



“Rye”, A Utopia, Dystopia, or Heterotopia? - A Comparative Analysis of *Catcher in the Rye* and *Teacher Man*

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ABSTRACT

The post-war American society has been extensively explored in numerous American literary works, among which J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* and Frank McCourt's *Teacher Man* are of significance due to their exposure to the “Lost Generation”. Although *The Catcher in the Rye* is written from the perspective of an alienated student while *Teacher Man* is from the perspective of a teacher, there are many similarities between the two novels. For example, Holden wishes to be the Catcher in the “rye”, while the protagonist of *Teacher Man* is the catcher in the “classroom”, who guards the innocence of children. The symbolic space, represented by “rye” in Holden's heart and “classroom” in McCourt's life, needs to be analyzed. This paper aims to explore the special space symbolized by the “rye” in *The Catcher in the Rye* and the “classroom” in *Teacher Man*, trying to find out what the space actually represents. Is it a utopia, dystopia, or heterotopia?

KEYWORDS: *Catcher in The Rye*, *Teacher Man*, utopia, dystopia, heterotopia

INTRODUCTION

The Catcher in the Rye, a novel by J. D. Salinger, is regarded as one of the most important classics in the history of American literature after World War II (Steinle, 2009). Psychological analysis has received a great deal of attention, but this has essentially been confined to the growth of rebellious and troubled teenagers, classifying *The Catcher in the Rye* as Holden's personal growth novel. As Bryan stated that “One implication of the novel's main motif, that which polarizes child like and adult responses, concerns the dilemma of impossible alternatives” (1974), he held the view that Holden experiences sufferings because he stands in a gap between childhood and adulthood, so he needs to grow. Martori also pointed out that “The idea of growing up appears to boost the emotional stress caused by trauma leading to a feeling of great fear towards the future” (2018). Few of them analyze the special space in Holden's heart, the “rye”.

Although scholars such as Ohmann have mentioned the secret world, “..... Holden uses different, cold, rude, and vulgar words in public society, while in his own secret world he uses elegant words...” (1976), they seldom analyze it in the round. Coincidentally, in *Teacher Man*, there is also such a place, the classroom. *Teacher Man* is Frank McCourt's famous book which narrates his own teaching experience. Though it is written from the perspective of a teacher, it can be seen as a response to *The Catcher in the Rye*. Holden wishes to be the Catcher in the rye, while the protagonist of *Teacher Man* is

the catcher in the “rye”, or the “classroom”, who guards the innocence of children. The symbolic space, represented by “rye” in Holden's heart and “classroom” in McCourt's life, needs to be analyzed. This paper aims to explore the special space symbolized by the “rye” in *The Catcher in the Rye* and the “classroom” in *Teacher Man*, trying to find that it is a utopia, dystopia, or heterotopia.

Utopia: Purity and Simplicity

The concept of Utopia originated from the famous work *Utopia* by Thomas Moore, which is intended to build an ideal harmonious society. In fact, the story of the Garden of Eden in *Genesis* and *The Republic* of Plato are original literary works related to Utopia. With time going by, utopian literature evolved into dystopian literature. Dystopia has reached its peak in the literary works of Jonathan Swift, Aldous Huxley and George Orwell, especially Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, Huxley's *Brave New World* and Orwell's *1984*. And another related concept “Heterotopia” was put forward by a French philosopher, Michel Foucault. Foucault believes that “heterotopia” is a concept relative to “Utopia”. He once said in his article *Different Spaces*: “in the process of 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 anti-position fields; they are actually realized utopias. But different from utopia, I call them ‘heterotopia’” (Faubion, 1984). The “Rye” is a classic field in *The Catcher in the Rye*. It first appears when the protagonist



Holden answers his sister’s question “What do you really want?” (Salinger, 2001,198) Facing the hypocritical society, Salinger takes the “Rye” as the imaginary space of the deviant teenager Holden. It is the same to the protagonist of *Teacher Man* under Frank McCourt’s pen, the “classroom” is also his spiritual sustenance. What does the space actually represent, a utopia, dystopia, or heterotopia?

In Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*, although most parts of the novel are describing the sheer frustration of a society that had been irrevocably altered in the wake of war, there are some parts describing the goodness and kindness of the world. In Holden’s mind, the only criterion to test social value is sincerity. He believes that only children and adults with childlike innocence can be honest: The sincere thanks of the little girl who got Holden’s help to tie the ice shoelaces once excited him a lot; the conversation with two pure and simple nuns without any prejudice gave him great comfort; the expression of dedication on an unknown drummer’s face in a nightclub helped him to reach a detached and “perfect state” (Salinger, 2001,13).....All the innocence and sincerity are in a utopian world of Holden’s heart. And in the utopia, the most representative characters are his red-hair brother Allie and his sister Phoebe, especially Allie, the younger brother who was deprived of his young life by illness. As Holden recalls, “He was also the nicest, in lots of ways. He never got mad at anybody” (Salinger, 2001,68). Until now, he still treasures Allie’s softball glove as a symbol of innocence, purity and simplicity. And the death of his brother Allie symbolizes that this ideal world is a utopia.

There is also an ideal world in McCourt’s *Teacher Man*. The protagonist of the book is a teacher who tries to protect the innocence of children although those children are called “Lost Generation”. He tells his own stories to attract their attention, inspires his students to write some excuses, and encourages Kevin to do things about his own interest. He once said that “If nobody cares, I will do anything in class” (Mccourt, 2005,66). The classroom is a utopia in which he can do anything. It’s a secret world for him to escape the rules of the school, the comments of the headmaster, and the complaints of the parents in his class. But actually, it’s inevitable for Holden and McCourt to face the real world, which is full of phonies and fakeness, so “utopia” is not a representative word to describe the “rye” or “classroom” completely.

Dystopia: Phonies and fakeness

“Phoniness” is one of Holden’s favorite concepts. It is a phrase Holden often uses for describing superficiality, hypocrisy, pretension, and shallowness. The world after WWII seems calm and peaceful under the economic boom, but it’s full of hypocrisy, falsehood and uneasiness. It is like a dystopia which is contrary to utopia. Holden does not want to accept the “bright future” designed for him by his middle-class family. He hates hypocrisy and holds the view that hypocrisy has swallowed everything around him and feels that he is

surrounded by “phoniness”(Pinsker, S&Pinsker, A, 1999). They, those hypocritical adults, forget honor at the sight of money and benefit themselves at the expense of others. Holden’s father is one of the representatives of the adult world. He is a lawyer who only focuses on making money and ignores professional ethics; So as Holden’s brother, who seals his creative talents cheaply to cater to the low tastes of Hollywood; Even the headmaster of the School, Pencey Preparatory, does his best to flatter the rich parents, but despises the poorly dressed ones (Salinger, 2001). Throughout the novel, Holden seems to be excluded from and victimized by the world around him. It is the same in Frank McCourt’s *Teacher Man*. When the protagonist is a new teacher, he was “kindly” advised by those skilled teachers that “Do not tell students anything private about yourself” (Mccourt, 2005, 60) and “Watch your step, teacher. Don’t make yourself a problem” (Mccourt, 2005, 61). They put themselves in complete opposition to their students. They teach for the sake of indicators, not really for the good of students. In the school McKee, teachers give students higher marks only because the number of failed students should be smaller.

“Every June during my eight years at McKee, the English department met in a classroom to read, evaluate, grade the New York State English Regents examination. Barely half the students at McKee passed the examination. The other half had to be helped. We tried to inflate the failure grades from high fifties to passing, the mandated sixty-five. We could do nothing about multiple-choice questions, the answers were right or wrong, but we helped with essays on literature and general topics.” (Mccourt, 2005, 89)

In this institute, the school, and teachers don’t protect the innocence of students, but yield to fame and power. It seems that the world is a dystopia full of phonies and fakeness. However, the hypocrisy world doesn’t erode the innocence and purity in Holden and McCourt’s hearts, so “dystopia” is not a representative word to describe the “rye” or “classroom” completely, neither.

Heterotopia: A dilemma Between Utopia and Dystopia

In the two novels, neither “utopia” nor “dystopia” is the most appropriate theory to describe the symbolized field. Actually, there is another space, heterotopia. In *The Catcher in the Rye*, the “Rye” is not only an important image, but also an important space. It is Holden’s imaginary place for children, the innocent children’s world represented by his sister Phoebe, and the purity represented by nuns, symbolizing the quiet cabin in the forest he yearns for, which is both Holden’s imaginary space and real space. Therefore, “the Rye” is also a “heterotopia” in the regular space. It is not only a space in Holden’s imagination, but also a space in which goodness and purity as well as tranquility and simplicity in reality exist. It is precisely because Holden stands in the

"Rye", a "heterotopia", that he can see all kinds of phonies and fakeness in his regular space in a clear state.

According to the six principles of "heterotopia" put forward by Foucault in his *Of Other Space*, it can be seen that Salinger's setting of the "Rye" as a "heterotopia" in *The Catcher in the Rye* is indeed ingenious. Firstly, as a "heterotopia", the "Rye" can form a horizontal comparison between itself and the conventional space in which Holden lives, so as to analyze and criticize the hypocrisy and phonies in the conventional space. Secondly, the "Rye" can also be compared with the space in different periods. The "Rye" is Holden's memory of his innocent childhood, and at the same time, a sharp contrast between the once positive generation of the United States and the "Beat Generation" in the 1950s-1960s. The purity of children, the kindness of nuns and the tranquility of nature jointly draw the "Rye" as a place of yearning in Holden's heart. It appeals to the third principle of "heterotopia" in Foucault's *Of Other Space*:

"The heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible. Thus it is that the theater brings onto the rectangle of the stage, one after the other, a whole series of places that are foreign to one another" In addition, the "Rye" can also stack those various unrelated places together, so that they can cross the gap between time and space and be expressed intensively in this "heterotopia". (Foucault, 1984, 2)

And the same is reflected in the novel *Teacher Man*. In the classroom, the teacher always tells stories about his past to the students. "I'm teaching. Storytelling is teaching" (McCourt, 28). And the space several decades ago is connected to the current space through storytelling.

And Foucault points out the fifth principle of "heterotopia" in his article: "Heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable. In general, the heterotopic site is not freely accessible like a public place" (Foucault, 1984). It is reflected in both novels. In *Catcher in the Rye*, such a "heterotopia" is both open and closed, which is full of infinite temptation to Holden, but Holden can not really enter this "heterotopia" because he can not meet the required conditions. Although Holden is kind-hearted, he is involuntarily influenced by the conventional space. For example, although he hates those dirty, sexual and immoral peers around him, his own behavior is always the same as theirs. He also pretends, lies, and makes irrational and contradictory assumptions (Sasani & Javidnejat, 2015). Therefore, he can not really enter the "Rye" and play freely like a child, but he does not want to fall into the conventional space under the "cliff", so he can only be a "catcher" in the "Rye". In *Teacher Man*, the protagonist has a strong desire to protect children's innocence and to be the "catcher in the rye", but he can not enter his ideal classroom easily, either. He tells his own stories to students to heal himself, giving up teaching them cultural knowledge,

and abandoning them in those stories. Because he has his own trauma, so he can not protect his students from their own trauma. And he can not enter his ideal classroom as a soul keeper of those students.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, among the three spaces, utopia, dystopia and heterotopia, "heterotopia" is the best to demonstrate the "rye" and "classroom" in the two novels. The existence of "heterotopia" is not only the mapping of conventional space, but also the inversion and protest of conventional space. It can observe the operation of power in conventional space from the perspective of "absence". Helen Weinberg believes that Holden not only lives in public space, but also hides a secret space in his inner world. Therefore, "Holden uses different indifferent, rude and usually false vulgar language in public, while he uses elegant language in his own secret world" (Weinberg, 1966). In *The Catcher in the Rye*, Salinger creates a kind of space represented by the "Rye", which symbolizes the pure, kind, natural and real space in Holden's heart, which is in line with Foucault's "heterotopia" theory. Holden, a middle-class boy born in a rich family, enjoys higher education and shuttles between the prosperous cities, but puts forward a field playing space such as "Rye", which is indeed a "heterotopia" existence for Holden's conventional space. The teacher in *Teacher Man* teaches not only in a concrete classroom, but also in a spiritual classroom. He obeys the rules of the institution in the regular world, but tries his best to protect children's innocence in his secret world. He permits Kevin Dunne, a student who was refused by other teachers, to stay in his class, making him the classroom manager in charge of everything, and allowing him to clean the jars which the boy likes crazily (McCourt, 2005, 169). Although the boy is missed in Vietnam, the teacher can not change the cruel world and rebels against the hypocritical world obviously, he led the boy into an innocent world once. Holden and the teacher not only belong to the utopian or dystopian world, but they are also in a dilemma, on a cliff, in a "heterotopia".

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