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## Through the Eyes of a Teenager: The Way from Conflict to Compromise with the Society

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**Abstract.** The aim of this article is to research some similar features in the representation of the teenage characters in the novels by three American authors: C. McCullers, J.D. Salinger and T. Capote. The novels that we are to analyse feature some characters that start with misunderstanding the people around them and the motivation of their acts. But for some reasons they start feeling that their perception of a problem is too radicalised and the better way for dealing with others is trying to find some kind of a compromise. It may be a psychological compromise, as a matter of accepting the other's freedom of self-determination, or a social compromise in a manner of finding the way of social interaction. But each time finding a compromise is depicted as an act that takes a certain effort, leading to inner transformation of a character. For achieving the goals of our research, we are using a combination of motif analysis, comparative method and hermeneutical method of text interpretation. The characters of their novels *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* (1940) by Carson McCullers, *The Catcher in the Rye* (1945–1946) by Jerome David Salinger and *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948) by Truman Capote have a certain degree of similarity that goes far beyond their teen age.

**Keywords:** conflict, dialogue, teenager, Modernism, J.D. Salinger, T. Capote, C. McCullers

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## Глазами подростка: путь от конфликта с обществом к компромиссу

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**Аннотация.** Цель статьи – изучение некоторых сходных черт в репрезентации героев-подростков в романах трех американских авторов: К. Маккаллера, Дж.Д. Сэлинджера и Т. Капоте. Центральные персонажи исследуемых произведений испытывают непонимание по отношению к окружающим людям, а также мотивы собственных поступков. По каким-то причинам они начинают чувствовать, что их восприятие проблемы слишком радикально и лучший способ взаимодействия с другими – попытаться найти некий компромисс. Это может быть психологический компромисс в плане принятия свободы самоопределения или социальный компромисс в поиске способа взаимодействия с окружающими. Но каждый раз этот поиск изображается как поступок, требующий определенных усилий и приводящий к внутреннему преобразению персонажа. Для достижения цели исследования используются такие методы, как мотивный анализ, сравнительно-сопоставительный и герменевтический подходы к интерпретации текста. Протагонисты романов «Сердце – одинокий охотник» (1940) Карсон Маккаллерс, «Над пропастью во ржи» (1945–1946) Джерома Дэвида Сэлинджера и «Другие голоса, другие комнаты» (1948) Трумена Капоте имеют определенную степень сходства, выходящую далеко за рамки подросткового возраста.

**Ключевые слова:** конфликт, диалог, подросток, модернизм, Дж.Д. Сэлинджер, Т. Капоте, К. Маккаллерс

**Вклад авторов.** Разработка идеи, сбор и анализ данных, написание и редактирование рукописи – С.С. Савинич и Н.С. Шалимова.

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### Introduction

The novels that we are going to research in this article are not regarded as masterpieces just because of their plot. The main focus of narration is the inner world of the characters, the motivation of their acts and their inner transformation. There is a great similarity between the characters of these novels in how they feel towards themselves and the grown-ups and in the degree of alienation from the outer world. Each of them is going to pass a certain way in finding a different angle of perceiving the reality without judging it and this is going to coincide with their

coming of age. Ultimately, they are trying to find the answer for a question “What is it like to be a grown-up”, but each of them in his own way. So, it is not the answer that matters in this case, but the procedure of revealing it. In the epoch of digital education and online classes, this problem of coming out of age and overcoming the conflict with the world of grown-ups may become very important once again for the generation of digital-native children, who have less emotional communicative experience than people of their age from other generations.

The theme of a conflict of a teenager with society is very wide and has many aspects. To achieve the results that are more particular and can be verified, we prefer to treat this theme as a literary motif. Motif is often regarded as one of the “dominant ideas in a work of literature; a part of the main theme. It may consist of a character, a recurrent image or a verbal pattern” (Cuddon, 2013, p. 448). The motif of a teenage conflict with a society is a very appropriate research instrument. It is easier to compare the ways of the realization of the motif than that of a theme. That allows us to continue research by comparing this motif in the three novels that we chose as an object of research. But besides comparing just the ways of realization of the literary motifs in these texts, we also analyze and compare the reasons for the conflict and the possible ways to achieve reconciliation and that is done by the means of interpretation that can be generally characterized as hermeneutics. For achieving the goals of our research, we are using a combination of motif analysis, comparative method and hermeneutical method of text interpretation.

## Results and Discussion

The three novels that we are comparing in this article have a completely different readers' attitude in Russia. The most popular novel that is extremely well recognized by all age groups is *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger. It has been the object of scientific research for decades and there are hundreds of articles and dissertations that address this text directly or indirectly. But *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* by C. McCullers is a lot less popular and only a relatively small group of researchers, mainly those who deal with the Southern literature were using this novel in their research. The novel *Other Voices, Other Rooms* by T. Capote is even less known than the other two. Most of the readers in Russia would be quite familiar with the novel *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, but the other novels by T. Capote haven't been a very popular object of scientific research.

There were several researchers that were approaching the theme of the conflict with a society in the works by J.D. Salinger. E. Sheshikova (2016) in her article is stating this as a problem of contradiction between the individual and society. She remarks that the image of Holden Caulfield is extremely complicated and contradictory and assumes that the core of Holden's problems is his feeling of alienation, but she doesn't regard it as a specific teen age problem, but rather as a problem of a personality that doesn't want to fall under the regulations of the society.

In the article by A. Guseva (2016) we can see a very similar approach to this problem. But she adds to this that Holden's behavior is very much motivated by the

protest of personality against the social apathy and conformism. The main character is described as a grumpy person, who is chronically discontent with anything that happens to him. A. Guseva doesn't specify Holden's problems as age-related, but, just as the previous researcher, states that one of the main themes of the novel is loneliness. At the same time, in some researches, Holden's actions are perceived as a kind of pre-determination (Afanasjeva et al., 2023) and his behavior is interpreted as a painful pursuit of faith.

At the same time, some other researchers see the reaction of Holden as a protest against the reality. E. Vasil'eva (2015) expresses an idea that Holden is feeling very confused about all that he knows about the world of grown-ups and for this reason he rejects the essence of everyday life as it is. But deep down he is a very good personality that tries to understand the reality and fails to do so. That is the very reason for his rejecting the adulthood. But as he doesn't have any efficient way of expressing his protest against the reality, he remains rude and cynical, trying to hide his own shock from the encounter with the reality by shocking others. One of the most recent works, related to the novel by J.D. Salinger is also focused on the theme of a protest against the society of conformism. But after careful reading the article by K. Ushanova (2021) we may conclude that she relates to consumerism rather than conformism. Holden is received as a young bourgeois that brings to the world his own obscure ideas and is very upset by the fact that no one seems to understand him. K. Ushanova implies that reading this novel we witness a moral crisis of an individual who came across the false values of a society and tries painfully to formulate the better values by rejecting the values of the others. It is also important to mention that K. Ushanova defines the narration technique in this novel as a sort of confession.

A very interesting introspective of the reasons for the conflict between Caulfield and society is offered by N. Milovanovich (2020). He finds much similarity between the image of Holden and the Angry Young Men generation, more specifically, the characters of *Look Back in Ager* by J. Osborne. N. Milovanovich sees the behavior of Holden as a typical coming of age process that is painful but necessary for his self-confirmation. In the opinion of the researcher, Holden is a very contradictory character. He is apt of self-isolation but at the same time craves for understanding and suffers from loneliness. So, the main conflict is within himself rather than with the others. He also regards the novel as very optimistic and symbolic, adding that the main character is likely to find some common language with the world of adults.

We can see a certain disproportion in critical attention to these novels. The novel *Other Voices, Other Rooms* by T. Capote was an object of research only two times for the last several years. O. Kamysheva (2021) is analyzing a metaphor of music in the novel. She states that the sound of different musical instruments in the novel stands for the different moods of the characters. Also, it is implied that the instrument may represent the character, for instance, Zoo is represented by the little mail-order accordion. It is further implied that the images of the broken instruments are symbolic and often associated with moral and physical decay. Quite interesting is the approach of A. Shmeleva (2021) who analyses the novel *Other Voices, Other*

*Rooms* in the context of the motif of self-determination of personality. Joel Knox is seen as a teenager who faces a difficult moral choice between what is offered to him by a group of people living in the house of his quadriplegic father and the pursuit of his own determination of happiness. The novel is seen as a metaphor of the right moral choice that put the character on the path of confronting the wrong system of values, imposed on him by the others and looking by himself for what is right.

The novel *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* by C. McCullers had even less attention from the researchers in the last years. Among the very few articles, dedicated to this book, there is an article by E. Shageeva (2019) that studies the motif of loneliness in this novel. It is stated that every character is lonely in his own way and is trying to find the shortest way out of it. So instead of establishing true relationships between each other, they form an illusionary relationship with hearing impaired Singer. They endow singer that he doesn't have and the more they do so, the more painful is the collapse of their illusion.

As we can see, there was very little concern in the recent time about the theme of a teenager in these novels and the more specific theme of a conflict between the teenager and the world of adults. But what is even more important, how do these characters find a compromise with this world and what do they have to sacrifice to do so. We have found a great similarity between the characters of these novels and therefore consider them an apt object for researching this theme. We have to acknowledge that these novels were created in the same literary epoch, even the same decade, during the 1940-s. As was already said, the novel *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* by Carson McCullers was published in 1940 and it was the first to approach this problem indirectly, for Mick Kelly cannot be regarded as the main character. Some may claim that the novel *The Catcher in the Rye* by Jerome David Salinger was published in 1951. But we must consider that first it was published by chapters in a magazine in 1945–1946, so obviously this theme is again from 1940-s. And the latest among three is the novel by Truman Capote *Other Voices, Other Rooms* that was published in 1948.

Besides, being connected chronologically, there are some other ways of interaction between these texts. We know, for instance, that Carson McCullers and Truman Capote were friends and McCullers helped Capote to find a publisher for his novel. We can also hazard a guess that Capote was familiar with the plot of *The Catcher in the Rye* after it was published in serial in 1945–1946. Consequently, it is very likely that these three authors are involved in a sort of a dialogue that was partly initiated by McCullers. We must agree that for *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* the conflict of a teenager with the society is not a main theme. This is only one of the five stories, but it attracts attention of a reader as if it was a separate story with an individual plot. While in *The Catcher in the Rye* it becomes the main theme, significantly dwarfing any other themes and motifs. And in the *Other Voices, Other Rooms* it becomes the core motif that puts everything else right into its place.

In the novel by C. McCullers *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* the conflict between Mick Kelly and the society is rather hidden than overt. She looks like a very responsible elder sister most of the time, but a careful look at her drawings expresses

the conflict with the outer world very precisely: *She had imagined a big fire on Broad Street and painted how she thought it would be. The flames were bright green and orange and Mr. Brannon's restaurant and the First National Bank were about the only buildings left. People were lying dead in the streets and others were running for their lives*<sup>1</sup>. It is quite clear from this quotation, that Mick isn't on friendly terms with the people of her town and doesn't wish them well. Mick's family has certain financial issues, and she doesn't know how to help the situation, instead she blames the society for the problems of her family and in her pictures, she is looking for the way to revenge them: *The oil painting was a picture of the whole town fighting on Broad Street. She never knew why she had painted this one and she couldn't think of the right name for it*<sup>2</sup>. She isn't bold enough to acknowledge the fact that she hates other people and she doesn't know why. But the truth is that the other people of the town are living even more miserable lives, so they deserve rather pity than hatred (Gleeson-White, 2003).

The family feels very reluctant about asking Mick to work for money to help the family. Instead, when the vacation of a shop assistant is offered to her, the family gathers to say that she is too young to work and she has to get her education first. But we see that Mick knows to read between the lines, so she insists on leaving school for taking up the job. The reaction of the family is very eloquent: *It was as though a great worry and tightness left the family. In the dark they began to laugh and talk. Their Dad did a trick for George with a matchstick and a handkerchief. Then he gave the kid fifty cents to go down to the corner store for Coca-Colas to be drunk after supper*<sup>3</sup>. It is very clear that everybody was expecting this answer and feels a lot easier after Mick voices their common wish.

By refusing to attend the school, Mick also refuses to follow her dream to become an artist or musician. But that seems her sacrifice for the family's well-being and learning to sacrifice her own cause for the sake of others makes her very adult while she is still a teenager. It is quite wonderful how soon her conflict with the society comes to a compromise. She feels like she wasn't quite herself at this point: *Mick frowned and rubbed her fist hard across her forehead. That was the way things were. It was like she was mad all the time. Not how a kid gets mad quick so that soon it is all over – but in another way. Only there was nothing to be mad at*<sup>4</sup>. Only after reconciling with herself, Mick comes to terms with the others, so it must be considered that her emotional and psychological conditions are vitally important for her social adaptation (Goncharova, 2022).

The reasons for the conflict of Holden Caulfield with the world of grown-ups seem to be very different. He is coming from an upper middle-class family and doesn't have such problems as Mick Kelly. The money he spends in New York in three days could suffice Mick's family for a month or even more. But that doesn't mean that he can avoid these typical coming of age problems (Mohammadi, 2018).

<sup>1</sup> McCullers, C. (2000). *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* (p. 44). Houghton Mifflin.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. P. 317.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. P. 354.

At the very beginning of the novel, he reveals a profound distrust to the world of adults. But together with the general hypocrisy of adults, he rejects the efforts to help, coming from the people who really care about him, including his teachers Mr. Spencer and Mr. Antolini. It is quite obvious that they both try to help him to avoid some kind of an emotional trap or fall, but they don't succeed in it. And Holden later explains it in his paradoxical manner: *The thing with kids is, if they want to grab for the gold ring, you have to let them do it, and not say anything. If they fall off, they fall off, but it's bad if you say anything to them*<sup>5</sup>. At the same time, we can see that he conflicts with his peers just as well, after he leaves on the subway the equipment of the fencing team and they ostracize him. So, it is very clear at this point that the reason for this conflict is within him. In fact, the image of Holden is literally made of contradictions, he hates lies, but lies himself, he is afraid of growing up, but at the same time he is craving for it. He can't enjoy the present, he can only enjoy the past, that allows us to conclude that he doesn't like the people as they are, but rather his memories of what they used to be. Ultimately, the author leaves him alone to struggle with his emotional crisis all by himself and Holden intuitively finds the way out of it in rejoicing from seeing his sister riding a carousel and thoroughly enjoying herself. Watching his sister being quite happy, he feels finally that he has found the key for the reconciliation with himself and the outer world: *I felt so damn happy all of a sudden, the way old Phoebe kept going around and around... It was just that she looked so damn nice, the way she kept going around and around, in her blue coat and all*<sup>6</sup>. Holden learns that specifically for him, the easiest way to be happy is to make other people happy. At first, he can't take it as an answer; this seems to him too simple to be true. But later in this episode Holden, if we may put it that way, is catching the idea and “converting it into a value” (Chupryna, Baranova, 2022, p. 128). This may indicate that deep down he is guided by some moral compass, that unequivocally indicates for him, what is right.

But in the novel *Other Voices, Other Rooms* the conflict, quite paradoxically leads to compromise. The protagonist of the novel, a teen-age boy, Joel Knox, lives in a household with his stepmother Amy Skully and her first cousin Randolph, each of them being retarded in some way: *...he saw how helpless Randolph was: more paralyzed than Mr. Sansom, more childlike than Miss Wisteria, what else could he do, once outside and alone, but describe a circle, the zero of his nothingness*<sup>7</sup>. Joel intuitively understands that the company of Skully's Landing is not a society, but some kind of a simulacra. This strongly contradicts with the process of Joel's self-determination and self-confirmation: *“I am me”, Joel whooped. “I am Joel; we are the same people”. And he looked about for a tree to climb: he would go right to the very top, and there, midway to heaven, he would spread his arms and claim the world*<sup>8</sup>. He starts realizing himself as an adult, becoming more mature emotionally than the people who are looking after him. So, at a certain point he is looking at

<sup>5</sup> Salinger, J.D. (1991). *Catcher in the Rye* (p. 211). Little, Brown and Co.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. P. 213.

<sup>7</sup> Capote, T. (1955). *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (p. 227). Random House.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

them as at a handicap that tangles him from understanding his role and place in the society. It is important to notice here that society is perceived by the author as something constantly changing, and Skully's Landing is portrayed in the novel as something that is stuck in the past, something that can't take the change.

Joel is facing in this episode a difficult moral choice, to stay with vicious but familiar people, or to set off for his own pursuit of virtue. And his natural-born instinct of decency tells him, he must leave the mansion immediately: *...he knew he must go: unafraid, not hesitating, he paused only at the garden's edge where, as though he'd forgotten something, he stopped and looked back at the bloomless, descending blue, at the boy he had left behind*<sup>9</sup>. It is quite clear in the novel that Amy and Randolph are hiding away from the society and staying with them, Joel becomes part of the conflict. But leaving them, he accepts some form of a compromise with the society, assuming that he can't rely on the experience of people so detached from reality.

### Conclusion

In the three novels under scrutiny, the theme of conflict with a society emerges as a pivotal element of the plot. However, upon closer examination, it becomes evident that each instance of this societal conflict culminates in a compromise. That allows us to state that the teenage conflict with society in these novels becomes a literary motif. But each time there are different ways of textual realization of this motif. Each character that we analyzed has different reasons and finds a different solution to this conflict. In the novel *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* by C. McCullers, the reason for the conflict with society for the girl named Mick Kelly, is an economically disadvantaged position of her family that doesn't allow her to pursue her dream of becoming an artist, and the general misunderstanding with her parents that prevents her from expressing herself to others. Mick Kelly finds the solution for the conflict in gaining the ability for self-sacrifice and altruism. In *The Catcher in the Rye* by Jerome David Salinger the general reason for the conflict with society is Holden's inability to accept help from others and growing distrust to the world of adults that "constitute social and moral imperatives among teenagers" (Afanasjeva, 2020, p. 1105). Holden finds the solution for it in gaining the ability to rejoice from other person's happiness. And in *Other Voices, Other Rooms* by Truman Capote, the reason for the conflict is the protagonist's aptitude for psychological growth and self-confirmation that meets the inability of his legal guardians to cater to his spiritual and moral requirements. Joel Knox finds that the only way to interact with the society is to leave his guardians that dwell in their own vices, absolutely detached from the reality and other people. The theme of the conflict with the society as a part of coming of age can be found in other books by American authors. It can be very productive to continue research by comparing this as a literary motif in the novels by H. Lee *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *The Golphinch* by D. Tartt. We expect that each of these books may offer a different type of experience of confrontation and compromise between a personality and the society.

<sup>9</sup> Capote, T. (1955). *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (p. 231). Random House.

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