginning of this teaching unit. He managed to *be* Holden and not just to play him. He would have liked to expand the dialogue and also reach out to other characters, as he disclosed in his subsequent feedback. Other reactions during the evaluation discussion illustrated a high degree of inner involvement – among listeners as well as speakers.

It is probably obvious that a different task than the usual interpretation was at the centre of the unavoidable

#### *Test?!<sup>9</sup>*

I therefore developed the following request: "*Engage in an inner monologue! Imagine Holden makes an appointment with Phoebe in the park after the evening with Mr. Antolini. They sit down on a bench close to the ponds with ducks; the sun is already warming. Soon the two of them are engaged in a conversation. As usual, it doesn't take Phoebe long to stir up a delicate issue in Holden's soul. She says: 'Holden, listen. What are you actually thinking? Now you've flunked out of school for the fourth time. How do you ever want to achieve anything?' Take on the part of Holden and answer Phoebe. (If it helps you, you can have her respond with short questions or remarks.)*"

This task was to enable the students to pick up on thoughts that had emerged during the previous questionings. Furthermore this type of task widened their options in more than one respect: Content: defining Holden's role a) in opposition to Phoebe's and/or the adults' expectations b) in correspondence to these two or c) developing the inner conflict and ambiguities; linguistic: choice between "slang," Holden's verbal characteristics or the everyday language and, finally, formal: creation of an inner monologue or a dialogue.

### Conclusion

The experiences I have described with this new method of approaching a full length text confirm the assumption by Haas, Menzel and Spinner "that such an (production- and action-focused, D.K.) approach triggers more mental activity in the adolescents than a method that allows only one particular way of thinking."<sup>10</sup> In the final discussion nearly all of the learners evaluated their experience as positive and repeatedly rejected the objection that they did not learn as much as usual. They continued that the intensity of the individual work and conversation periods made up for the fact that one or the other detail was not addressed. It was more important, they maintained, that learners who tend to be more reluctant used the opportunity to contribute, that the chosen methods kept their interest fresh and that it enabled a very personal access to both the protagonist and the topic of the novel. Finally, for all teachers such lessons are far more exciting than "reeling off the usual

overly planned and controlled programme."<sup>11</sup>

(Translated by Ulrike Nichols)

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> In our integrated Comprehensive School we practice a dual differentiation between basic and advanced courses from the 6<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> grade in the areas German, English and mathematics. In the sciences the specialisation begins in grade 9.

<sup>2</sup> Haas, Gerhard, Menzel, Wolfgang, Spinner, Kaspar H.: Handlungs- und produktionsorientierter Literaturunterricht. In: Praxis Deutsch. (123) 1994, pp. 17 - 25, especially chapters 2.1 and 2.4.

<sup>3</sup> The following German edition of the text was used. J.D. Salinger. *Der Fänger im Roggen*. Reinbek 1991 (rororo paperback edition).

<sup>4</sup> Salinger, p. 128.

<sup>5</sup> Two reactions from students may serve as examples. One pupil whose experience had made a strong emotional impact was able to have a conversation with her parents. Another student informed me that a recent phase of his past emerged right at the beginning of the exercise so that he "got stuck" somewhere there during the journey.

<sup>6</sup> See chapters 23 and 24: Mr. Antolini is the only adult whom Holden trusts, since he does not regard him as a hypocrite and does not have to reject him, following his strongly developed moral code. During his desperate situation in the no-man's-land between college and the home of his parents, Holden seeks Mr. Antolini.

<sup>7</sup> In February 1993, Kaspar H. Spinner introduced this method at a conference of the Centre for German Teachers in Göttingen.

<sup>8</sup> The dialogues can become more or less complex but the interviewer should pay special attention to the emotional response so that the conversation does not exceed the frame of the class-room setting.

<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, I offered this as an option for those who did not want to confront unknown territory in an exam situation.

<sup>10</sup> Haas, Menzel, Spinner, p. 19.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

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*The editors of PRAXIS DEUTSCH avidly discuss the teaching models that are published in the journal. Sometimes they address problems that cannot be easily resolved. One such problem became apparent (or rather a co-editor pointed it out to us) with regard to teaching Salinger's Catcher in the Rye: the protagonist is male – as happens to be the case with most books that are discussed in school.*

*Consequently, the girls have to empathise with the problems of adolescence which the opposite sex experiences. In a teaching model that justifies itself through the students' individual relation to the question of growing up, the male students are at an (arguably unjust) advantage. I shared my concerns with the author and I received the following answer which we are printing here, following her suggestion.  
Kaspar H.Spinner*

*I appreciate that one of your colleagues pointed out the issue of "male protagonists." I have been thinking about this problem myself for a while, and it is an important criterion for me in choosing texts that centre around self-confident and active women or girls.*

*Nonetheless I decided in this case to teach The Catcher in the Rye because I had to use a text for the experiment that I am a) very familiar with and b) because the range of new literature on the topic of adolescence – as far as I know it – does not provide a suitable alternative (neither in terms of content nor quality of literature) for the age group in question. Indeed I have read and even taught a number of fantastic "girls books," as for instance Siv Widerberg, An Unbelievable Story (Eine unglaubliche Geschichte), Brigitte Blobel, My Pretty Sister (Meine*

*schöne Schwester) and Irene Rodrian, Good Luck, my Child (Viel Glück, mein Kind). However, these texts either address a younger readership or focus on aspects like the choice of job, undesired pregnancy and anorexia among others. Furthermore the two books by the often-discussed Dagmar Chidolue that I am familiar with were not suitable for the project.*

*As you will have seen, I support your colleague's concern in my practical work – also within the framework of an equality project at our school in which my German teacher colleagues and I fill a book box with literature for and about girls for each grade level.*

*Dorothea Kröll*