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Eng102
November 6, 2010

Holden's Reality

J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* recounts the story of an adolescent boy stuck between his past as a dependent child and his future as a responsible adult. The main character, Holden Caulfield, speaks directly to the audience in the first person narrative style throughout the story. He places himself between the two worlds of the innocence of a child and the adult's ability to make his own decisions. Because of Holden's choice, he is resistant to change and maintains the façade of a child while acting as an adult. Holden's true personality is revealed through the language he uses in a climatic point of the story, when Holden begins to have a panic attack triggered by all of the stress of balancing the contradicting personalities of kid and adult throughout the book. He says,

Anyway, I kept walking and walking up Fifth Avenue, without any tie on or anything. Then all of a sudden, something very spooky started happening. Every time I came to the end of a block and stepped off the curb, I had a feeling I'd never get to the other side of the street. I thought I'd just go down, down, down, and nobody'd ever see me again. Boy, did it scare me. You can't imagine. I started sweating like a bastard- my whole shirt and underwear and everything. Then I started doing something else. Every time I'd get to the end of a block I'd make believe I was talking to my brother Allie. I'd say to him, "Allie, don't let me disappear. Allie, don't let me disappear. Allie, don't let me disappear. Please, Allie." And then when I'd reach the other side of the street without disappearing, I'd *thank* him. Then it would start all over again as soon as I got to the next corner. But I kept going and all. I was sort of afraid to stop, I think- I don't remember, to tell you the truth. I know I didn't stop till I was way up in the Sixties, past the zoo and all. Then I sat down on this bench. I could hardly catch my breath, and I was still sweating like a bastard. I sat there, I guess, for about an hour. Finally, what I decided I'd do, I decided I'd go away. I decided I'd never go home again and I'd never go away to another school again. I decided I'd just see old Phoebe and sort of say good-by to her and then I'd start hitchhiking my way out West. (Salinger 198)

Through the examination of Holden's speech, a discovery of his desire to stay a carefree child while acquiring the decisiveness of an adult is unveiled.

Holden's entire story consists of action and would indicate a use of what Lanham has termed Verb Style. Like a little kid, he lives in the moment and tells his story in the same way. Lanham describes Verb Style versus Noun Style, saying they are "a style based on verbs, on *action* [and] a style based on nouns, on *stasis*" (11). Nowhere in the book does Holden stay in any one place for a long period of time. He travels from school to school throughout his life, from city to city even within the book. Holden is always going somewhere. This is why there is so little evidence of the Noun Style in his storytelling. His endless abundance of energy makes it easier for the reader to compare him to a small child. The child doesn't explain why he or she does something; the child is too busy doing and being. Lanham gives readers a formula to determine the presence of Noun Style in a text: "Is + preposition(s)." While looking for evidence of this in the text, there are only two instances of such a setup. There are 48 lexical verbs in this section alone. The large amount of action verbs in this sample compared to the miniscule amount of patterns that pertain to the Noun Style demonstrates Holden's child-like energy and impulse. Holden's audience can see why Lanham says, "And not by accident is the verb-style translation half as long [as a Noun Style text]" (18). The Verb Style gives readers solely action and what is going on without any of the pauses for explanation or even thought.

Holden's language is also paratactic. Within this aspect of grammar lies an elementary preconception. Many people believe that parataxis is used in history books for the young because "Third-graders are too young to understand subordination" (Lanham 42) and others say, "...parataxis [is] the natural language of childhood" (43). This relates perfectly to Holden's ambition of staying childlike. He wants his listeners to believe that he has not learned the value

of subordination, because he still maintains the innocence of a youth and subordination does not exist. Parataxis usually includes anaphora, or “a pattern of similar sentence-openings” as well (Lanham 31). Throughout the sample and the book, Holden predominantly uses the pattern, ‘I’ + verb or ‘I’d’ + verb. These are some of the more basic patterns used by paratactic authors. The pattern is made clearer below.

‘I’ + verb

I kept walking and walking
 I came to the end
 I had a feeling
 I thought
 I started sweating
 I started doing
 I kept going
 I was sort of afraid
 I think
 I don’t remember
 I know
 I didn’t stop
 I was way up in the Sixties
 I sat there
 I guess
 I decided (repeated four times throughout)

‘I’d’ + verb

I’d never get
 I’d just go
 I’d get to the end
 I’d make believe
 I’d say to him
 I’d reach the other side
 I’d thank him
 I’d do
 I’d go away
 I’d never go home
 I’d never go away
 I’d just see old Phoebe
 I’d start hitchhiking

Lanham explains another attribute of parataxis, which is that “No causal relationships are spelled out even when they scream to be” (30). This is seen in numerous sentences throughout the sample. The sentences below are not connected, despite how obviously they could be.

Original: Then all of a sudden, something very spooky started happening. Every time I came to the end of a block and stepped off the curb, I had a feeling I’d never get to the other side of the street.

Revised: Then all of a sudden, something very spooky started happening **which was that** every time I came to the end of a block and stepped off the curb, I had a feeling I’d never get to the other side of the street.

Original: Boy, did it scare me. You can’t imagine.

Revised: Boy, did it scare me **as** you can’t imagine.

Original: But I kept going and all. I was sort of afraid to stop, I think- I don’t remember, to tell you the truth.

Revised: But I kept going and all **because** I was sort of afraid to stop, I think, **but** I don’t remember, to tell you the truth.

Connectors can be placed in between the two sentences to make one subordinating clause.

Holden neglects to do this though, displaying a somewhat stilted rhythm of speech. But he does include many “and”s, and usually “then”s start out his sentences in this section. This shows the elementary organization of Holden’s story. This coordinates with Lanham’s criterion of parataxis when he says, “The ‘and’ connection runs through [the paratactic sentence] like a backbone” (31). The same thing can be said of “then,” especially in a story setting. Just as a child doesn’t take the time to organize his story for his audience, neither does Holden.

His paratactic style leads to even more evidence of his obvious use of what Lanham dubs Running Style. This style is exactly what it sounds like; as thoughts occur to the writer or speaker, events are told to the audience. There is no expert withholding of information until the last moments to build drama, only what happened and how it happened. Running Style is synonymous with stream of consciousness writing. Lanham describes it very well in just a few

sentences. He says, “The serial syntax registers the first thing first and then the second thing second, simple chronological sequence always calling the tune and beating the tempo” (48), and “Things happen as they want to, not as we would have them” (49). *Running Style* imitates life. It doesn’t stop to make itself more organized, more dramatic, it simply happens. Lanham presents an example of *Running Style* as a text “which runs from point to point, as happens in a private letter when one’s syntactic defenses are down, and yet which seems instinctive with rhythms, emphasis, turn of wit, and climax” (63). Nothing is contrived. Everything is innocent, in a sense. The writer leaves the reader to his or her opinion without rebut. The writer doesn’t sugarcoat things for the reader; the writer simply relays what happened from their own point of view, just as an oral story would be told by a child.

Holden uses emphasis through repetition, parallels, and adverbs to convey his experience to his listeners. Just as Holden feels stress overwhelming him in this climatic scene, so do readers who feel overwhelmed by repeated words and phrases and the exaggeration that appears in almost every line. Holden adds intensity to his speech by using adverbs like “never,” “hardly,” and “every” to accentuate if not exaggerate his emotions so that the reader can empathize with him. Compared to the 35 nouns in the paragraph, there are 24 adverbs. To have these numbers so close is interesting in the fact that, while nouns are necessary to a sentence, adverbs are solely additions to it. This high number of adverbs indicates a stronger emphasis on the character’s point of view than usual. Holden also puts the same words right next to each other to add emphasis.

Anyway, I kept **walking** and **walking** up Fifth Avenue...

I thought I’d just go **down, down, down**...

From Holden's description of his walking across the street, the audience can gather that he is walking quickly to avoid his own disappearance. And readers see how afraid he is to disappear from the street somehow. Holden seems to believe that if he disappears from the street, he will fall into some unknown abyss, and no one will ever hear from him again. He even illustrates his fear of disappearing by begging Allie, his deceased older brother, over and over.

I'd say to him, "**Allie, don't let me disappear. Allie, don't let me disappear. Allie, don't let me disappear.** Please, Allie."

The repetition brings out his desperation and fear. Just as any human who wishes fervently for a favor, Holden repeats himself to show how much he needs to be kept safe from disappearing. Holden also portrays insecurity in his speech about the validity of his story. Through his repetition of uncertain phrases, readers realize how truthful Holden wishes to be.

I think- I don't remember, to tell you the **truth**.

I sat there, **I guess**, for about an hour.

He also uses the term "sort of" twice in the text, indicating a lack of certainty on his part. If he cannot remember a certain part of his story clearly, the reader is made aware so that he is not branded a "phony"; something he despises. Towards the end of the paragraph, Holden makes his decision to leave everything behind and move out West. His resolution to stick to his decision is clear when he emphatically repeats the phrase "I decided I'd..." at the beginning of four consecutive sentences.

Finally, what **I decided I'd** do, **I decided I'd** go away.

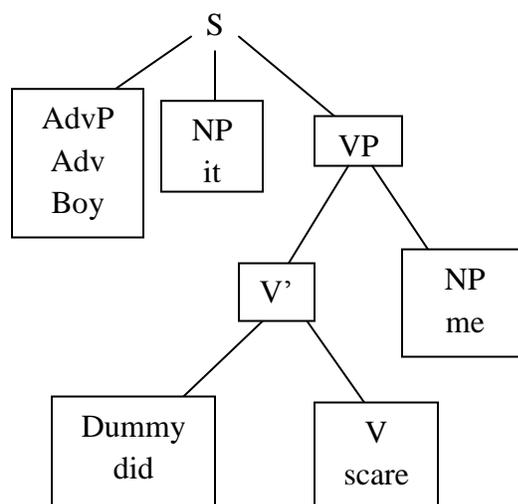
I decided I'd never go home again...

I decided I'd just see old Phoebe and sorta say good-by to her...

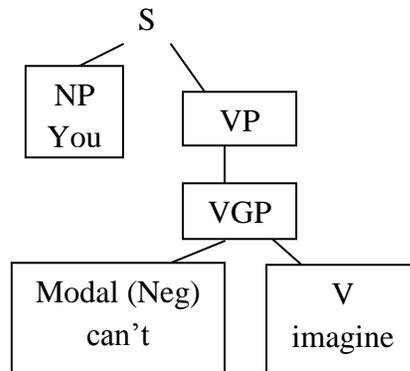
Holden finally shows signs of adulthood through his willingness to make an authoritative decision for his own life. His motives of maintaining a childlike innocence while acquiring autonomy over his own life are clearer to the reader by this point.

Readers find even more evidence of Holden’s subtle independence in the structure of his sentences. Not including fragmented sentences, there are ten simple sentences, ten complex sentences, three compound sentences, and one compound complex sentence. Compound sentences are actually simple sentences tied together by a coordinator. With this knowledge, Holden’s audience can see the wide array of simple sentences that Holden uses that are indicative of childhood, as well as the equally large amount of complex or compound complex sentences that show the intelligence and awareness of an adult. Holden takes on both roles of adult and child in his speech by balancing the length of his sentences to equal their presences. Complex, compound, simple and compound complex sentences can show simplicity through the way they are structured. If a sentence’s tree appears mostly linear, the speech is usually more simple in nature. Provided are several tree diagrams to demonstrate how linear Holden’s sentences are.

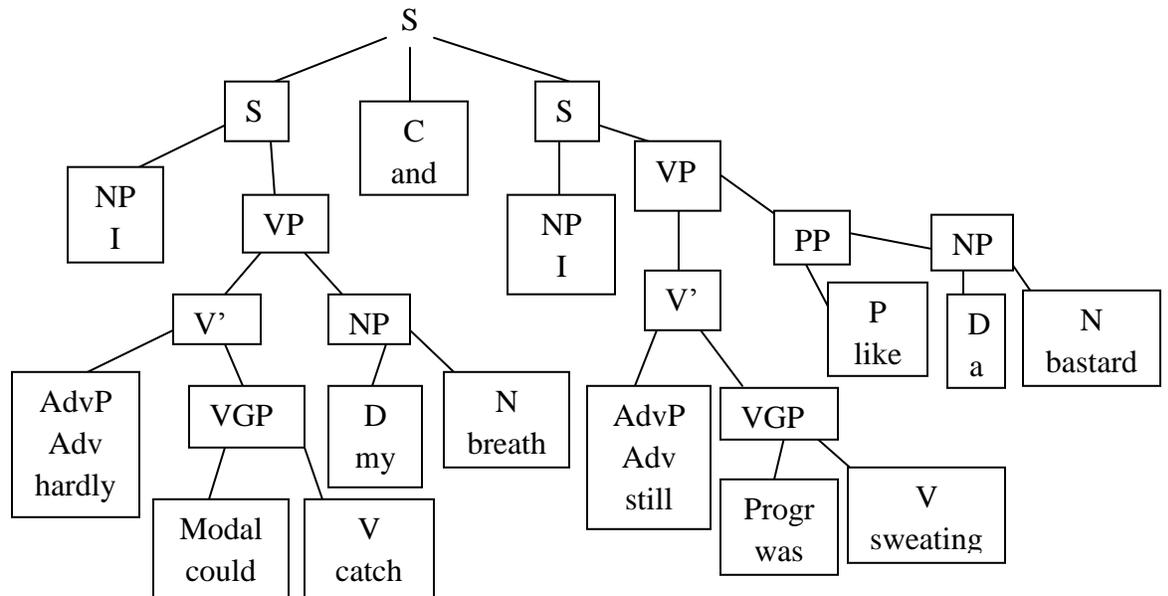
Boy, did it scare me. (Simple)



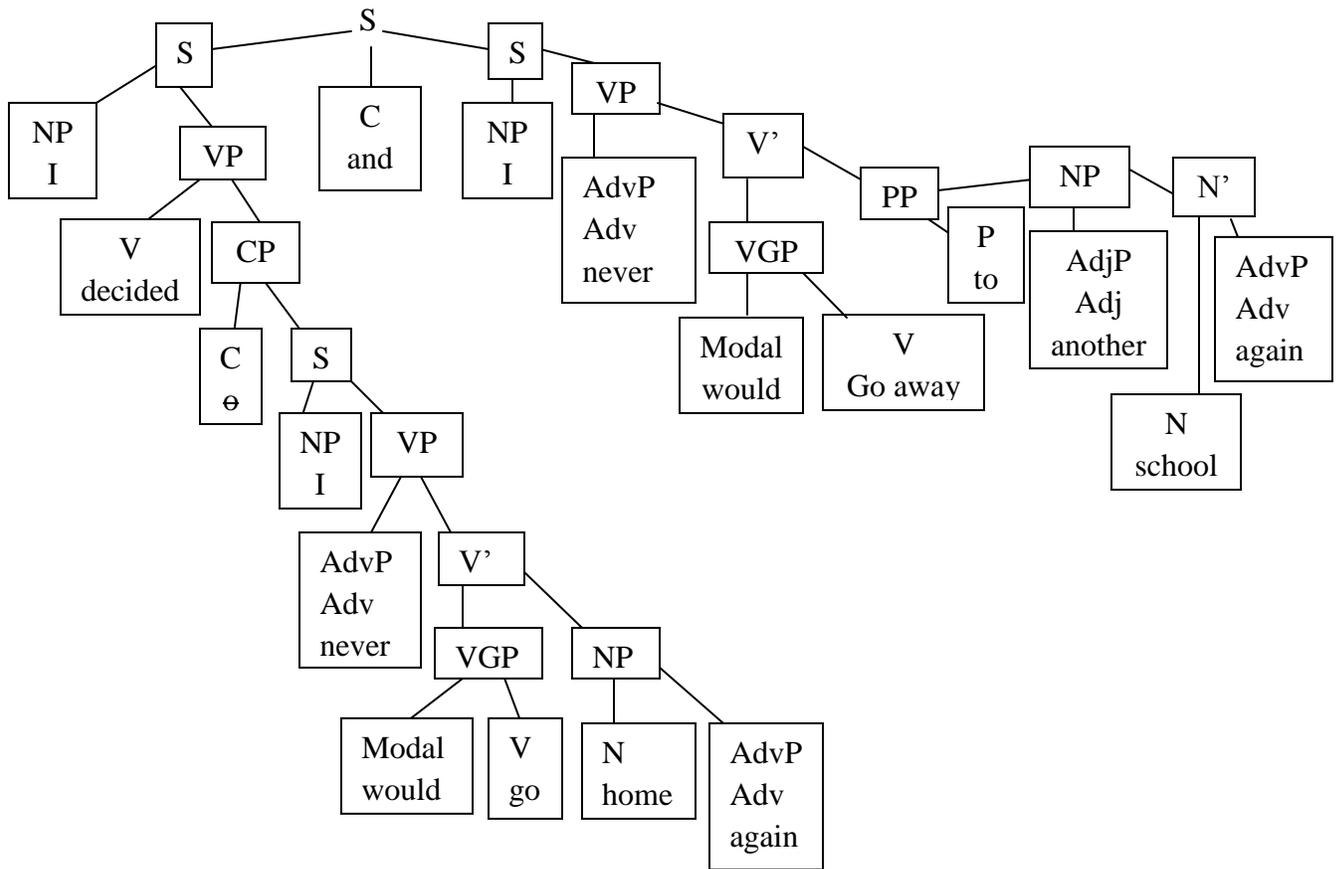
You can't imagine. (Simple)



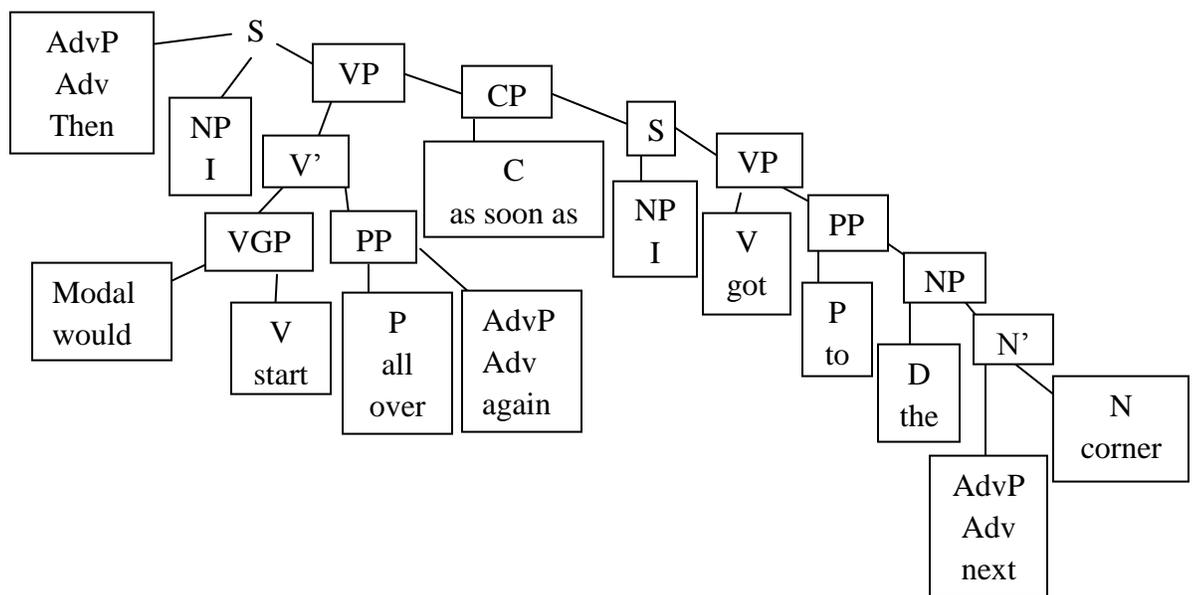
I could hardly catch my breath, and I was still sweating like a bastard. (Compound)



I decided I'd never go home again and I'd never go away to another school again. (Compound)



Then it would start all over again as soon as I got to the next corner. (Complex)



In the simple and complex tree diagrams, one can see the linear structure despite a few complicating branches. But it must be remembered that adverbs add complexity to the sentences, causing more sections to branch off. Something else that is interesting to note is that the compound sentences vary in complexity. The first compound sentence contains many branches, whereas the second compound sentence is very neat and linear. The second sentence could easily be split into two linear simple sentence tree diagrams, but the first sentence would end up looking like two masses of text. Within the constructions of these tree diagrams, Holden exposes his readers to an even more complete balance of his young and old personalities. He has the ability to use complex language, but he does not hesitate to speak simply.

Readers witness the same grown up features when seeking the balance of finite versus non-finite verbs in his sentences. Holden would be likely to use more non-finites if he wanted to remain a child forever, unable to make a decision of his own. But the results of a search for finites and non-finites prove something surprising. Holden uses many more finite phrases as opposed to non-finite phrases. There are an astounding 47 finite phrases to three non-finite phrases in the sample paragraph alone. To confirm this account, the first chapter has been reviewed. Throughout Chapter One, there are only 105 non-finite clauses while there are 221 finite clauses. The finite clauses more than double the non-finite clauses. This provides readers with the conclusion that Holden is more grown up than he lets on. He balances several other aspects of grammar so that no one will see how grown up he has become. This is not to say that Holden subconsciously wants to become an adult fully, only that he has more of a leaning towards adulthood than he'd care to let on. Holden's decisiveness is a main element in his use of finite clause as opposed to irresolute non-finite clauses. But he still wishes to retain that

independence of choice while keeping a childhood with innocence and fewer overwhelming consequences.

Holden turns out to be more of an adult in than expected, but he is still balanced between his desire for the child's innocent personality and the autonomy only entrusted to the adult world. Consciously he speaks like a child, rambling and using an elementary structure, but when his speech and the grammar he uses are looked at closely, a decision-making adult is discovered that shows Holden has already grown up. There is no reversal of age possible even if he does maintain the attitude or the grammar of a child. *The Catcher in the Rye* turns out to be a futile struggle of an adolescent caught between two worlds. Though he wants to stay in the kid's world of innocence where a brother's death could be avoided, he can't resist the independence of the adult world. Though his audience knows he will be stuck in the adult world for the rest of his life, Holden still tries to maintain the advantages of both worlds through an attempt to appear innocent and simple in speech. Because of his constant wish to remain in both spheres of age, Holden is revealed to be a phony himself.

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