

Holden's "Rye" from the Perspective of Symbolism

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Abstract

The *Catcher in the Rye*, as the representative work of American writer Jerome David Salinger, has won wide praise for its unique artistic charm and profound theme connotation since its publication in 1951. The novel is famous not only for its delicate depiction of the plight of teenagers, but also for its rich symbolism, presenting readers with a thumbnail picture of the material and spiritual life of ordinary Americans in the alienated society after World War II. Based on Yimin Luo and Xi Wang's research on "rye field" and "Heterotopia" and combined with the great *Gatsby* and the Beaten Generation of relevant case analysis, this paper will shed a new light on the image symbolized by "rye field", the core image of this book.

Keywords

The *Catcher in the Rye*; Symbolism; American Dream; Group Alienation.

1. Introduction

The Catcher in the Rye, as the representative work of American writer Jerome David Salinger, has won wide praise for its unique artistic charm and profound theme connotation since its publication in 1951. The novel is famous not only for its delicate depiction of the plight of teenagers, but also for its rich symbolism, presenting readers with a thumbnail picture of the material and spiritual life of ordinary Americans in the alienated society after World War II. The interpretation of *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger, especially the core image of "the rye," has been widely discussed by scholars both in China and abroad. For a long time, many Chinese and foreign scholars have interpreted the core image "rye field" in the book. The general view is that "rye field", as a utopian space envisioned by Holden, symbolizes the carefree childhood. It is a beautiful and innocent children's world in which no adult is allowed to integrate. It is the good memory and spiritual comfort of the protagonist's future life. For instance, Feipeng Li's view is that Holden's dream is to be the catcher in the rye, for "the rye" symbolizes happy childhood, children's paradise and a pure world.(Feipeng Li, 2014, p.22)

There is no doubt that this symbolic perspective is correct from the point of view of characterization. However, considering the background of the book's publication, we may notice that the story takes place in the United States after World War II. In the post-war 1950s, the United States shaped its social character at the "material" and "spiritual" levels in terms of social changes, making people living in the developed industrial society and consumer society controlled by capital in terms of life style and value orientation, gradually converges, and gradually "materialized". This kind of individual powerless against group confrontation is unified in the post-war social spiritual outlook of the United States.(Wenxin Liu, 2023, p.1733) On the one hand, Holden Caulfield's resistance spirit of taking rye field as thought is the resistance to this kind of group alienation; on the other hand, the American Dream is also born in this "great prosperity" background. It advocates individualism, that is, everyone realizes the great ideal through their own efforts. From this perspective, the American Dream is actually consistent with Holden's symbolic "rye field". We may now make the following conclusion, that is, Holden's "rye field" is a concrete expression of the American Dream in 1950s Americans' heart.

Therefore, this paper will discuss the symbol of this core image from a new perspective on symbolism, synthesizes Michel Foucault's heterotopia analytical theory applied by Yimin Luo and Xi Wang (2021) in *The Catcher in the Rye* and Henri Lefebvre's space theory applied by Yue Wu and Jinsong Shen (2023) in *The Great Gatsby* to analyze the American Dream symbolized by the core image of "rye field", and step to the conclusion that The "rye field" in Salinger's work is represent the elusive yet seemingly real "American Dream" in people's hearts after the war through three aspect-analyzes: the geographical aspect, the social aspect, and the characteristic aspect.

2. Geographical Aspect: The Rye Field and the West

To better interpret the rye field, we need first answer the question: why Holden Caulfield, the protagonist, repeatedly mentions his desire to live in the West? According to America's agricultural belt layout, "the rye field" in United States is mainly located in the central part of the country, slightly to the west. Although this does not completely correspond to the geographical concept of the West, for someone like Holden, who lives and studies in Pennsylvania or the eastern part of the United States, the wheat-growing region of the United States, or the vast rye field in his mind, represents the "West" he longs for, where he can find freedom and endless exploration, echoing the spirit of the West. Let's consider that Holden's yearning for the West is because there is a "rye field" there—not just a wheat-growing area, but also the hope and beauty symbolized by the color of the wheat. Given the American society of the time, especially in the cities of the East, the "rye field" is a "heterotopia" in the conventional space where Holden is located. It is both a space imagined by Holden and the real existence of those pure and tranquil hearts and the ideal and natural environment (Yiming Luo, 2021). Heterotopia, an important concept in Foucault's philosophy, was originally a medical term meaning heterotopic transplantation, an abnormal but realistic technique or phenomenon. Foucault never gave a clear definition of this term in his philosophy, but we can get a glimpse of it from his related theories. According to Foucault, Heterotopia is a concept as opposed to Utopia, which Foucault explained in his article "Different Spaces" (Yiming Luo, 2021, p.7), to the effect that "in the development of all cultures and civilizations, there are such real places: They are written into the social system itself by the discourse system, they are a kind of antipositional field, they are actually realized utopia. Instead of utopias, I call them heterotopias." And this heterotopia, which represents for the ideal of simplicity and nature is actually the same as the "American Dream." People fantasize about achieving a good life by relying on their ideals and experiences, this is a core message of American Dream, which is also a "heterotopia" to those who live in the east and thinking about fame and power all the time, like Holden's father and brother, and his environment live in, these people, influenced by the impetuous atmosphere of the East, only stay in the stage of material enjoyment and are not the real practitioners of the American Dream. However, Holden enjoys spiritual freedom in the "western" wheat fields, which is unimaginable to those in the prosperous cities in the east. In other words, Holden's rye field in the West is the heterotopia of the eastern people.

Near the end of Chapter 25, Holden decides to hitchhike to the "sunny and beautiful" West, pretending to be deaf and dumb and doing things like filling up his car with gas. He plans to earn money to build a cabin, next to the woods rather than in the woods, because he likes to have sunshine inside all the time. Holden took the West as the ideal shelter, and he believed that the bright sunshine and beautiful scenery in the west could probably reduce the long-accumulated dissatisfaction and bitterness in the heart. Compared with the crowded and noisy east, the West is sparsely populated, which eliminates a lot of boring and hypocritical human interaction. Peter Conn makes this point: Holden's idea of the hidden West is really a simplified Thoreauan fantasy. (Minhao Zeng, 2008, p.50)

This spatial heterogeneity had already been used in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* in the 1920s.(Yue Wu, 2023) Yue Wu and Jinsong Shen draws on the space theory of Henri Lefebvre, especially his spatial heterogeneity to explore the close relationship between space and class in *The Great Gatsby*. Henri Lefebvre's theory of space is a critical social theory that explores how space plays a role in social production and development, and how space can be used to maintain or challenge existing social structures and power relations. Lefebvre's theory emphasizes that space is not just a physical place, but a product of social relations and human practices, including daily life, work, leisure and other activities. According to Yue Wu and Jinsong Shen's (2023) research on Henri Lefebvre's theory of space, in *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald uses the social space of Long Island in New York City as a backdrop, juxtaposing three physical spaces: the East Egg, the West Egg, and the Valley of Ashes, to illustrate the lives and consumption patterns of different classes in America. There is no doubt that such political class competition brought about by space is an important manifestation of heterogeneity. Let's look back to the book *The Catcher in the Rye*. Salinger presented the concept of "the West" in the eyes of readers through the protagonist's mouth, in order to bury a dark line to testify that in American society, Spatial relations represent unequal social relations between different classes in a hierarchical society. The depiction of these spatial relations highlights the huge political and economic differences between the various classes of American society, thus illustrating the demise of the American Dream in the social structure of the conceptual and ideological difference between the East and the West. The rye field, as the concrete symbol of the American Dream, is undoubtedly the evidence of the author Salinger's evidence of the spatial heterogeneity of the West.

In summary, it is not difficult to find that Salinger intentionally or unintentionally created a so-called spatial heterogeneity, reinforcing a heterotopia mentioned above. Salinger used Holden's reference to the West as a plot, furthering confirmed that his ideological and emotional attitude towards rye field is actually a dream; It is this emotional progression produced by location that gives us a glimpse of Salinger's real idea of Holden -- that is, Holden actually hopes, or fantasises, to realize a "new" world of extreme innocence and extreme freedom, based on the existing American West, and further on this basis. According to Zeng Minhao (2008), both the west and the wheat fields represent a form of escapism in Holden's mind, a spiritual habitat that allows him to temporarily escape from the shackles of the adult world. Therefore, we can say that the rye field and the West are connected by an illusion of Holden's inner pursuit, which is nothing more than an almost childish idea to realize that everyone (in his eyes, every child playing on the edge of the cliff) lives an equal life, has the power and needs to control their own destiny, and is free from the intervention and threat of the cliff (that is, the government, the upper class, the society), and lives a purer life. This idea, we say, is right at the heart of the American Dream.

3. Social Aspect: The Rye Field and the 1950s America

The 1950s in America were marked by a period of significant economic growth and prosperity following the end of World War II. This era saw the rise of consumerism, with Americans enjoying unprecedented material wealth. The GI Bill, formally known as the Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944, was enacted in 1944. It allowed many veterans to pursue higher education and buy homes, leading to the growth of suburban neighborhoods. However, we may say this material prosperity often masked a deeper sense of spiritual emptiness and disillusionment. The social and economic situation of the United States in 1950s has been unprecedentedly prosperous, capitalism has prevailed, and people's material life has been improved, but their spirit has been gradually lacking.(Yimin Luo, 2021) We can explain this with the help of Yue Wu and Jinsong Shen's research on Gatsby's mansion and inner spirit in *The Great Gatsby*. "Grand banquets, magnificent villas, and the Rolls-Royce limousines used to

transport guests were all means used by the nouveau riche to highlight and enhance their status. Gatsby acquired mansions, imitating the Eden of the West of his dreams, wanting to build spaces that were his own and gave him a sense of belonging” “However, Gatsby’s house is only a fake landscape without content, without the history and depth presented on the surface, but an ineffective symbol that cannot fulfill its owner’s ideological purpose.”(Yue Wu , 2023, p. 2504)

With the end of the war and economic prosperity, American society experienced unprecedented material wealth and spiritual emptiness, just like Holden, who “sold a typewriter that originally cost ninety dollars for twenty dollars”(Salinger, 1951, p.30) and “bought a prostitute for ten dollars for one night.”(Salinger, 1951, p.49-p.53) People squandered money, pursuing material enjoyment and sensory stimulation, neglecting the needs and values of the heart. This is a strong conflict between inner ideals and social reality. On the one hand, Holden is full of longing for the rye field in his heart and does not utter a single dirty word to his sister who can understand his concept of the rye field. Zeng Minhao (2008) believes that the rye field is the habitat of Holden’s soul. For Holden, the second spiritual habitat is the poetic title of Salinger’s *Rye* that makes this point abundantly clear. It is, he argues, a dream scene for idealists and people whose ideals have not yet been fully gnawed by the real world, and its positive atmosphere is in stark contrast to the bleak gloom of a nightclub or bar in Holden’s life. Holden harbors a deep longing for the purity and innocence symbolized by the rye field. Just as the American critic C.A.Alexander said, *The catcher in the rye* (Holden) is the guardian of the innocent and the protector of the innocent and the unjust.(Minhao Zeng, 2008, p.49) This rye field represents an idealized world, untouched by the corruption and phoniness of adult life. His relationship with his sister, Phoebe, is a testament to this longing. He refrains from using any dirty words around her, preserving her innocence and protecting her from the harsh realities he despises. On the other hand, he is full of dirty words in daily life. Holden’s daily life is filled with profanity and cynicism. He frequently uses dirty words and expresses disdain for the people around him, whom he often labels as “phonies.” This stark contrast between his idealistic vision and his everyday behavior highlights the hypocrisy and confusion that define his character. This duality is not just a personal struggle for Holden but a reflection of the broader societal issues of the time. This kind of hypocrisy and confusion is exactly the psychological state that was common in American society at the time, and it is completely consistent with the dilemma of the “Beat Generation” at that time, who longed to realize their inner dreams (the American Dream) but were willing to be trapped in reality. The 1950s were a time of significant economic prosperity in America, but this material wealth often came at the cost of spiritual and emotional fulfillment. The Beat Generation, a group of writers and artists, emerged during this period, expressing their disillusionment with the mainstream American Dream. They sought to break free from societal norms and explore their inner dreams and desires, much like Holden. The Beat Generation’s works often depicted the same kind of hypocrisy and confusion that Holden experiences. They criticized the materialism and conformity of the time, highlighting the gap between the idealized American Dream and the reality of people’s lives. For instance, Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* (1957) and Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl* (1955) both explore themes of longing for freedom and authenticity while grappling with the constraints of society.

The above argument is based on the deformed characteristics of American society in the 1950s. The 1950s were marked by a strong emphasis on conformity and the pursuit of the American Dream, which often led to a sense of spiritual emptiness and disillusionment. This period saw the rise of McCarthyism and the Red Scare, where fear and suspicion permeated society. People were encouraged to conform to societal norms and avoid any behavior that could be perceived as un-American. This, we say, is “The Reality” in 1950s America.

This climate of fear and conformity created a sense of hypocrisy and confusion, as individuals struggled to reconcile their inner desires with the demands of society. Holden’s behavior

reflects this societal dilemma. He longs for a world of innocence and purity but is constantly confronted with the harsh realities of life. His use of dirty words and his cynical attitude are his ways of coping with this conflict.

And it can be argued that in the United States in the 1950s, there were many people like Holden who yearned for the new order of “rye fields” in their confusion, and the “Beat Generation” mentioned above is an outstanding representative of them. These men share Holden’s cynicism and desire to build a new order through their own power. Like Holden, the Beat Generation held a strong opposition to materialism and traditional values. Despite the Beat Generation’s pursuit of extreme personal freedom and spiritual exploration, their work often reveals disappointment and criticism of the American Dream. They believe that the American Dream is corrupted by materialism and hypocrisy, making it difficult to achieve true freedom and happiness. Holden represented the confusion and rebellion of American youth in the 1950s. Holden’s pursuit of the American Dream is more reflected in his desire for innocence and authenticity. Compared with the Beat Generation, his attitude toward the American Dream is more primitive and vague. He hated hypocrisy and materialism and yearned for a simple and sincere life. However, he eventually found himself unable to escape the hypocrisy and indifference of reality, and eventually fell into a spiritual dilemma. For the Beat Generation and Holden, the American dream in their hearts was never realized and will never be. The Beat Generation believed that true freedom and spiritual satisfaction were difficult to achieve in a society full of materialism and hypocrisy, and could only be accused of reality over and over again in their works. Holden also found in the constant struggle that he could not find a completely pure and real world, and eventually he could only become a “catcher in the rye”. Although their pursuit is sincere, it seems idealistic and difficult to realize in reality. This aspect reflects that they have the purest American Dream in their hearts, but it can never be realized due to the shackles of reality.

Therefore, it is not wrong to suggest that Holden’s “rye field” is the American Dream that was torn apart by the rules and hegemony of reality in the hearts of the dreamy middle class and young literary and artistic people who eager to awaken in the 1950s; anyone of them is Holden and could be Holden, and anyone of them has got a “rye field” , that is their American Dream shrouded in the shadow of the “cliff” which points to the reality.

4. Characteristic Aspect: Holden’s Rye Field and Those Dreamers’ American Dream

As the catcher in the rye, Holden’s responsibility is to protect the children who are about to step off the cliff, aspired to utilize his limited capabilities in order to rescue those who will fall off the cliff and get lost, but he was also aware of the insignificance of his own strength and efforts. We can get a glimpse of this in his words, behavior and expressions. Holden’s language is often informal, filled with slang and colloquialisms, sometimes dirty words which reflects his rebellious nature and his desire to distance himself from the adult world he finds phony. His frequent use of hyperbole and sarcasm also highlights his cynicism and disillusionment with society. Also, he desires connection but frequently isolates himself. His behavior is erratic, such as his impulsive decision to leave Pencey Prep and wander New York City. This reflects his inner turmoil and struggle to find his place in a world he feels disconnected from. Holden’s emotional state is complex. He is deeply affected by the death of his brother Allie, which manifests in his depression and sense of loss. His protectiveness towards his sister Phoebe and his fantasy of being the “catcher in the rye” symbolize his desire to preserve innocence and protect others from the harsh realities of life. Holden embodies the struggle between maintaining one’s ideals and confronting the often disappointing reality. His character resonates with those who feel disillusioned but still hold onto hope for a better world. This role symbolizes those who are

disappointed with reality but do not give up on the American Dream. They try to change the world in their own way, but in front of society, individual efforts are insufficient.

The ending of the book further emphasizes the contradiction and compromise between ideals and reality. Although Holden once dreamed of living in the rye field, he still cannot escape the constraints and oppression of reality. Because of this, Holden finally chose to return home. Holden's "return" can be explored from two perspectives:

First, he ended his wanderings and returned to his family. In *Catcher in the Rye*, Holden goes through a long wandering life, during which he constantly escapes from reality and tries to find an ideal "rye field". Eventually, however, he realized that this avoidance would not solve the problem. At the end of the novel, Holden returns to his family and receives the love and support of his parents. This return symbolizes his re-acceptance of his family and real life.

The second is his spiritual return, that is, he accepts the reality as it is. Holden's spiritual return is an important sign of his growth. In the novel, he once hoped to become a "catcher in the rye" to protect the children from the pollution of society. However, as the story progresses, Holden comes to realize that this idealism is unrealistic. He comes to terms with reality, giving up the fantasy of being "a catcher in the rye" in favor of a more ordinary and practical life. This spiritual return reflects his transformation from an idealist to a realist. This "return" symbolizes the common desire of ordinary Americans to escape this hypocritical and indifferent society and go to a country that is infinitely free and full to realize the "American Dream" in their hearts, but they cannot get rid of the constraints of reality; they long to find their true selves and the meaning of life, but they are lost in confusion and hesitation. And therefore it can be argued that it was a failed attempt at dreamism.

In fact, as early as 30 years ago, the signs of this failure first appeared. For instance, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* is a quintessential exploration of the American Dream and its disillusionment. The novel's protagonist, Jay Gatsby, is a self-made man who rises from poverty to immense wealth, driven by his love for Daisy Buchanan and his desire to recreate the past. Gatsby's mansion, lavish parties, and opulent lifestyle symbolize the material success that many associate with the American Dream.

However, Gatsby's dream is ultimately unattainable. Despite his wealth and efforts, he cannot win Daisy's love or change the past. His tragic end underscores the illusion and emptiness of the American Dream, revealing the moral decay and superficiality beneath the glittering surface of the Jazz Age.

Therefore, we can say that Holden Caulfield's rye field and Jay Gatsby's dream both serve as powerful metaphors for the American Dream and its complexities. They highlight the tension between innocence and experience, the disillusionment with reality, and the search for meaning in a world that often feels superficial and corrupt. Both works reflect the struggles of individuals trying to find their place in a society that often feels alienating and oppressive, ultimately revealing the compromises and failures inherent in the pursuit of the American Dream. Holden's growth experience from "rye field" to "cliff," from "catcher" to "ordinary person," is actually a kind of spiritual compromise, even failure; it symbolizes a common "trivial individual dreamism" of the American Dream in the 1950s—it symbolizes the compromise and failure of the American Dream. This "return" is not only the failure of Holden's personal dream, but also a failure of the post-war United States to build a spiritual home, and the powerlessness and final assimilation of individual dreamism in front of group alienation.

5. Conclusion: The Rye Field in Holden's Heart and the Doomed American Dream Destined to Be Shattered in the Hearts of Americans

Holden's yearning for the rye field, as depicted in J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, is a poignant metaphor for the broader societal aspirations of the post-war American era. The rye

field symbolizes an idyllic and unspoiled vision of the American Dream, a dream that many believed was within reach during the economic boom of the 1950s. However, this dream was often overshadowed by the harsh realities of class divisions and the relentless pursuit of material wealth.

The metaphor of the rye field extends beyond Holden's personal fantasies to represent the collective disillusionment of a generation. The post-war economic prosperity created a facade of success and happiness, but beneath this veneer lay a society grappling with moral decay and a loss of values. The "cliff" that looms over the children in Holden's imagination is a stark reminder of the fragility of this dream. It signifies the ever-present threat of societal collapse and the potential for the American Dream to crumble under the weight of its own contradictions. This cliff is a symbol of the precarious balance between aspiration and reality, a balance that many Americans of the time felt was slipping away.

Holden's role as the "catcher" in the rye is a poignant reflection of his—and by extension, his generation's—impotence in the face of these societal pressures. He longs to protect the innocence of childhood from the corrupting influences of adulthood, but he is ultimately unable to do so. His desire to be a "savior" is a testament to his deep-seated desire to preserve the purity of the American Dream, but it is also a recognition of his own limitations. He is caught in a paradox: he wants to save the rye field from the encroaching darkness, yet he is part of the very society that threatens it. This internal conflict mirrors the larger societal struggle of the time, as Americans grappled with the dissonance between their idealized vision of the nation and the harsh realities of a divided and materialistic society.

In conclusion, Holden's story is not just a coming-of-age narrative but a profound commentary on the American condition in the mid-20th century. His unfulfilled desire for the rye field and his inability to be its savior underscore the broader cultural disillusionment with the American Dream. The rye field, as a symbol of an unattainable utopia, serves as a critique of the societal values that prioritize wealth and status over genuine human connection and moral integrity. Just as Holden, born into a comfortable middle-class existence, is insulated from the true nature of labor and the struggles of the working class. His innocence and naivety are reflected in his romanticized view of the rye field, a place he has never seen but imagines as a sanctuary of purity and freedom; In the post-war 1950s, the United States was economically superior, indulgent, with increasingly severe class struggles, the worship of money was increasingly prevalent, and has a fantasy-like desire for the American Dream. But as long as there are constraints of reality, utopia will never be realized, just like the "cliff"—the sword of Damocles hanging over the children's heads; Holden can only be the "catcher" in the rye, and cannot be the "savior" of the rye. His unrealistic fantasy about the rye field—symbolizing the illusory, and untouchable American Dream in the hearts of Americans at that time.

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