A Comparative Analysis of the Protagonists in
*Catcher in the Rye* and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

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I. Introduction

Holden Caulfield is the protagonist of *Catcher in the Rye*, as Huckleberry Finn is a protagonist from the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Beyond the truth that they are protagonists, narrators, boys, there are more lying beyond. Holden is a boy from the middle of 20th Century; on the other hand, Huck dates back to the 19th century. With several decades lying between them, they are being regarded as “true blood-brothers.” Despite the fact that they both step onto a process of self-discovery and self-realization, I would like to draw comparisons between their morality and social perspective. The former allows us to understand what has caused their rebellious behavior, and whether their disobedience is consistent with dissent. The latter, however, discusses their view towards the outer world. Since both of them hold quite unique standards of what is right or wrong, it is essential to sketch up their ideals.

II. Thesis

1. Plot summary

1.1. Plot summary of *Catcher in the Rye*

*Catcher in the Rye* is a novel written by J.D. Salinger published in 1951. He had the background set in Agerstown, Pennsylvania and Manhattan, New York in 1950. The protagonist, Holden Caulfield, provides a first person narration for the story in a mental hospital. Holden is born into a family with high social standard: his father is a well-paid lawyer, and his older bother is a talented writer who now works in Hollywood. He also has a younger bother named Allie who died at the age of eleven and a younger sister named Phoebe. His family is one of the reasons that leads to his distinctive character.

The story starts off with Holden’s departure from Pencey Prep, which is the fourth school he has been expelled from. Holden boards a train back to New York. However, Holden does not wish to return to his family immediately and thus he checks in a hotel in the city. Holden encounters several events while meandering across the city and is drowned with loneliness and drunkenness. He later sneaks to his parent’s house and meets his sister. Also, he pays a visit to his previous English teacher, where Holden experiences physical discomfort. All of his experiences in New York City accumulates into a burden, and leads to Holden’s breakdown. Later, Holden leaves and wanders through the street. He makes an intention to move to the
West, and passes his decision to his sister. His sister decides to go with him, but Holden refuses to take her. The story ends with Holden watching her sister having a ride on a carousel.

1.2. Plot summary of Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is a novel written by Mark Twain published in 1884. The story happens about in the 1830s and the 1840s, a time before the American Civil War. Therefore, the book deals with the liberation of slavery. Huckleberry Finn (often shortened as Huck Finn) tells the story in first person. Huck is formally a boy regarded as a “poor lost lamb.”(11) After Tom and Huck came into a considerable amount of money in the previous story (Adventures of Tom Sawyer), Huck has been placed under guardianship of the Widow Douglas. Both Widow Douglas and her sister, Miss Watson, attempt to mold him into a civilized boy. Huck appreciates their efforts, but can not adapt to the new life style. However, things suddenly changed when Huck’s father, Pap, appears in town. Pap demands Huck to give him the money that Huck and Tom earned earlier in an adventure. Since Huck has already given the money to Judge Thatcher, Huck is able to prevent his father from getting the money. Later on, Pap forcibly gains custody of Huck and locks him away in a cabin in the woods. Huck escapes the cabin one day when Pap went to the town. Huck makes his father believe that he had already been killed by robbers, and then he departs by canoeing.

As Huck reaches Jackson’s Island, he encounters Jim. Jim is a black slave that used to work for Widow Douglas; however, he fled the house, when he overheard Widow Douglas and Miss Watson tempting to sell him. Huck and Jim lives comfortably until Huck discovers that men from town are trying to hunt down Jim. They depart immediately and start their journey to the South.

Further down the river, they encounter two people and join them on the raft. They claim themselves as the displaced aristocrats: the “King” and the “Duke.” Few days later, the four of them came into town. On the journey down the river, the king and the duke deceive villagers in order to earn money. However, villagers later uncover their conspiracy and the king and the duke made immediate escape. After several frauds, Huck regains conscience and decides to free Jim. Huck originally attempts to confront the farmer to have Jim back, however, he is mistaken as Tom Sawyer, who is coming for a visit. Huck hurries to meet Tom Sawyer who has just arrived in town and tells him the whole situation. They later figure out where Jim is hid and how to
save him. They are successful with their plan and return to St. Petersburg, Missouri.

2. The analysis of the protagonists’ personality

2.1 Morality

2.1.1 The display of sympathy and morality- Holden Caulfield

For Holden, one of the most endearing qualities is his empathy for other people, especially those whom others reject. In the beginning of the novel, Holden reluctantly pays a visit to his history teacher. He realizes "Old Spencer" will lecture him about not fulfilling his potential, and he doesn't like seeing old men in their pajamas with "their bumpy old chests (7)" and their legs "so white and unhairy. (7)" But he goes anyway out of respect for a teacher who cares about his subject and his students. Besides, Holden mentions that he wrote a note to Mr. Spencer to apologize for doing poorly in history, and doesn’t want him to feel sorry for flunking him.

Other people in Holden's life also benefit from his caring attitude. Everybody hates Ackley. Besides from snoring loudly, he has "sinus trouble, pimples, lousy teeth, halitosis, crumby fingernails. (39)" But, says Holden, "You had to feel a little sorry for the crazy sonuvabitch. (39)" Holden is the only one who does. Though Ackley irritates him, he never turns him away. He invites Ackley to go to a movie because he knows Ackley has no other friends.

Holden Caulfield emerges as a confused but moral person. He befriends the friendless. He respects those who are humble, loyal, and kind. He demonstrates a strong love for his family. He shows strong hatred towards hypocrisy. He values sex that comes from caring for another person and rejects its immorality. And, finally, he wants to be a responsible member of society, to guide and protect those younger than he. Some may seem simple; however, people don’t usually put their sympathy to physical action. In this case, it provides a contrast to Holden’s good nature.

2.1.2 A Conflict between morality and sympathy- Huck Finn

On the other hand, Huck is a boy who is continues to face the conflict of morality and sympathy. What leads to his conflicting morals are mostly an influence of Pap’s behavior, as Levy indicates,
A major conflict takes place in the process of saving Jim. Many times, Huck tries to reach the shore and tell people about Jim. However, he fails to accomplish the task due to his sympathy for Jim, because he had once been under the guardianship of Widow Douglas. While Jim was sold away, Huck confronts a dilemma: “It would get all around that Huck Finn helped a nigger to get his freedom; and if I was to ever see anybody from that town again, I’d be ready to get down and lick his boots for shame… a person does a low-down thing, and then he don’t want to take no consequences of it.” (207) After thinking the situation thoroughly, Huck regains his consciousness and is resolved to help Jim escape, and felt “as light as a feather” (208).

On another occasion, Huck is brought to an approving judgment of conscience. During the journey down the river, the King and the Duke conducted several frauds in order to earn money. Unable to tolerate their behavior of, Huck later told Tom that he had seen them “astraddle as a rail”(224), and that the they “didn’t look like nothing in the world that was human- just looked like a couple of monstrous big soldier-plumes.” (224) Here we admire Huck’s humaneness and hatred towards the cruelty of men to one another, both of which his conscience expresses.

Throughout the story, we can see that Huck’s morality and sympathy confronts each other. Both had a chance of winning and losing. Leo B. Levy points out that:

“Twain is particularly concerned with the enormous and crippling guilt that conscience can engender. His perception of the ways in which conscience becomes the tool of organized hypocrisy led him to the hope, expressed through Huck Finn, that moral decision independent of the workings of conscience is possible.” (390)

2.1.3 Comparison based on morality

Holden and Huck are both boys who are confused but caring. However, they fall into different categories. Holden is the one who has his viewing standards and evaluate a person or event from his own principle. On the other hand, Huck is the one who seeks much more adventure but also learns from the process. When encountering an event, Huck may not take immediate action to decide what is right or wrong. Instead,
he is more of an objective person. Huck usually regains conscience as the situation worsens.

2.2 Perspectives of the society

2.2.1 A world full of phonies- Holden Caulfield

How does Holden illustrate the word "phony"? From his perspective, it can be concluded that those who tend to be dishonest, disloyal, hypocritical, and flaunting can be categorized as "phony." In the beginning, Holden mentions the advertisement of Pencey Prep: “we have been molding boys into splendid, clear-thinking young men.”(2) Instead, he believes that Pencey Prep is nothing more than an ordinary school. In another scene, he speaks of a pianist named Ernie: "he's so good that he's almost corny" and "he sounds like the kind of guy that won't talk to you unless you're a big shot"(80) Holden agrees that Ernie is adept at playing the piano; however, he extremely dislikes his flaunting attitude. In addition, one of the reason why Holden left Elkton Hills, is because of the hypocrisy of his headmaster, Mr. Haas: "'old Haas went around shaking hands with everybody's parents" except for those who had "old funny-looking parents."(14) He is not in favor of the act and shows compassion towards those who have been neglected.

As Holden points out the flaws of the society and adulthood, he hopes to defend the children’s world from being deprived of their innocence and kindness:

"Anyway, I keep picturing all these little kids playing some game in this big field of rye and all. Thousands of little kids, and nobody's around--nobody big, I mean- except me. And I'm standing on the edge of some crazy cliff. What I have to do, I have to catch everybody if they start to go over the cliff."(173)

Holden observes the world from a different value which he finds it difficult to agree with the modern world. The Promised Land that is filled with splendors is only a disappointment for Holden. While he is not ready to compromise with the reality, he chooses to reject it. Holden believes in his own world where there is purity, simplicity, sincerity and justice. And he desires to be the “catcher in the rye”, in order to protect the beauty of his world.

2.2.2 A society filled with shortcomings- Huck Finn
Likewise, Huck is also trapped in a society that fails to meet his desire. He uses the term “I can’t stand it”, which in Holden’s terminology is “It depresses me” and “It kills me.” The shortcomings in his life include that of religion, slavery, and concrete rules.

Throughout the book, we can see that Huck mocks religion continually. At the beginning, Widow Douglas tries to teach Huck about Moses and the Bulrushers. At first, Huck felt nervous to know that such divine exists, and is afraid that he will be punished for his sins. However, Widow Douglas “let it out that Moses had been dead a considerable long time” (12), therefore, Huck “didn’t care no more about him” (12) because he “don’t take no stock in dead people.”(12) Besides, Huck also indicates that Hell seems to be more fun than Heaven.

Slavery is something that has been debated since the publishing of the book. As Mark Twain himself was anti-slavery, he expressed his views through Huck Finn. In the story, Jim is portrayed as the human side of slaves, and hopes to win our sympathy. Although the idea of anti-slavery is clearly stated in the book, the values of the South, which is keeping the slaves, still put Huck in a dilemma upon saving Jim.

The rules of the society are another thing that Huck cannot abide with. Whenever Miss Watson teaches him rules, he would get fidgety. In the end of the book, Aunt Sally adopts Huck after the incident, and Huck makes a comment upon being “sivilized”: “I can’t stand it. I [have] been there before.” (281)

As Huck escapes from Pap and floats down the river toward Jackson’s Island, he has had a release from the restrictions of society. He is never truly free from those shortcomings, but only a person who is temporarily away from the reality. However, his behavior does not detract him from his genuineness. In fact, by viewing Huck’s intermittent connection with the society, we can easily see his practicality and morality.

2.2.3 Comparison based on the perspective of the society

Holden and Huck are definitely not idealists; instead, they have their own creeds they hold on to. The former emphasizes especially on the ill-natured adulthood, and hopes to shepherd the young. From the colored pianist, to his dream as the “the catcher in the rye”, Holden expresses his dismay towards the phony world and hopes to protect children from it. On the other hand, Huck is a “youthful liberator of a grown man.”
(Branch, 150) The society without satisfying needs brings Huck to a dilemma between freedom and civilization. In fact, Holden is some way an “urbanized” Huck, and they both discover the darkness of the society.

III. Conclusion

Concluding the moral behavior and perspective of society above, there is no doubt that Holden is a good-natured person. However, why is it that Holden cannot be accepted in the society? It seems that his “religious concerns and questions about love and marriage also present difficult ethical and moral issues and serve further to alienate him from those he considers to be phony.” (Lott and Latham, 21) Therefore, he tries to pursue his ideal world, but it somehow remains fruitless, because “Holden is never allowed to imagine or experience himself in any significant struggle with others . . . neither he (nor his creator) can conceive of society as a source of growth, or self-knowledge.” (Rowe, 90)

What about the adventurous Huck Finn? Rubenstein said about the substance of the novel: “The clarity and directness of insight, the humorous but sharp exposure of human failings on the one hand and the warm faith in human goodness and equality on the other.” (74) Some of these qualities are what Huck posses and expresses throughout the story. Furthermore, humanity is also one of the reasons that Huck can be regarded as a good person. Since Huck would rather go to hell than sell Jim out, it is obvious that humanness has prevailed over the established rules.

At first glance, Holden and Huck may seem to be compulsively rebellious, a fact that connected with their often-noted failures of self-esteem, exaggerated loneliness, and acute depression. After an insight into the story and their personality, we discover that they are pure minds that deny collusion, and have their own “Utopia”. Also, they refuse fall into the reserved place that the society has given them, and refuses to become merely a cog wheel of the world. In fact they are free-thinking boys who have a sense of justice, kindness, and moral.

Overcrossing the barrier of time, and the geographical difference of the New York City and the Mississippi, Twain and Salinger created two identical adolescents. Both adolescents give us an insight of American society and verbalize their sympathy and love to those who are demeaned. They have not only become the odysseys of youth (Kaplan, 76), but also gained mortality in literature.
IV. References


Gilbert M. Rubenstein (1956). The moral structure of Huckleberry Finn. *College English, 18*(2), 72–76
