

# Decoding Narrativity : The Catcher in the Rye

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**Abstract:** Since its publication in 1951, J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* has generated enormous interest among critics. According to Warren French, *The Catcher in the Rye* is the "best" work of the "present generation of writing." Writers like Charles H. Kegel, Edgar Branch, Arthur Heiserman and James E. Miller have explored the narrative patterns and style of *The Catcher in the Rye*. Even the language of the novel which is conversational, informal and overlaid with strong personal idiosyncrasies finds interest with Donald P. Costello. The impressive accumulation of critical views on Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* is a tribute not only to the exciting qualities of the book, but also to the awareness and resourcefulness of academic commentators.

If so much work has already been done on *The Catcher in the Rye*, then why should we add to the plethora of the already existent critical reading of the book? First, though a lot of critical attention has been paid to its theme, the main character Holden Caulfield and the language of the novel, not much work has been done on it from the perspective of narratology which constitutes its structural framework. Secondly, besides decoding its narratology, this analysis also aims at interrogating its ideological voices. Analytically speaking, *The Catcher in the Rye* can be segmented into various structural components such as story, temporal order, spatial location, narration, focalization and ideology. The selection of a particular segment in the narrative analysis depends upon its thematic significance.

**Key Words:** Kernel Events Satellites Enchainino Embedding Joining Focalization Flashback

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, first published in 1951, still continues to be read and loved by the readers all around the world. It was *The Catcher in the Rye* which brought Salinger name and fame. The novel has truly earned itself a place among great classics. Salinger created a literary piece that was completely unique. It belongs to an ancient and honorable narrative tradition, perhaps the most profound in western fiction<sup>1</sup>. Even though *The Catcher in the Rye*, Salinger's first and only novel is considered only a minor classic of American fiction, it is a very popular novel that frequently provokes strong reactions – both positive and negative-from its readers. In fact, the catcher in the Rye is one of the most widely read and discussed works in the American literary canon. Despite its widespread popularity and significant reputation, however, some critics argue that it is too vulgar, immoral, and immature to be considered serious literature. Moreover, a few teachers and parents have censored the novel because they feel that it will corrupt children who read it. But still the book continues to survive and enjoy popularity. The prominence of Salinger's novel in book supplements and news columns is significant evidence that *The Catcher in the Rye* is no longer merely a trade book but has become a college and high school text as well<sup>2</sup>.

*The Catcher in the Rye* was the product of ten years of Salinger's labour. But the novel did not get immediate success. It had an uphill struggle for two years before establishing itself at the top. Since then it has generated enormous interest among critics. According to Warren French, *The Catcher in the Rye* is the "best" work of the present generation of writing<sup>3</sup>. Charles H. Kegel says the novel can be read as Holden Caulfield's quest for communicability with his fellow men, and the hero's first person after-the-fact narration indicates that he has been successful in his quest<sup>4</sup>. Edgar Branch has explored the narrative patterns and style of *The Catcher in the Rye*. Arthur Heiserman and James E. Miller, Jr. place the novel in the epic tradition of the quest<sup>5</sup>. Even the language of the novel which is non-grammatical, conversational and obscene finds interest with critics. According to Donald P. Costello the language of the novel is overlaid with strong personal idiosyncrasies<sup>6</sup>.

Despite the fact, that the book got vast critical attention yet its path to progress was not easy. The book has been steeped in controversy since it was banned in America after its first publication. John Lennon's assassin Mark Chapman asked the former beatle to sign a copy of the book earlier in the morning of the day he murdered Lennon. Police found the copy of the book in his possession upon apprehending the psychologically disturbed Chapman. However, the book itself contains nothing that might have lead Chapman to act as he did. It could have been just any book that he was reading the day he decided to kill John Lennon and as a result, it was *The Catcher in the Rye*, a book describing a nervous breakdown, that caused the media to speculate widely about the possible connection. This gave the book even more recognition. The book made the "best-seller" list in the New York Times. Salinger's reputation and excitement about his work continues to grow with the passage of time. His

fiction has been translated into several languages such as French, Italian, German, Dutch, Swedish and other languages. In Russia, it became so popular that a possession of the copy of *The Catcher in the Rye* became a status symbol among the discontented adolescents. *The Catcher in the Rye* received so much popularity that it has received the stature of modern classics. The reason that this book has a universal appeal to such a variety of people lies in the main character, Holden Caulfield.

A narrative recounts a series of events in a temporal sequence and it is available to us through a telling. *The Catcher in the Rye* recounts a story in a temporal sequence and it is available to us through a telling, that is, there is someone who tells the person story. Salinger presents *The Catcher in the Rye* through a first person point of view; however, the narrator, Holden Caulfield, is not wholly reliable in his understanding and reporting of events. First, he is a youth, a young boy of seventeen who does not have much experience in living. Second he is extremely depressed during the three days he is on his own in New York, and his mood colours everything. Third, Holden tells his story through flashbacks, and memory is never perfect. Because of these things, the reader has to make some assumptions and perform some interpretation on the story. As opposed to an omniscient narrator, Holden Caulfield is a naïve narrator. He is still a teenager, an innocent child, as evidenced in the scene with the prostitute. As a result of his innocence, the reader and the people surrounding Holden often see and understand more than he does. Since Holden is looking for himself, seeking a place to fit into life, he tells about things that happen to him, without any comprehension. Even when he has moments of truth, he is often unable to articulate his thoughts because of his youth and depression. He desperately searches for and misses the meaning of life.

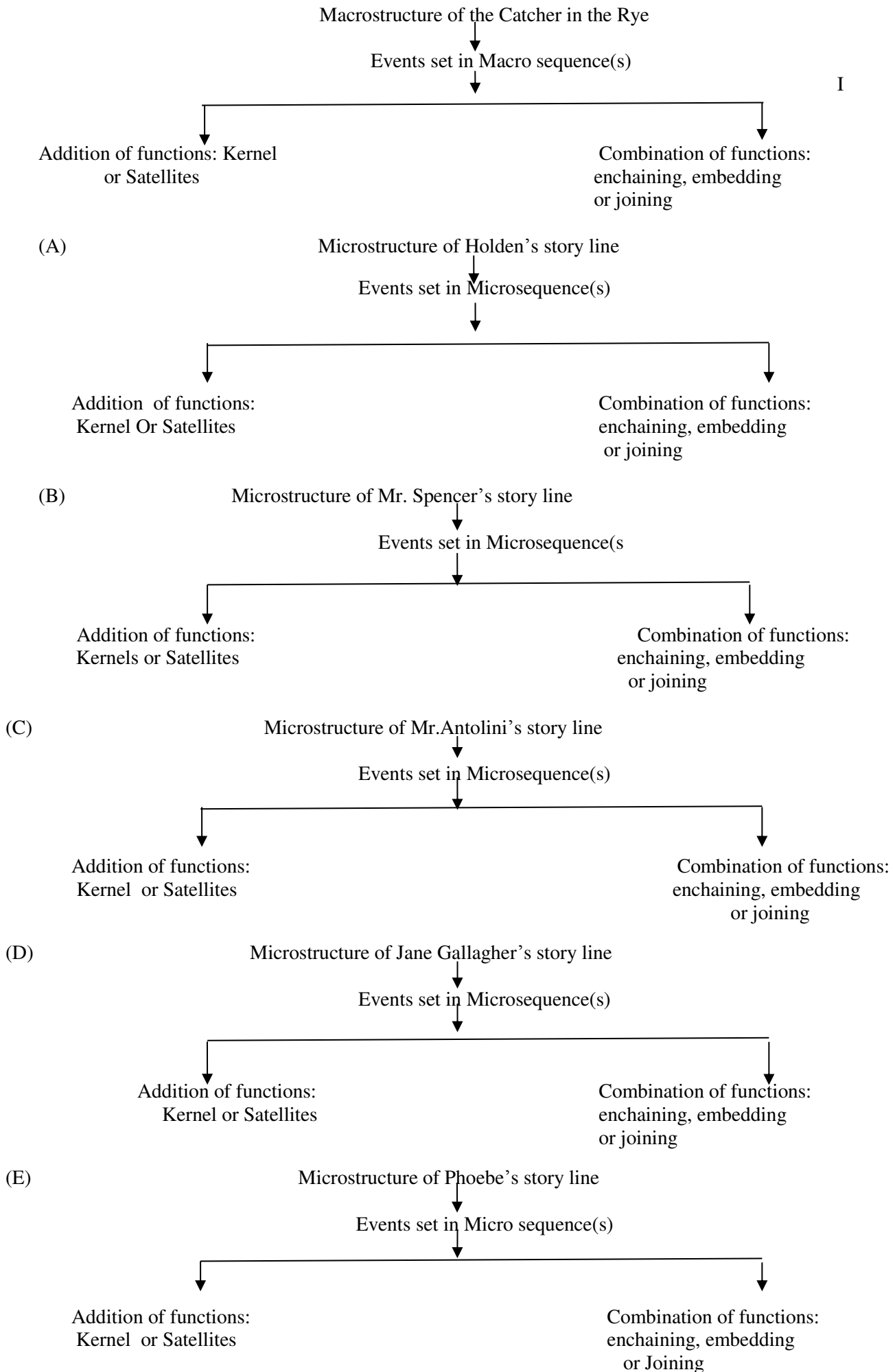
## 2. KERNEL EVENTS, SATELLITES:

Analytically speaking, the novel can be divided into various structural components such as story, character, temporal order, spatial location, narration, focalization and ideology. The main points of the narrative are called kernel events whereas the others which merely fill in the narrative space are called satellites. The novel is also organized through kernel events and satellite events. The kernel events and satellite events. The kernel events of the novel are:

- Holden's expulsion from Pencey Prep.
- Holden's arrival in New York instead of his parents' home.
- Holden's inability to share a bed with a prostitute.
- Holden's visit to his kid sister Phoebe.
- Holden's visit to the museum of art and his obsessive effort to erase the censored words.
- Holden watches Phoebe taking a ride on a carousel but refuses to do so himself.
- Nervous breakdown of Holden.

The list of the above written kernel events can be reduced or enlarged depending upon the aesthetic, thematic and narrative requirements of the critic. Contrasted with these kernels, the satellites retard the movement of the main events through amplification, evaluation and description. This may be seen through the analysis of the first kernel event, which is Holden's expulsion from Pencey Prep. In contrast with this kernel event, Holden's visit to his history teacher, Mr. Spencer is a satellite event. Another satellite event is Holden's conversation with Ackley. Holden hates the meaningless talk but just for the sake of conversation he talks. These satellites merely fill in the narrative. They don't propel the narrative forward. In a narration events are combined to stress the sequential relatedness in one of three ways: enchainment, embedding or joining. The linear chronological relation can be seen in the depiction of all such events which follow one another. Holden Caulfield, a teenager, is expelled from school for poor achievement in studies. In an attempt to deal with this, he leaves school few days prior to the end of the term, and goes to New York, to take a vacation before returning to his parents' home. These events provide us with a vivid example of a string of events enchainment in a chronological order. The second way to combine events in a narration is embedding. This may be seen when Phoebe takes a ride on a carousel and Holden simply watches her. Both the events occur at the same time. The third way to combine events in a narration is joining. It may be witnessed in Holden's narration of events of his life while convalescing in a California sanitarium. At one level it shows the plight of Holden which affects his studies, his well-being and his outlook towards the people in general. He is alienated from the society and his own self. He does not want to come of age; he nostalgically yearns for the innocence of childhood when the self is unaware of disturbing ambiguities. At another level, it shows the destruction of his childhood dreams. He comes to know of the reality of life that the children have to grow up whether they like it or not.

All these structural components of *The Catcher in the Rye* whether enchainment, embedded or joined can be subsumed under a single event label. Such as Holden –The Voice of Youth or some such other name. The macrostructure of the novel may be presented with the help of chart:



The chart shows the macro sequence(s) of *The Catcher in the Rye*. One deals with the main character Holden Caulfield and there are secondary story line of Phoebe, Mr. Antolini, Mr. Spencer, and Jane Gallagher too. Further story lines of Ackley, Stradlater, and Sunny can be traced also. An analysis of these story lines shows that though their respective stories move in their respective orders; they are often embedded and joined with other story lines. They often crisscross one another and are finally subsumed in the macrostructure of the main story line.

In this novel the hierarchical order is established with Holden's story line forming the apex. The other story lines are of relative secondary importance, viewed from the perspective of the alienation of the youth in *The Catcher in the Rye*. This hegemony can be changed, if we constitute its structure through another yardstick, such as gender, temporal, spatial or narrative zones among others which is attributed to each character. Such a displacement would dispense with the present macrostructure with another one, having different primary and secondary story lines. Here the movement of the narrative is in syntagmatic order, which arranges events according to the principle of contiguity. The novel is a story of Holden who has been expelled from school for poor achievement for the third time. He leaves school a few days prior to the end of the term and goes to New York to take a vacation before returning to his parents' house. Told as a monologue, the book describes Holden's thoughts and activities over these few days, during which he describes a developing nervous breakdown. An altogether different kind of analysis can be made if selected from a paradigmatic perspective. The lost, lonely Holden can be compared and contrasted with the successful, well-adjusted Stradlater. Both are roommates and are acquainted with Jane Gallagher. For Holden, Jane is a part of his childhood who used to play checkers with him but for Stradlater she is just another girl in the long list of his conquests. Stradlater is everything that Holden is not; a Pencey hot-shot, who, despite his year book kind of good looks is a secret slob. The antitype of Holden, he obeys the school rules and will graduate that is, succeeding whereas goes on breaking the rules of the society and is driven out from schools. The good and the innocent people can be contrasted with the phony people according to Holden's viewpoint. Throughout the novel, Holden keenly desires to protect the innocence of those he considers to be innocent. Holden wishes to protect his sister Phoebe who has a mix of youthful innocence and generosity that overwhelms Holden. He wants to protect people like Jane Gallagher, the nuns and even the ducks freezing in the Central Park. He considers Jane Gallagher innocent simply because she plays checkers with more regard for the symmetry of the pieces on board without caring for the outcome. He gives ten dollars to the nuns at the station because he is depressed by their meager breakfast. He considers Stradlater a phony and a secret slob though outwardly he looks gorgeous. Holden's father and mother are also labeled as phony by him. Being a lawyer, Holden's father does not always save innocent people's lives. His mother always seems predictable and insincere to him. His elder brother D.B. is a phony too, because of his career choice of a screen-play writer in Hollywood. Holden feels that all movies are exaggerated portrayals of reality and because his brother takes part in these perversions of realism he is a phony. The way Holden talks about different people in the novel gives an idea of whether he thinks they are phony or innocent.

### 3. DIFFERENT ROLES PLAYED:

A character in the novel may not play one role alone; he can play different roles. Holden is a cynic, who seems to like nobody and only few people like him. He calls people 'morons', 'phony'. He seems to hate everybody in the novel. He sees Stradlater, Ackley, his parents, D.B. as phony. But Holden plays another role too, that of a protector. He has a keen desire to save the innocent children before they enter the world of destruction and phoniness. As we know that a character's features can be analyzed not only through his own role but also through a "paradigm of traits". Throughout the story different traits of Holden are scattered. When he narrates his story, he appears to be a sensitive adolescent. During the course of his narration, Holden sometimes appears as a snob and sometimes as a saint. Holden believes in a definite code of honour that he attempts to live up to and expects others to abide as well. He feels superior to the people around him. He calls them 'phony'. According to Holden, no one is true to oneself. Due to this superiority complex he is alienated from the people around him. Holden's feeling of superior moral standard matches only a few people, his dead brother Allie and his ten-year old sister Phoebe. Holden appears as a saint when he expresses his ambitions to protect children from the world of corrupt adult's. His experiences throughout the course of his journey have created a desire in him to preserve the innocence of those he considers being innocent. Not only does Holden want to protect the children but he also sympathies with the nuns, the ugly daughter of Penney's headmaster and even Sunny the prostitute. Thus, throughout the text different traits of Holden appear or disappear. The two basic types of textual indicators of character are direct definition and indirect presentation. The different characters in the novel like Ackley, Mr. Spencer, Mr. Antolini, Stradlater, Phoebe, D.B., Holden's parents, Maurice, Sunny are directly defined through the protagonist's viewpoint, that is, Holden Caulfield. Holden is a young boy of seventeen who relates the events of the past one year while convalescing at the hospital. But Holden's account of his disturbed past cannot be considered fully reliable as he was in a disturbed state of mind and depressed. Thus, the reader has to make some assumptions and interpret the story himself. Salinger has used indirect presentation for presenting Holden. Holden's fumbling; halting speech adds authenticity to his character. Salinger presents him as a realistic teenager given to digressions and obscenities typical of a boy his age. The swearing however, is not employed by Salinger to show an attitude of daring, but to convey a deep-seated insecurity in his character.

#### 4. FLASH-BACK AND FORESHADOWING:

Narrative time does not always follow the linear story order. The deviation in the story-time and text-time is called flash-back and foreshadowing. An example of flash-back or analepsis is when Holden thinks of his dead brother Allie: "My brother Allie had this left-handed fielder's mitt. He was left-handed. The thing that was descriptive about it, though was that he had poems written all over the fingers and the pocket and everywhere... He got leukemia and died when we were in Maine<sup>7</sup>." Foreshadowing or prolepsis is when the psychoanalyst alludes to the fact if Holden would apply himself when he goes back to school next September. It hints that Holden would get well. The two common modes of narrating duration are summary and scene. The summary foregrounds the main points of the narrative and dispenses with the superfluous details. This mode is used by Salinger in the last chapter of *The Catcher in the Rye* when Holden says; I could probably tell you what I did after I went home and how I got sick and all, and what school I'm supposed to go to next fall, after I get out of here, but I don't feel like it." (213) Where summary accelerates the story, the scene coordinates the duration of story and narration time. The dialogue between Holden and Sally's grandmother is in purest scenic form:

'Hello', I said when somebody answered the godam phone. I sort of yelled it, I was so drunk.

'Who is this?' this very cold lady's voice said.

'This is me. Holden Caulfield. Lemme speaka Sally, please.'

'Sally's asleep. This is Sally's grandmother. Why are you calling at this hour, Holden? Do you know what time is it?'

'Yeah, Wanna talka Sally. Very important. Put her on.'

'Sally's asleep young man. Call her tomorrow. Good night.' (150)

#### 5. SLOWDOWN, PAUSE AND ELLIPSIS:

Along with the scene and summary, there are other modes of narrative duration too. They are slow down, pause and ellipsis. Slow down Decelerates story time, when nothing significant happens. The slowdown occurs in the story when Holden arrives in New York after leaving Pencey. For hours he wanders here and there, calling one person or the other but nothing significant occurs. Pause places narration time over story time. A pause occurs in the novel when Holden starts describing characters or addresses the readers like "If you want to know the truth" (1) Holden describes an actor Sir Laurence Oliver as:

I just don't see what is so marvelous about Sir Laurence Oliver, that's all. He has a terrific voice, and he's a helluva handsome guy, and he's very nice to watch when he's walking or dueling or something, but he won't at all the way D.B. said Hamlet was. (117)

#### 6. FIRST PERSON NARRATIVE:

In a narrative discourse, the elements of the story are lined through the textual utterances of the presenter. It is only the first person who can narrate the narrative text. The narrator in *The Catcher in the Rye* is Holden Caulfield, a young boy of seventeen. It is Holden who narrates all the incidents in the novel; it is through him that we come to know of other characters and events. But even then focalization can be of other characters, when Holden is the narrator. As we know that a narrator provides us with the narration while the focalizer perceives the story. Sometimes our expectations are not fulfilled as it happens in the very beginning of the novel, when Holden says:

If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you'll probably want to know is where I was born, and my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don't feel like going into it. (1)

Here the reader thinks, at first, that Holden will talk about his childhood, his parents but the reader's expectations are not fulfilled when Holden refuses to go into "that stuff." As we know that there is a difference between the narrator and the focalizer, so the narrator and the focalizer may but need not be the same person. In the novel, Holden is the narrator and the focalization alternates between different characters but the dominant focalizer is Holden Caulfield. Focalization can be further divided into two parts: external focalization and internal focalization. Salinger has not brought into use the first type of focalization. Internal focalization usually takes the form of character-focalization. For instance, "There were never many girls at all at the football games. Only seniors were allowed to bring girls with them. It was a terrible school, no matter how you looked at it. I like to be somewhere at least where you can see a few girls around once in a while." (3) Focalization can be divided into various facets as well, that is the perceptual facet, the psychological facet and the ideological facet. As Holden is an internal focalizer in the novel, that is a character within the represented world of the novel; so his focalization is limited mostly to the 'past' of the story. The psychological facet is determined by the cognitive and the emotive component. Example of cognitive, emotive and ideological focalization can be seen throughout the text when Holden talks about his relationship with Phoebe, Allie, Jane Gallagher and his parents. He is a sensitive adolescent. He remembers his brother Allie, who was two years

younger to him. He had died of leukemia. Holden misses him badly. He also misses his younger sister Phoebe who lives with his parents whereas Holden has spent most of his life in boarding schools. He had absent parents for most of his life. He never had anyone to talk to or really get to know. Because of poor grades, he was changing schools all the time. The only people with whom he had been able to talk were Allie, Phoebe and Jane Gallagher. Further the process of focalization is fully linked with ideology which like focalization is not uniform. Each and every individual has an ideology different from the other. In *The Catcher in the Rye* there is no explicit discussion of ideology but ideology can be inferred through Holden's actions, behavior, and views. As Holden is the protagonist of the novel so the dominant ideological perspective that can be inferred is of Holden. Throughout the novel, Holden feels isolated yet superior to others. He is aware that his values are not those of his society. He characterizes almost every person he meets as 'phony'. He feels that he is surrounded by hypocrites. Holden has a fixation on childhood which shows itself in many forms. His glorification of children, inordinate admiration of Phoebe, idealization of his dead brother and the joy he gets from reminiscing about his own childhood all contribute to his obsession with innocence and youth. Throughout the book, Holden tries to save all children from growing up and losing their innocence. He does not want to come of age; he nostalgically yearns for the innocence of childhood when the self is unaware of ambiguities. Holden abhors the materialistic attitude of the people around him. He even describes his father as 'phony' as he too, fights cases in court for purely materialistic ends. Other ideological perspectives that come to light are of Stradlater, Mr. Antolini, Pencey's Headmaster and many others. Stradlater, a Pencey hot-shot, who is Holden's roommate as well believes in going by the rules but on the other hand he had no compunction about asking Holden to write his English composition for him. He has no qualms for breaking the rules for himself. Mr. Antolini, Holden's teacher, offers advice and comfort to Holden. He goes to Antolini's home when he is unwilling to remain at his parents' apartment. Antolini does offer him well intended fatherly advice. But his motives are ambiguous. Holden is not sure whether Antolini made a pass at him or simply patted his head when he was sleeping in his apartment. This gesture of Antolini puzzles Holden. It is ironical that the one who gave advice to Holden; he himself had double standards. Pencey's Headmaster too, has double standards in the running of the school. The boys are given steak on Saturday nights so that on Sundays the boys can tell their visiting parents that they had steak the night before. Another is to advertise the school by advertising some model on a horse jumping over the fence when there isn't a horse anywhere near the school. Through Antolini and Pencey's headmaster, Salinger has depicted the standards of educationists.

## 7. MODALITY IN LANGUAGE:

Next feature of a narrative is the modality in language. Modality refers to the attitudinal features of language. The deontic modality is present in the language of *The Catcher in the Rye*: when Phoebe is ready to leave home and go out to West with Holden, he refuses to take her and says "You have to go back to school." (208) The words "you have to" points towards the deontic expression. Holden reminds Phoebe of her duty to go to school which is good for her. The second type is boulomaic modality which indicates the desire and wishes of the speaker. For example, the sentence "I wished to hell he'd stop calling me 'boy' all the time" (12) indicates the desire or the wish of the speaker. The third type is the epistemic modality which is concerned with the speaker's confidence or lack of confidence in the truth of a proposition expressed. "I thought you were supposed to be in a play at school and all. I thought you were supposed to be Benedict Arnold in that play and all." (207) The word 'supposed' points towards Holden's lack of confidence.

## 8. TWO CATEGORIES OF NARRATIVES:

Narratives can also be divided into two categories: A and B. Category A narratives are those which are narrated in the first person by a participating character within the story. *The Catcher in the Rye* belongs to this category of narratives as Holden Caulfield, the narrator of *The Catcher in the Rye* is a character within the story who narrates the story as well. Category A narratives of positive shading foregrounds a narrator's desires, duties and obligations. For instance, the great desire and duty which Holden feels impelled to do is: "What I have to do, I have to catch everybody if they start to go over the cliff- I mean if they're running and they don't look where they're going I have to come out from somewhere and catch them." (173) These lines depict Holden's ardent desire to be the protector of children, to save them from falling. He considers it as his duty, words like "I have to come out," "What I have to do," points towards the deontic modality. Category A narratives with negative shading exhibit epistemic and perception modalities which are absent from A positive. For instance, "where I want to start telling is the day I left Pencey Prep. Pencey Prep is this school that's in Agerstown, Pennsylvania. You probably heard of it. You've probably seen the ads, anyway. They advertise in about a thousand magazines, always showing some hot-shot guy on a horse jumping over a fence." (2) This passage from the text is rich in negative shading. The speaker repeatedly uses epistemic modal adverb, that is, 'probably' which shows the speaker's lack of confidence in the truth of the proposition expressed. The last category in A narratives is A neutral. In this category the narrator does not present his own judgments on events and other characters rather he withholds subjective evaluation and tells the story through categorical assertions alone. *The Catcher in the Rye* does not belong to this category as Holden, the narrator as well as the character within the story narrates the story himself, so his narration is subjective. Holden never takes to neutral

point of view. Category B narratives are divided further into narratorial mode and reflector mode. As *The Catcher in the Rye* does not belong to this category of narratives so we will not discuss it further.

## 9. CONCLUSION:

Summing up, we may say that J.D.Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* provides us with a good example of the compositional process of narratology. By dividing the text into kernel and satellite events, meaning is transmitted through the narrating agent via the medium of different focalizers. As a result of his superb use of narrative technique, Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* has indeed attained the status of a classic of American literature of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

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