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A CRIMINAL READING OF *THE CATCHER IN THE RYE*: MARK DAVID CHAPMAN'S CASE*

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Abstract

J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) still holds the status of being a phenomenal novel especially in terms of readers' reactions. The central character Holden Caulfield appealed to troubled feelings of many readers as he is known for his condemnation of insincere behaviors and attitudes as phoniness. This attitude later became a shared emotion for some ardent readers. Among the fans of Holden Caulfield was Mark David Chapman, the man who shot John Lennon of Beatles dead, on 8 December 1980. Minutes after the murder, he was found in the crime scene reading *The Catcher in the Rye*. Chapman later claimed that he killed Lennon because he was influenced by the novel and started identifying himself with Holden Caulfield, who is one of the best examples of an anti-hero. There is a paradox here because even though Chapman identifies with an anti-hero, he thinks he is doing something heroic by killing John Lennon. This article aims to focus on this discrepancy and explore the complex relationship between Chapman's interpretation of *The Catcher in the Rye*, his psychological state, and the tragic consequences of his actions.

Keywords: *The Catcher in the Rye*, J. D. Salinger, Holden Caulfield, Mark David Chapman, John Lennon.

Çavdar Tarlasında Çocuklar Romanının Kriminal Bir Okuması: Mark David

Chapman Vakası

Özet

J. D. Salinger'in *Çavdar Tarlasında Çocuklar* (1951) başlıklı romanı özellikle okuyucu tepkileri açısından hâlâ sıra dışı olma özelliğini korumaktadır. Romanın anlatıcısı ve baş kişisi Holden Caulfield, samimiyezsiz davranış ve tutumları sahtekarlık olarak kınamasıyla

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tanındığı için birçok okuyucunun benzer duygularına hitap etmiştir. Bu tutum daha sonra bazı fanatik okuyucular arasında ortak bir duygu haline gelmiştir. Holden Caulfield'in hayranları arasında, 8 Aralık 1980'de Beatles grubunun solisti John Lennon'u vurarak öldüren Mark David Chapman da vardı. Cinayetten dakikalar sonra, olay yerinde *Çavdar Tarlasında Çocuklar* romanını okurken bulundu. Chapman, daha sonra Lennon'u romandan etkilendiği için öldürdüğünü iddia etti ve kendisini en bilinen anti-kahraman örneklerinden biri olan Holden Caulfield ile özdeşleştirmeye başladı. Burada bir çelişki bulunmaktadır çünkü Chapman kendini bir anti-kahramanla özdeşleştirse de John Lennon'u öldürerek kendince kahramanca bir şey yaptığını düşünmektedir. Bu makale, bu çelişkiye odaklanarak Chapman'ın *Çavdar Tarlasında Çocuklar* romanını yorumlayışı, psikolojik durumu ve eylemlerinin trajik sonuçları arasındaki karmaşık ilişkiyi incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Çavdar Tarlasında Çocuklar*, J. D. Salinger, Holden Caulfield, Mark David Chapman, John Lennon.

Introduction

Holden Caulfield, the narrator of J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), has been idolized by many readers who identify with his alienation and anger. Salinger's only novel was an instant success at the time of its publication and has never lost the status of being a phenomenal novel. Set in 1950s America, the novel relates the story of Holden Caulfield exclusively from his voice and perspective. He narrates his story retrospectively following his expulsion from a prestigious high school. While seemingly the story of a sixteen-year-old loner relating the events leading to his dismissal from school, *The Catcher in the Rye* has influenced readers then and now, primarily through Holden Caulfield's honest portrayal of adolescent angst and disillusionment. Especially his recurring critique of phoniness, the insincerity he perceived in the adult world, became a defining characteristic for many readers. This uneasiness deeply resonates with those readers experiencing similar phases of alienation and a yearning for genuine connection with the world.

Chapman, the man who ended the life of English singer and songwriter John Lennon (1940-1980) on December 8, 1980, was one of those impressed readers. Minutes after the murder, Chapman was apprehended at the scene of the crime, where he was found calmly reading *The Catcher in the Rye*. Later, he claimed that his actions were influenced by the novel as he had begun to identify himself with

Holden Caulfield, the quintessential literary anti-hero. The fictional Holden Caulfield and the real-life Chapman both exhibit a strong sense of unease and discontent stemming from their perceived phoniness of the world and its inhabitants. Interestingly, this shared feeling of restlessness, unhappiness and disappointment is subtly foreshadowed in the novel through the voice of Holden Caulfield's teacher, Mr. Antolini:

"Among other things, you'll find that you're not the first person who was ever confused and frightened and even sickened by human behavior. You're by no means alone on that score, you'll be excited and stimulated to know. Many, many men have been just as troubled morally and spiritually as you are right now."
(Salinger, 1951/1991, p. 189).

Mr. Antolini recognizes Holden's psychological distress and acknowledges the universality of these feelings. The continued fascination with Holden Caulfield and his struggles serves as a testament to the enduring relevance of Mr. Antolini's observation in the novel. His words highlight the pervasiveness of the feelings of disconnectedness and alienation that Holden powerfully articulates. These feelings take a disturbing turn in the case of Chapman's murder of John Lennon.

Within this context, this article will explore how this shared emotional ground between a fictional character and an ardent reader tragically culminated in the murder of John Lennon, one of the 20th century's most iconic figures. It is argued that the discrepancy between Chapman's identification with Holden Caulfield and his fatal action highlights a paradoxical and ultimately delusional reading of the novel. This is because Chapman states that he has identified with Holden Caulfield, an anti-hero who struggles with alienation, anxieties, and frustrations of adolescence. Holden constantly criticizes the world around him but fails to take any action to fight against it. In other words, Holden's discontent with superficiality and phoniness of people is expressed through a constant stream of complaints. However, his rebellion remains largely internal, and he does not turn them into external action. Ironically, Chapman twisted his identification with Holden Caulfield as he believed he was

acting heroically by killing John Lennon. Ultimately, this article is about the paradox between Chapman's idealization of an anti-hero and his supposed heroism through the murder of Lennon. It is also about the affective force of art that can significantly alter an individual's emotional and psychological landscape. In extreme cases, this force can contribute to the development of delusional perceptions, deep-seated anger, and even a rationalization of violent actions, and become a contributor to criminal behavior. To this end, the following sections will examine: 1. Holden Caulfield as a quintessential anti-hero, drawing on specific scenes from the novel to illustrate his character; and 2. Mark David Chapman's distorted idealization of both *The Catcher in the Rye* and John Lennon.

1. A Portrait of Holden Caulfield as a Young Anti-Hero

According to M. H. Abrams' *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, a standard reference in the field of literary studies, "[t]he use of nonheroic protagonists occurs as early as the picaresque novel of the sixteenth century, and the heroine of Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1722) is a thief and a prostitute" (1999, p.11). Distinctly, the term "antihero," as understood today, primarily evokes literary figures who are disillusioned and traumatized by 20th-century world wars. In this sense, in its contemporary usage, an antihero is defined as follows:

"The chief person in a modern novel or play whose character is widely discrepant from that which we associate with the traditional protagonist or hero of a serious literary work. Instead of manifesting largeness, dignity, power, or heroism, the antihero is petty, ignominious, passive, ineffectual, or dishonest" (Abrams, 1999, p.11).

This definition emphasizes characters who are complex, troubled, flawed and representative of the anxieties of the modern age. As a matter of fact, setting clear boundaries for anti-heroes in fiction can be challenging due to the diverse range of forms they can embody. Following the same line of thought, Berrin Turan Tilbe emphasizes the difficulty in providing a precise definition for the term "antihero," and she further asserts that "the definition of an anti-hero focuses on what he is not,

instead of what he is" (2019, p.151). Hence, antiheroes are often contradicted with traditional heroes, who display ideals of courage, virtue, self-sacrifice and honor. While heroism requires unconditional commitment to noble causes, anti-heroic acts often involve a cynical view of the world. Anti-heroes have problems with authority figures, and they defy established societal norms. Also, they are almost always pessimistic and tend to focus on the negative aspects of the world. Considering all these, Holden Caulfield aptly exemplifies the antihero archetype.

In *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden Caulfield recounts the events following his expulsion from yet another prestigious boarding school. Before his family is informed about his situation, he wanders aimlessly in New York City. He struggles with feelings of loss, alienation, and the phoniness of the adult world. In this article, Holden Caulfield's antiheroic qualities will be examined by focusing primarily on three key aspects: his cynicism, his frequent dishonesty, and finally his aimlessness and passivity.

Holden's cynicism reveals itself in his complete distrust and disbelief in the goodness and sincerity of others. This fuels his perception of phoniness because he views the world through a lens of skepticism. He thinks that grownups are insincere, self-serving and deceitful. He whines incessantly about everything, from a casual remark to a simple request to even a harmless joke. He is often unhappy and suffers from unexplained angst. Also, he is easily offended and has a fixated anger and resentment towards anything he perceived as phony. Generally, this can be anything which is compatible with expectations of the adult world. Holden Caulfield's frustration with phoniness is a recurring theme throughout the novel. Therefore, the novel is replete with examples of his annoyance with phoniness. Here is one instance where he was sitting in a pub: "If you sat around there long enough and heard all the phonies applauding and all, you got to hate everybody in the world, I swear you did" (Salinger, 1951/1991, p.142). Apparently, he has a deep-seated cynicism which causes him to further isolate himself from others. He only enjoys the company of

children, especially his younger sister Phoebe, believing that kids still have a sense of innocence that he thinks is lost in the adult world. As Robert C. Evans states

“his general attitude is cynical and judgmental, and he rarely finds –and rarely seeks—a sincere, enduring bond with another person. His relationships –except for the one with Phoebe—are fleeting, disappointing, and often disillusioning. He clearly longs for more permanent and meaningful connections” (2009, p. 42).

His sincere bond with children is also implicated in the title, which is a reference to the rye field scene in the novel. In this scene, Holden imagines himself as a guardian in the field of rye, surrounded by children running around:

“I keep picturing all these little kids playing some game in this big field of rye and all. Thousands of little kids, and nobody is around – nobody big . . . 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” (Salinger, 1951/1991, p. 173).

Apparently, he imagines himself as the protector of innocent children from falling into the abyss of cynical, corrupt adulthood.

Despite this idealized image of himself as a protector and savior, Holden Caulfield frequently lies, both to others and to himself, about his age, his whereabouts, and his intentions. Still, he is self-conscious about his tendency to lie: “I’m the most terrific liar you ever saw in your life. It’s awful. If I’m on my way to the store to buy a magazine, even, and somebody asks me where I’m going, I’m liable to say I’m going to the opera. It’s terrible” (Salinger, 1951/1991, p.16). This dishonesty may stem from his difficulty in forming genuine connections with others and his inability to engage with reality. Furthermore, his frequent lying can be interpreted as an act of rebellion against the phoniness and superficiality of the adult world. Through lying, he may be trying to distance himself from this world. This further emphasizes his role as an anti-hero who rejects societal norms, constructs his own reality and refrains from taking responsibility.

This tendency towards deception and lying is also related to Holden’s overall aimlessness, passivity and inactivity. Hülya Bayrak Akyıldız makes a compelling

point about the link between inactivity and the fall of many anti-heroes: "Inactivity is a common trait among anti-heroes, appears in a cause-and-effect relationship with many concepts such as failure, incompatibility, and exclusion" (2014, p.20). This is also true for Holden as he drifts through life and lacks clear goals or a sense of purpose. At the start of the novel, he is expelled from school, runs away from home, and wanders aimlessly around New York City. He has no concrete plans or goals; he just makes impulsive moves and acts spontaneously. For example, his encounters with former classmates and childhood friends are mostly unplanned. He randomly decides to visit Carl Luce at the Wicker Bar and then impulsively calls up Jane Gallagher, an old acquaintance, even though he is not sure if he wants to see her. Also, he spends much of his time wandering the streets of New York City, often making sudden decisions about where to go and what to do. He drifts from one place to another, changes his mind very quickly, and he is driven by fleeting impulses and a sense of restlessness. This aimlessness and passivity further contribute to his alienation, incompatibility, and his growing sense of despair. By avoiding engagement with the world, Holden creates a self-fulfilling prophecy of failure, isolation and overall detachment:

"Although he interacts with numerous people during the three days the novel depicts, he remains fundamentally withdrawn and isolated; he is estranged and distant from others and even, to some degree, from himself. He has no real or deep friendships; most of his interactions are superficial, and many of his relationships are insincere. Holden seems fundamentally frustrated and unhappy with his life and most of the people around him" (Evans, 2009, p. 41).

This section has briefly explored Holden Caulfield's character through the lens of the antihero, examining his cynicism, isolation, deceitfulness, aimlessness and passivity. This analysis is crucial given the tragic case of Chapman, who claimed that he identified strongly with the character and cited the novel as an influence in his assassination of John Lennon. Notably, patterns of cynicism, inner frustration, isolation, and incompatibility can also be observed in Chapman himself. However,

unlike Holden, who primarily retreats into himself and remains largely passive, Chapman, “the *Catcher*-infatuated murderer of John Lennon” as John Sutherland puts it, acted upon his disillusionment (2011, p. 46). This article contends that Chapman’s identification with Holden Caulfield presents a paradoxical outcome stemming from a distorted reading of the novel. This will be explored further in the next section.

2. From Fiction to Fatality: *The Catcher in the Rye*, Chapman, and Lennon

The Catcher in the Rye has received critical acclaim and lasting popularity. Harold Bloom considers the novel as Salinger’s “principal achievement . . . that has attained a kind of mythological status in the nearly half-century since its publication” (2005, p. 150). To recall, the novel intrigued many readers with its portrayal of adolescent turmoil, isolation, loneliness and estrangement. That is why Holden’s struggles deeply resonated with some readers, regardless of age or cultural background:

“The astonishing and enduring popularity of Salinger’s book suggests it touches a real nerve in its depiction of the lives of American teenagers, and the book’s translation into numerous other languages suggests that it also speaks to (and about) adolescent experience in other nations and cultures.” (Evans, 2009, p. 42).

Considering all, the novel is more than just a coming-of-age story, it has evolved into a significant cultural touchstone.

The Catcher in the Rye had complex and multifaceted reactions since its publication. The novel’s notoriously controversial reception is most evident in its recurring appearances on banned book lists across different eras in the United States. Stephen J. Whitfield states that “no postwar American novel has been subjected to more—and more intense—efforts to prevent the young from reading it” (1997, p. 575), highlighting the intense scrutiny and opposition the novel faced. The inclusion of *The Catcher in the Rye* in high school curriculums itself became a matter of

dispute. Edward Jenkinson highlights this conflict noting how people “protested Holden’s presence in schools (...) teachers were fired for teaching Salinger’s novel. In others, teachers were admonished never to bring that ‘kind of trash’ into their classroom again, and their future literary selections were carefully monitored” (1985, p. 26). Controversially, *The Catcher in the Rye* is also rated as one of the most widely taught novels in the United States. As Pamela Steinle points out the novel “had the dubious distinction of being at once the most frequently censored book across the nation and the second most-frequently taught novels in public high schools” (1951/1991, p. 127). This paradoxical situation can be explained by the novel’s enduring popularity, especially among teenagers, and the strong and varied responses it received from readers of all ages. Especially censoring of the novel vividly demonstrates literature’s immense power on readers. By trying to control what people read, censors unknowingly admit that books can challenge existing norms, inspire critical thought, or in extreme cases, trigger criminal acts. For instance, in the case of *The Catcher in the Rye*, in addition to the book’s immediate success, popularity and the fervent discussions it started, the novel has also been linked to highly publicized and tragic events. The 1980 assassination of John Lennon is perhaps the most infamous case. However, this is not an isolated incident. As Whitfield reports, the 1981 assassination attempt on President Ronald Reagan also involved an individual, John Hinckley, with an apparent obsession with the novel:

“John Hinckley, Jr., described himself in his school days as ‘a rebel without a cause’ and was shocked to hear that Lennon had been murdered. A year later Hinckley himself tried to kill President Reagan. In Hinckley’s hotel room, police found, along with a 1981 John Lennon color calendar, Salinger’s novel among a half-dozen paperbacks.” (1997, p. 572).

A common thread in these events is that both assailants were known to have idealized *The Catcher in the Rye*, which resulted in associating the novel with dangerous and potentially harmful events. Hence, the cases of the Lennon murder and the Reagan assassination attempt reveal the role of individual reading

experiences, interpretation, and the broader social context that shapes how a literary text is received.

Though the precise motivations behind Chapman's fatal shooting of John Lennon remain complex, his subsequent actions and statements strongly indicate the influence of *The Catcher in the Rye* on his psyche. Daniel Stashower, in his article "On First Looking into Chapman's Holden: Speculations on a Murder," posits two possibilities for Lennon's murder: "either Mark Chapman saw John Lennon as a corrupter of innocence, or he saw him as an innocent about to be corrupted . . . It is more likely . . . that Chapman saw Lennon as an innocent who was himself about to be corrupted" (2010). Stashower's interpretation suggests that Chapman killed Lennon to prevent his future corruption. This article, however, offers an alternative perspective, arguing that Chapman's act stemmed from his deep frustration with the perceived discrepancy between Lennon's luxurious lifestyle and the idealized, peaceful world he presented in his songs. In Chapman's view, Lennon epitomized what Holden Caulfield would label a "phony." As a matter of fact, Chapman himself openly connected the murder to his interpretation of *The Catcher in the Rye*, stating that the novel's influence has been a factor in his actions:

"John Lennon, formerly of the Beatles, his wife Yoko Ono, and their son Sean, were living in the Dakota, an exclusive apartment building looming over Central Park West. On the evening of December 8, as they entered the Dakota, a deranged twenty-five-year-old, Mark David Chapman, fired four hollow-pointed bullets into Lennon at close range, killing him. The assassin then calmly sat down on the sidewalk, pulled from his pocket a copy of The Catcher in the Rye, and began to read as if nothing had happened (...) When the police arrived to arrest Chapman, he was still reading placidly. They removed the book from his hands and took him into custody. Inside the novel, they noticed that Chapman has written a disturbing inscription: 'This is my statement. Holden Caulfield, The Catcher in the Rye.'" (Slawenski, 2010, p. 383).

This was not the first time Chapman signed the book in Holden Caulfield's name. Jack Jones writes that Chapman, when he gave a copy of *The Catcher in the*

Rye to his wife Gloria Chapman, “he had told her that she would understand him better if she read the book. He had signed the book for her: ‘Holden Caulfield’” (1992, p. 17). Apparently, Salinger’s only novel and its central character were more to Chapman than mere fictional constructions. For one thing, he considered the novel as a medium through which he could express himself. For another, his responses overreached the feelings of mere sympathy for a fictional character but rather turned into an unhealthy aspiration to be like him. Chapman’s aspiration is not unique; it reflects a sentiment shared by some *Catcher* fans, as Joanna Rakoff relates in her memoir *My Salinger Year* (2014). In her work, Rakoff, a recent college graduate with a degree in English, recounts her experiences as an intern at a prominent literary agency representing Salinger. Her primary duties involved responding to fan mail and autograph requests. During her time working for the literary agency representing Salinger, Rakoff encountered numerous fan letters that reflected the tendency of acting like Holden. Some fans, she notes, “hoped to impress Salinger with his likeness to Salinger’s hero” (2014, p. 71). Rakoff further observed a gendered dynamic among fans as she says that “the boys wanted to be Holden, while the girls wanted to be with Holden” (p. 71). Even though the desire to connect with a fictional character might seem harmless, in Chapman’s case, this intense identification with Holden Caulfield appears to have contributed to a distorted perception of reality which ultimately resulted in an act of violence. At this point, a more in-depth exploration of Chapman’s life and motivation is necessary to fully understand how his absorbed reading of the novel caused a tragic crime.

Chapman was born in Texas in 1955 and experienced turbulent adolescence marked by significant personal changes. As he transitioned “from a nerd to a hippie,” (Jones, 1992, p. 103), Chapman evolved from a withdrawn young man to a runaway, a drug user, and ultimately, a devout Christian (pp. 102-109). This period coincided with the rise of the Beatles, a band that captivated global audiences in the 1960s. Their music transcended entertainment in the way that they influenced youth culture with various messages of sexual freedom, anti-war sentiments, and social and

political commentary. The Beatles impact, known as “Beatlemania,” resonated deeply with many people, including Chapman. While a fan of the band, he developed complex and ultimately negative feelings towards John Lennon, who was the group’s most popular member. Considering this ambivalent love-hate relationship with Lennon, two key aspects of Chapman’s personality emerge: his fervent admiration for the Beatles and his strong identification with Holden Caulfield.

Firstly, Chapman’s Beatles idolatry was affected by two books he borrowed from the Honolulu library. The first, Anthony Fawcett’s *John Lennon: One Day at a Time* (1976), presented a realistic, and perhaps disillusioning, portrayal of Lennon’s life. The second, Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*, proved to be even more influential. According to Jones (1992), Chapman believed that he had found the real John Lennon in the first book and himself in the second (p. 7). These books contributed to Chapman’s growing frustration with Lennon and the world he represented. In *John Lennon: One Day at a Time*, Chapman encountered the complexities of a celebrity he once idolized. Additionally, *The Catcher in the Rye* amplified his feelings of unhappiness. Therefore, it is evident that the emotional impact of art—be it literature, music, or other mediums—can profoundly shape an individual’s emotional and psychological well-being. In extreme cases, this impact can contribute to the development of distorted perceptions, intense resentments, or a justification for violent actions. In such cases, art can become a factor in criminal behavior. For example, Chapman explained his feelings after reading *John Lennon: One Day at a Time* as follows:

“I looked through the book at the pictures of John Lennon on the gabled roof of the Dakota building in New York. Of course I didn’t know anything about the Dakota building. I didn’t know anything about New York. I didn’t even know where John Lennon was. But he was in that book. Just as Holden Caulfield had bled through the ink of the Catcher and entered my mind, John Lennon entered my mind through that book.” (Jones, 1992, p. 176).

As a rock star, Lennon lived a life of luxury and excess which constituted a stark contrast to the modest, dreamy and peaceful life he presented in his songs (Jones, 1992, p. 177). Also, that Lennon expressed himself through popular hit songs and influenced large groups of fans annoyed Chapman. For example, as Jones points out, Chapman was extremely upset with Lennon's statement about "Beatles being more popular than Jesus," (p. 117) which coincided with the time Chapman had turned more to Christianity. Furthermore, Lennon's perhaps most famous song, "Imagine" (1971) envisioned an anti-capitalist, anti-religious, and anti-governmental utopia, yet Lennon himself did not always embody these ideals in his personal life which made him "phony" in the eyes of Chapman. Turning to the realm of literature, similar themes are also explored in *The Catcher in the Rye*, which is

"a serious critical mimesis of bourgeois life in the Eastern United States, ca. 1950—of snobbery, privilege, class injury, culture as a badge of superiority, sexual exploitation, education subordinated to status, warped social feeling, competitiveness, stunted human possibility." (Ohmann and Ohmann, 1976, p. 35).

In short, from popular music to literary fiction, these were the pervasive social and cultural anxieties of the time. Chapman's identification with Holden and disappointment with Lennon reflected these broader social and cultural concerns. Also, the huge capacity of art (Salinger's novel and Lennon's songs) to both mirror and influence these anxieties affected Chapman's perceptions and actions.

"Members of church groups that Chapman joined (...) recall that he engaged in a vendetta against "Imagine," warning that Lennon's message –to imagine a world with no heaven or religion –was blasphemy. At prayer meetings and religious rallies he attended, often several times a week, friends remember that he would sing his own foreboding lyrics to the Lennon tune: 'Imagine John Lennon is dead.'" (Jones, 1992, p. 117).

Secondly, Chapman was deeply influenced by *The Catcher in the Rye*, identifying strongly with Holden Caulfield's alienated perspective. He was not alone in this identification, as Louis Menand observes, "each generation feels disappointed

in its own way (...) For many Americans who grew up in the nineteen-fifties, *The Catcher in the Rye* is the purest extract of that mood. Holden Caulfield is their sorrow king” (2001, n.p.). The novel’s enduring appeal stems largely from the passive-aggressive tone of Holden’s narrative voice. Many readers, including Chapman, found themselves deeply resonating with Holden’s voice which blurred the lines between fiction and reality. Chapman’s reactions and discourse mirrored those of Holden Caulfield’s and eventually led him to connect his act of violence to his obsessive engagement with *The Catcher in the Rye*. For example, when he was sentenced in the court, Chapman “read aloud the passage that begins with ‘anyway, I kept picturing all these little kids’ and ends with ‘I’d just be the catcher in the rye and all’ (Whitfield, 1997, p. 572). As noted earlier, this imagery can be interpreted as an attempt to protect children from the corrupt adult world. Like Holden Caulfield, who dreamed of becoming a “protector of children’s innocence” (Levine, 1958, p. 97), Chapman also viewed the adult world as superficial and evil. Another compelling example of Chapman’s identification with Holden can be found in an interview with Jones. There, Chapman stated that he “did set up and follow a ‘Holdenish’ pattern by walking through Central Park and seeing the pond and asking policeman where the ducks went in winter, the way Holden Caulfield did” (p. 212). This is significant because Holden’s curiosity for the fate of the Central Park ducks during winter is a recurring motif in *The Catcher in the Rye*. He even asks ducks’ whereabouts:

“The driver was sort of a wise guy . . . ‘Hey Listen,’ I said. ‘You know those ducks in that lagoon right near central park south? That little lake? By any chance, do you happen to know where they go, the ducks, when it gets all frozen over? Do you happen to know, by any chance?’” (Salinger, 1951/1991, p. 60).

Despite being rebuffed by the taxi driver, Holden still thinks about the fate of the Central Park ducks during winter. This recurring image reflects Holden’s deeper anxieties about change, loss, and the fragility of innocence. For Chapman, inquiring about the ducks served as an attempt to connect with Holden, whom he

viewed as more than just a fictional character. Chapman's wife Gloria also observed this connection, noting that "the character Holden Caulfield reminded her of him 'in the way his mind worked'" (Jones, 1992, p. 191). All in all, Chapman increasingly adopted Holden's perspective, interpreting and judging the world through a lens shaped by his cynical worldview.

Chapman's frustration intensified as he became increasingly aware of the phoniness around him, with John Lennon emerging as a prime example. Initially a devoted Beatles fan, Chapman likely took Lennon's lyrics and public pronouncements on peace and equality as genuine statements. However, upon witnessing the huge contrast between Lennon's ideals and his luxurious lifestyle in New York City, Chapman concluded that Lennon was a hypocrite, a "phony" who did not truly embody the values he espoused. This disappointment, further solidified by Fawcett's *John Lennon: One Day at a Time*, led Chapman to believe that Lennon was not an admirable figure. As he told Jack Jones in an interview:

"I checked out the book and brought it home to my wife and pointed out the pictures to her, pictures of him smiling on the roof of the sumptuous Dakota building: the decadent bastard, the phony bastard, who had lied to children, who had used his music to mislead a generation of people who desperately needed to believe in love and a world at war that desperately needed to believe in peace . . . He told us to 'imagine no possessions', and there he was, with millions of dollars and yachts and farms and country estates, laughing at people like me who had believed the lies and bought the records and built a big part of our lives around his music." (1992, p. 177).

In Chapman's eyes, John Lennon, with his immense influence on youth through his music, statements, and lifestyle, embodied the phony world. This growing influence disturbed Chapman as he felt a twisted sense of duty to cleanse the world of this perceived phoniness:

"In interviews given as late as 2006, Chapman always maintained that he killed John Lennon because he had been influenced by Salinger's novel. He alternatively explained that he felt that he was actually Holden Caulfield; was

fearful that Lennon was proclaiming himself to be the new catcher in the rye; and had killed the musician to save him from descending into phoniness.”
(Slawenski, 2010, p. 383-4).

Now is a good time to return to the article’s main point: Chapman’s identification with Holden Caulfield, an epitome of an anti-hero, appears paradoxical given his violent actions. This is mainly because while Holden criticizes the world around him, his rebellion remains largely internal as he never acts. Chapman, however, misinterpreted this internalized frustration as a call to action, tragically translating his identification with Holden into a violent act against John Lennon. In Chapman’s own words, “It’s what Holden had envisioned and fantasized about, killing the big fat guy in the hotel: the pimp, the phony. I took it a step further than Holden. I got a gun” (Jones, 1992, p. 180). This confession is a reference to a pivotal scene in *The Catcher in the Rye* where Holden, after a humiliating encounter with a prostitute, fantasizes about shooting her pimp Maurice (p. 104). For Chapman, this scene mirrored his own act of violence against John Lennon. He perceived Lennon, a public figure whose idealized image clashed drastically with his grand lifestyle, as a symbol of the “hypocrisy that was the source of the world’s problems” (Jones, 1992, p. 26). In Chapman’s apparently confused mind, by killing Lennon, he believed he had finally achieved a form of “Holden Caulfield” heroism, a contradictory notion given Holden’s status as an anti-hero. As a last point, this tragic outcome also underscores the affective power of art. While literature can inspire critical thought and empathy, in extreme cases, its influence can become distorted. For individuals like Chapman, who is deeply immersed in a fictional world, the lines between reality and fiction can be blurred. This intense emotional engagement, when combined with pre-existing psychological vulnerabilities, can transform one’s internal struggles into criminal actions.

Conclusion

With its strong portrayal of adolescent turmoil and disillusionment through the voice of Holden Caulfield, *The Catcher in the Rye* resonates with readers

worldwide. Holden's critique of phoniness in the adult world particularly reflects anxieties and feelings of alienation experienced by many readers. However, this powerful and influential novel also carries a dark potential. For instance, in the case of Chapman, an intense identification with Holden Caulfield leads to a delusional interpretation of the novel. While Holden primarily expresses his discontent internally, Chapman translates his own feelings of alienation into a violent act. In doing this, he believed that he was emulating a form of Holden Caulfield heroism, which sounds like an oxymoron given the fact that Holden is an embodiment of an anti-hero.

This article highlights two key points: 1. the sharp contradiction between Holden Caulfield's status as an anti-hero and Chapman's distorted belief that killing John Lennon, whom he saw as a symbol of the world's phoniness, constitutes a heroic act; and 2. art's capacity to affect individuals, for both good and ill. Chapman's statements, along with his explicit connections between his murder of Lennon and *The Catcher in the Rye* and its protagonist Holden Caulfield, strongly suggest that his reading experience significantly influences the tragic event. First, Chapman internalizes the novel's central theme: the pervasive corruption and insincerity of the adult world. Second, he gradually adopts Holden Caulfield's cynical worldview, seeing the world through his eyes. This even manifests itself in his behaviour as he begins to dramatize certain scenes from the novel. As an avid reader, Chapman becomes deeply immersed in the novel's world, and he even claims it serves as justification for his crime. He reads excerpts from the novel in court and claims that the novel itself constitutes his statement. All of these suggest that he is completely immersed in the novel, to the point where the boundaries between reality and fiction become blurred. Ultimately, this case serves as an important reminder of the complex and sometimes unpredictable relationship between art and human experience. It also highlights art's capacity to provoke feelings and potentially trigger destructive interpretations and actions.

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