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## **‘One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest’ and ‘The Catcher in the Rye’: Comparing Depiction of Alienation and Isolation in Novels**

The themes of alienation and isolation in ‘The Catcher in the Rye’ and ‘One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest’ are highly prominent, as the authors seek to portray the journey of an individual (or indeed group) that exists outside of mainstream society. In both novels we see the story told through the persona of an alienated first person narrator, a viewpoint that profoundly affects our comprehension and interpretation of the stories told, whether it be Bromden’s hallucinatory description of “the fog” and its effects or Holden’s quasi-reliable description of the events that lead to his being in a mental asylum. It is important to illustrate the subtle difference between alienation and isolation: Although the two terms are closely linked and often seen to be synonymous, I understand ‘alienation’ to be a more passive term; an alienated character has been alienated by the society around them. I understand isolation, however, to be a conscious – or at least intentional on some level – move by a character to exist outside of society. Society alienates a character, whereas a character isolates himself – naturally, there is some overlap between the two. Both of these phenomena are presented in, and are key to understanding ‘One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest’ and ‘The Catcher in the Rye’.

There is no doubt that the narrators of both novels assert their individuality, and in doing so isolate themselves, through their idiosyncratic use of language and lack of adherence to narrative conventions. From the moment that we meet Holden, we see him using the slang (“lousy”, “all that kind of crap”) and standoffish direct address (“don’t even mention them to me”) that characterise his narration throughout the novel. Similarly, the opening line of the narrative of Bromden in ‘One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest’ is “they’re out there” - a completely subjective and paranoid statement that instantly creates distance between him and the reader due to its seeming implausibility. Kesey also punctuates Bromden’s narrative with long and bizarre hallucinations, of manipulative machinery and robotics for example, which too initially create distance between himself and the reader. However, as the novels progress, we grow to accept the strange and somewhat difficult narrative, and it becomes personable and likeable. The language and narrative styles of the novel serve to force the reader to go through a journey regarding their proximity to the narrator: at first, we are alienated by their unconventionality, but as the novels develop we find ourselves very much on the side of the narrator. In my opinion, this journey of the alienation of the reader is of just as much importance as the alienation of the characters themselves.

For Holden, isolation is a means of self-protection. In his interactions with other people –

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especially girls, such as Sally and Faith – he seems ill-at-ease and confused as to what he should say, trying forcibly to sound “suave as hell” and adult in place of actually making any connection with anyone he talks to. He isolates himself, therefore, both intentionally (his journey around New York City) and unintentionally (through his odd behaviour in an attempt to be adult) as a way of avoiding having to face the clear confusion and inner conflict that he possesses. This illustrates the irony of Holden’s character and actions; he isolates himself as a result of an unfulfilled desire to fit in with the society around him. His famous red hunting hat, for example, is a clear and intentional physical symbol of difference. His assertion – however jocular – that it is a “people-shooting hat” is suggestive of his explicit desire to stand out by wearing it, but his numerous mentions of Allie and Phoebe’s red hair suggest that he wears it simply as a subconscious attempt to fit in to his family. At the same time, Holden seems both proud and self-conscious of the hat (often not wearing it when meeting friends, or taking it off when it is commented on), a clear symbol of this conflict between isolation and fitting in.

In many respects, Bromden (and indeed many of the minor characters such as Harding in ‘One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest’) uses isolation as a means of self-protection, much in the way that Holden does. Bromden’s pretence that he is deaf and dumb could, in some respects, be compared with Holden’s pretence of adulthood and maturity – both are used because the perpetrator believes that it is the only way to get by and fit in with a society that they do not fully understand. However, whilst Holden seems unaware of his use of isolation as a means of protection, Bromden does so intentionally. He believes that he is “cagey enough to fool” everyone else in the ward – and in doing so, makes himself less of a target than the other patients. Indeed, he only lets this guard down much later on for McMurphy, once he is certain of his trustworthiness. In this respect, Bromden’s self-imposed isolation is an effective tool – he avoids the vicious and destructive sessions of group therapy, through which “the Big Nurse” is able to maintain a stranglehold over the ward through psychological manipulation. However, this isolation alone is not enough for Bromden to regain his confidence and sanity – it requires a character like McMurphy to catalyse this process. The fog is the ideal symbol of Bromden’s isolation – it appears at emotional points in the story, and creates a veil – symbolic for the reader, but physical for Bromden – behind which he “feels safe”. Although he knows that the fog – his isolation – is wrong, “as bad as it is”, slipping back into it allows him to distance himself from the situation. Kesey therefore seems to suggest that although isolation is an effective shield, simply withdrawing from society is not enough in itself to bring about change. The active struggle, although often sisyphian, is portrayed as more heroic and effective than simple passive withdrawal; Bromden’s struggle against “the combine” is only really escaped by his breaking out of the institution, and McMurphy’s struggle, although not bringing him freedom, is enough to mentally liberate the other ‘inmates’ of the ward, from both mental imprisonment, and in Bromden’s case physical imprisonment too.

Loss of identity is prominent in both novels, both as cause and effect of isolation and alienation,

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and both Bromden and Holden have a perception of identity that shifts greatly during the course of their respective stories. Kesey manifests Bromden's changing identity, like much of his mental state, through physical symbolism in "One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest". As a result of societal alienation in the form of the government's destruction of his heritage and his subsequent institutionalisation, Bromden feels that he physically shrinks – despite being "six foot eight", he sees McMurphy to be "twice the size" of him. As he is pushed out from the society he knows, he loses all sense of power and confidence, and sees his depression manifest itself physically. As with his 'deafness', it is only when he regains acceptance into society – albeit the counter-culture society embodied by McMurphy – that he returns to his normal size. We also see a reflection of this in the narrative itself, namely in that although Bromden is the narrator, he does not tell his own story, rather centring on McMurphy's story, and including his own as almost subsidiary. The fact that Bromden is almost a passive eyewitness to his own life, focusing instead on McMurphy's, illustrates the powerlessness and loss of identity that he feels as a result of alienation.

Holden too suffers from loss of identity, or at least uncertainty. However, contrary to Bromden, for whom loss of identity is result of alienation, for Holden we see changing identity to be a root cause of his isolation. Much like Bromden, there is a duality in Holden's identity. However, unlike Bromden, who clearly develops from one identity into the other (powerless to powerful), both sides of Holden's identity seem to be ever-present, and in direct juxtaposition with one another. For Holden, this duality is between adult and child identity.

It is this conflict in identity that is the foundation of the novel, and one of the reasons that it is considered the archetypal Bildungsroman in English literature. It is even alluded to in the title of the book – Holden misinterprets the lyrics of a folk song about a sexual affair to be "can a body, catch a body, comin' through the rye" – an idea which then reoccurs as what Holden wants to be when he is older, a 'catcher in the rye' – someone who catches children before they fall off a cliff. The cliff can be seen to represent adulthood, and that Holden wants to ensure that children (himself included, perhaps) can remain young and innocent, without falling off the "cliff" of adulthood and responsibility. The fact that Holden derived this naive and innocent image from a song about sex is indicative of the duality in his identity – simultaneously, Holden wants to be immersed in the adult world, as represented by his constant emphasis on smoking and drinking, and desire to act 'adult'. However, at the same time, he is clearly unsure and afraid of the adult world, as seen by his paying a prostitute to just talk, as he did not feel comfortable with the idea of sex. It is, incidentally, interesting that both novels feature prostitutes as relatively important characters – Candy in 'One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest' and Sunny in 'Catcher in the Rye'. As perhaps the most alienated and isolated group of people in society, the fact that the prostitutes in the novels are portrayed as the norm in comparison to the isolated characters illustrates the extent to which they (the members of the ward and Holden respectively) are socially estranged.

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This conflict between adult and child, and its resultant confusion, is present in almost all of Holden's actions throughout the novel. His great interest in the museum, for example, could be seen to represent his desire to understand and compartmentalise the complexity of the world, as in a museum. It is ultimately this duality that leads both to Holden's alienation and his isolation – he is alienated by both the adult world that he is too immature to take part in, and the childish innocent world that he is seen as too old for. As a result, we see him isolate himself not only from his family but also from himself, by becoming a parody of an adult, going through the motions of adulthood so as to avoid having to confront the complex duality that exists within his character. In many ways, this is the absolute antithesis to Bromden; the psychological problems that cause Bromden to isolate himself are manifested physically – in his changing size and perception of “the fog” and “the combine”. Conversely, Holden internalises his problems to the extent that he seems almost oblivious to them, only beginning to express them by childishly accusing everything and everyone but himself as “phony” – when ironically, it is Holden's persona that seems to us the most fake.

The hugely different backgrounds of the two isolated characters – Holden and Bromden respectively – should be taken into account when comparing them. I believe that the backgrounds of both characters, although hugely different, are relevant in examining their alienation and isolation: Holden's wealthy upper-middle class white background makes him seem like the perfect all-American aspirational figure, making his isolation and views on society all the more ironic. Holden has no obvious motive to feel distaste for American society or those within it – he is very much a part of the society that he sees as “phony”. His isolation is all the more striking considering his everyman status – he is not the ‘typical’ outsider by any means. In contradistinction, Bromden is a Native American, a fact which, although not seen as hugely important, I believe to be crucial to the portrayal of alienation and isolation in the novel. As a subjugated people, effectively driven out from their land and culture – a fact seen in the novel – Native Americans are an excellent symbol of the alienating effects of society. Furthermore, the connection of Native Americans to nature (a fact that is again seen in Bromden's recollections of his youth) makes the alienation of the ward even more poignant as Bromden is alienated from his natural roots by the cold and artificial world of “the combine”, with its disturbing mechanical parts. The metaphor of a “combine” – a combine harvester machine – is a brilliant image of this; a combine being a mechanised device that cuts down and harvests the land's products – representative both of the loss of the Native American people and the alienation of Bromden by an emotionless society.

In conclusion, I believe that isolated and alienated characters are effectively used as a statement against mainstream society in ‘One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest’ and ‘Catcher in the Rye’, as we see the alienating effects of society and the attempts of the protagonists to (unsuccessfully, in my opinion) counter them through isolation. Indeed, the link between the two concepts is often blurred, and we often see one causing the other – as Bromden says, “it

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wasn't me that started acting deaf; it was people that first started acting like I was too dumb to hear". However, it is Bromden's journey of freedom from the alienating world of the ward that is more optimistic than Holden's downward spiral of isolation and resultant alienation. This is not to say that the two books convey a greatly different message regarding the isolated individual; in both novels we see isolation as an ineffective tool against the inequalities and "phoniness" of society – it is through fighting the system of alienation that freedom is achieved by Bromden. The two books are, in my opinion, simply mirrors of each other – Bromden begins as a powerless mental patient, and is liberated through rebellion, whereas Holden begins by rebelling and, we discover at the end, is eventually institutionalised. Although Kesey and Salinger therefore would seem to disagree in their presentation of alienation and isolation on many fronts, they are, in my opinion, two sides of the same coin.

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