

CAULFIELD AND COPPERFIELD

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Surely a major irony of Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* is that its would-be hero, though openly disdaining what he calls all that "David Copperfield" kind of nonsense on the very first page, is in fact described in terms of the self-development novel as stemming to a large extent from Dickens. What is more, though he repeatedly exhibits revulsion at what he dubs the "phony" type of individual, he himself turns out to be the biggest fake of them all. In the light of this latent irony, it is puzzling why controversy has arisen over the genesis of his name. The former editor of the journal *College English* writes that "even his name, one suspects, is an ironic amalgam of the last names of movie stars William Holden and Joan Caulfield" [1], who, he reminds us, co-starred in the 1947 cinematic version of *Dear Ruth*.

Yet, in a rebuttal that reappeared when Oldsey's article was reprinted in a collection of essays, Oldsey is taken to task on the grounds that the Caulfield name in the Salinger stories predates the film by several years [2]. An essay by Dexter Martin offers a more speculative solution: "Salinger's primary reason for selecting Caulfield is obviously the fact that it means 'cold field'; and, therefore, within the book, it signifies 'cemetery'—specifically the one in which Allie is buried. Since Holden means 'deep valley,' it may also imply 'grave' or 'abyss'; but certainly its primary significance is 'trying to find somebody or something to hold on to' or 'trying to hold myself together and find somebody who will help.' *Holden Caulfield* means, then, 'The boy who needs love because he's obsessed with the death of his brother'".

But is it not crystal clear that the name springs at least partly from Copperfield, the latter reported on the first page of Dickens' novel as being born with a caul, thereby betokening good luck? Both Holden and David tell their own stories and relate rather similar early school experiences (whereby Holden's story may derive at least indirectly from David's); both try to "find themselves" and thus exhibit conviction as a main source of strength (but also of weakness) [3]. Even as David describes his friend Steerforth as an adolescent Victorian immoralist, Holden presents us with Stradlater, the so-called "secret slob" and "sexy bastard" [4]. Whereas one steers forth, the other does his straddling.

That Salinger's popular novel has, in spite of some controversy it has caused, certain convincing literary antecedents is now a commonplace; however, so far commentary has limited itself to some general consideration of the place of his work in the history of the picaresque tradition and, in particular, in its relation

to **Huckleberry Finn** [5]. Yet perhaps especially because of Twain's own connection with Dickens [6], the Dickensian element in Salinger's novel should be duly inspected, too. Indeed, this is part of the "catch" to **The Catcher**, for Salinger had literary resonances in the back of his mind and not merely in the implicit allusion to Burns in his title ("coming through the rye...") [7].

The Romantic element in **David Copperfield** is more striking in various ways. Holden's adoration of his little sister points back to David's puppy love for Little Emily. Even the overt profanity in Salinger might have been indirectly suggested by Dickens--that is, if Salinger had in mind the expression "what the dickens" as an euphemism he wished to overcome and in doing so unconsciously linked the phrase with the novelist. (It has been argued that Dickens himself, in performing in a production of Shakespeare's **The Merry Wives of Windsor**, was attracted to the expression "the dickens his name is" in Act III, Scene ii of that comedy.) All told, the clearest evidence is that of nomenclature. Yet it would be carrying coals to Newcastle to proceed a step farther and maintain that even the forename, Holden, has a hidden resonance from **David Copperfield** (say of Mr. Gummidge as the "old 'un"); it is always dangerous that the name game can be carried too far! More likely, Holden would signify something generally in the past through the connotation of 'olden', thereby not ruling out some Dickensian association. On the other hand, surely Caulfield's former teacher, Antolini, can be construed as a collapsed form of another name found in Dickens: Mantolini.

In short, Salinger was "full of the Dickens" in more ways than one when he composed his most famous novel. Not to be discounted in this respect is the fact that Dickens considered David Copperfield (whose initials happen to be his own in reverse) to be the hero of his own favorite novel.

[1] Bernard S. Oldsey, *The Movies in the Rye*, *College English* 23 (1961), p 109-15; reprinted in Harold P. Simonson and Philip E. Hager (ed), *Salinger's "Catcher in the Rye": Clamor vs. Criticism* (Lexington, Heath, 1963).

[2] Robert D. Bhaerman, *Rebuttal*, *College English* 23 (1962), p 508.

[3] Janet H. Brown, *The Narrator's Role in David Copperfield*, *Dickens Studies Annual* 2 (1972), p 197-207.

[4] Carl F. Strauch, *Kings in the Back Row: Meaning Through Structure -- A Reading of Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye*, *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature* 2 (1961), p 5-30.

[5] *College English* 18 (1956), p 80; *American Quarterly* 9 (1957), p 144-58; *Ohio University Review* 2 (1960), p 31-42.

[6] Joseph Gardner, *Mark Twain and Dickens*, *PMLA* 84 (1969), p 90-101.

[7] Alan Trudgett (*London Sunday Times*, 21 Aug 1994) writes that Salinger's title relates not to Burns but a fielding position in baseball: "The catcher in the rye (grass) is positioned out on the boundary and as such, like Holden Caulfield, observes rather than participates."