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EXISTENTIAL CRISIS IN JEROME DAVID SALINGER'S THE CATCHER IN THE RYE AND SAUL BELLOW'S HERZOG

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Abstract

Jerome David Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* and Saul Bellow's *Herzog* were both written and published in the early second half of the 20th century, when significant changes were taking place in the social structure of American society as a result of the Second World War. And these changes, as well as the results they brought about are evidently reflected in both of the novels. Although the protagonists of the books Holden Caulfield, a college student who fails all the classes he takes, except for English; and Moses Herzog, a university professor who apparently has the potential to transform the social structure of the world, seem completely different from each other at first glance, a close reading of the novels shows us that the psychological processes they undergo and the existential vacuum that is caused by these processes are very much alike. In this paper it will be argued that both Caulfield and Herzog, who have been frequently associated with the writers of the novels, are going through an existential crisis. The symptoms as well as the causes of this existential crisis will be analyzed in relation to the socio-cultural transformations that took place in post war America.

Keywords: Existential Crisis, Family Relations, Post-War America, Alienation, Identity

1. INTRODUCTION

An existential crisis may be broadly defined as the moments when an individual questions whether life is worthy of living, and it is closely related to motivation crisis or identity deficit which according to Roy Baumeister and Dianne Tice is caused by the lack of a definitive self, thus, the individual cannot identify himself or herself with the common goals of the society and has difficulty about decision making processes in life (Baumeister and Tice, 1985, 400). L.V. Senkevich argues that existential crisis occur when an individual desires to live in a structured and organized way; however, he or she is aware that such an organization is not possible. And, this paradoxical situation brings the feelings of loneliness, meaninglessness, need for contact, protection and the feeling of belonging (Senkevich, 2016). The concept of "meaning" is at the heart of existence. It does not matter how difficult life is, if the individual is able to attach meaning to the particular events and situations that he or she goes through and believes that these events and situations have existential causes, he



or she is less likely to find him or herself in the existential vacuum. On the other hand, a person who does not regard life as having a worthy cause of living, no matter how comfortable it is, is more prone to undergo an existential crisis. The concept of meaning itself is directly related intrapersonal and interpersonal relations that the individual has. Dominique Louis Debats and colleagues, in a semi-quantitative research on the meaning of life, found out that the individuals who had strong relationships with themselves, others and the world attached much more meaning to life, while the ones whose relationships were weaker, found life less meaningful and were more likely to go through an existential crisis (Debats et al., 1995, 359).

An existential crisis might have various indications. However, at the broadest level, these indications can be analyzed at three basic levels: emotional, cognitive and behavioral. Butenaite Joana and colleagues characterize these three levels of an existential crisis as:

The emotional components include these aspects: emotional pain, despair, helplessness, disturbed sense of integrity, emotional vulnerability, guilt, fear, anxiety, and loneliness. The cognitive component includes these aspects: loss of meaning and goals, realization of own end, loss of personal values, decision making. The behavioral component is characterized by these aspects: restraining actions, rituals, relationship loss, health problems, addictions, anti-social behavior and the need for therapy (Joana et al., 2016, 9).

A deep analysis of the novels *The Catcher in the Rye* and *Herzog* will show that the both of the protagonists of the books, Holden Caulfield, and Moses Herzog experience many of the aforementioned symptoms of existential crisis. *The Catcher in the Rye* was written after the Second World War, in which J.D. Salinger himself was a soldier and witnessed the brutality of the war. Holden Caulfield, the protagonist of *The Catcher in the Rye*, first appeared in the *Slight Rebellion off Madison*, a short story by Salinger which was accepted by the *New Yorker* in 1941 but later rejected because it narrated the story of a boy (Holden Caulfield) who was afraid of war (Revidiego, 2019, 5). *The Catcher in the Rye* was set in 1949 America, when significant changes were taking place in terms of people's ideas, beliefs and conceptions about life. The destruction of war that revealed the brutality of humanity and civilization also destructed the modernist idea of human progression and brought a deep depression in turn. Salinger himself was one of the people who experienced this depression and disappointment in western society, and as a result, he created the alienated hero Holden Caulfield (Rosen, 1977, 547).

The Catcher in the Rye has been mostly analyzed in terms of the theme of "alienation" which is one of the most important components of existential crisis. Srebren Dizdar and Alpaslan Toker (2012, 72) in their paper: "Holden Caulfield: Alien in the *Catcher in the Rye*" argue that the society in which Salinger's characters live does not have a place for them, and the characters themselves do not know what they want. Thus, having been carried away from the common goals of the society, the characters are alienated and dragged into an existential vacuum. This assertion is an important clue to the existential crisis that Salinger's characters, Holden Caulfield in particular, undergo because one of the most fundamental characteristics of an existential crisis is the lack of commitment to social values and personal goals. Holden cannot adopt himself to the rapid transformations that characterized the post-war America, and thus he is alienated to the society around him, and this alienation brings depression as a result (Mankhi, 2018, 579).

Herzog, the most acclaimed book by the Nobel Prize winner Saul Bellow, is one of the most influential novels written in the post-war America and, similar to *The Catcher in the Rye* by Salinger, it reflects the emotional, spiritual and intellectual crises of this era (Mohammad and Hamadallah, 2013, 180). The existential vacuum that has shown itself in the second half of 20th century as a result of the changing paradigms concerning family relations, religious ideologies and belief in human progress have been reflected into Moses Herzog's personality and experiences. Allan Chavkin argues that the problem that Herzog faces most severely is the question of how the postmodern individual will pursue human values in a mass materialist society (Chavkin, 1979, 327). Herzog, who has multiple and fragmented relationships goes through a neurosis which almost leads him to suicide. Saul Bellow, coming from a cultural tradition where social commitments and family relations were at utmost significance remarked that: "I seem to have asked in my books, how can one resist the controls of this vast society without turning into a nihilist, avoiding the absurdity of empty rebellion?" (Bellow as cited in Chavkin, 1979, 226).

The Catcher in the Rye and *Herzog* have not been mentioned about much in the same context because their plots and characters do not have any resemblance at the surface level. Unlike the academically



unsuccessful teenager, Holden Caulfield, in Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, Bellow's novel *Herzog*, tells the story of Moses Herzog, a middle aged university professor, who has written hundreds of pages of review of the philosophical ideas that have influenced the existential paradigm of modern societies. However, in spite of the differences concerning the plots and themes, the two novels cannot be interpreted independently of zeitgeist of the post-war epoch which their writers witnessed. This effect is most visible in their characters Holden Caulfield and Moses Herzog who have been associated with the writers of the books by critics (Hart, 1983, 2; Baer and Gesler, 2004, 405). In this paper, the characters Herzog and Caulfield will be analyzed in terms of the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral components of existential dread they undergo. And these components of existential crisis will be argued in line with the socio-cultural setting in which the books were written.

2. THE CATCHER IN THE RYE

The most visible indication that Holden Caulfield, the protagonist and the narrator of *The Catcher in the Rye*, is going through an existential crisis is the feeling of loneliness that is both revealed explicitly and can be observed implicitly in his behaviors. Throughout the novel, Holden is not observed having any conversations with family members except for his little sister Phoebe whom he has a very deep connection with. Although his father and mother provide his monetary needs, Holden does not mention any emotional relationship between himself and his parents. Considering Holden's emotional nature which characterizes one of the most important themes in the novel; his deep love for his sister Phoebe and his dead brother Allie, the lack of emotional attachment to his parents indicates to the fragmented structure of family relations in post-war American society. No matter how creative Salinger was, Holden Caulfield was not solely the product of his creativity. It was also the social, psychological, political and historical setting of 1950s America that created this character and popularized him (Dorri, 2018, 3)

After Holden becomes drunk having sought companionship in various people and failing to do so, he expresses his loneliness with the following words: "...I was crying and all. I don't know why, but I was. I guess it was because I was feeling so damn depressed and lonesome" (*The Catcher in the Rye*, 1951, 198). Because Holden cannot satisfy his need of love and compassion through his family relations, he seeks this compassion in various other people, some of whom he doesn't even know. He asks his classmate's mother whom he meets on the train, and two taxi drivers to have a drink with him, but all of them reject his offer. He meets two nuns at a sandwich bar who behave friendly towards him, he gives them ten dollars for their collection and feels bad because he didn't give more although he doesn't have any spiritual connections to their cause.

Even though Holden is just sixteen, he tries to date with various women from different ages, one of them being his classmate's mother. He defines himself as a sex maniac: "I mean that's my big trouble. In my mind, I am probably the biggest sex maniac you ever saw. Sometimes I can think of very crummy stuff I would not mind doing if the opportunity came up" (*The Catcher in the Rye*, 1951, 81). However, a closer analysis shows that what Holden really looks for is not sex but compassion. This fact is best illustrated in the scene when he calls up an escort but rejects to have a sexual intercourse with her. When the escort takes off her clothes in front of him, he feels uncanny and expresses this with the following words: "I certainly felt peculiar when she did that. I mean she did it so sudden and all. I know you are supposed feel pretty sexy when somebody gets up and pulls their dress over their head, but I didn't. Sexy was the last thing I was feeling. I felt much more depressed than sexy" (*The Catcher in the Rye*, 1951, 123). Although he rejects to have sexual intercourse with the escort, he does not want her to leave, because he feels lonely and tries to start a conversation with her, which does not make any sense for her in that context.

Another indication that Holden Caulfield is going through an existential crisis is lack of commitment. He simply doesn't have a route or a purpose with his life. Throughout the book he does not mention any plans or dreams about his future except for getting away from the society he lives in. And his alienation to the society he lives in is because he cannot make sense of it. That's why he almost always uses the word "phony" for the people he encounters.

The window motive, which is frequently observed in the book, gives us further clues about the existential vacuum that Holden finds himself in. He is seen looking from the window on several occasions, but the picture he describes is that of almost nothingness at first, and later it is mentioned in relationship with death and suicide (Sojdelova, 2014, 24). Holden is lost in the post-war materialistic society in which everything has come to be seen in relation to its instrumental value. After he leaves his ex teacher Mr. Antolini's house at night,



he thinks of his dead brother Allie, and speaks to him about his mental state: "Every time I would get to the end of a block I'd make believe I was talking to my brother Allie. Allie don't let me disappear, Allie don't let me disappear. Please, Allie" (The Catcher in the Rye, 257). Having got lost in the post war American reality, Holden doesn't have much meaning in his life: He has neither any strong social connections nor a religious belief that might help the recovery of his dread by fulfilling his spiritual needs. Although he says that he has sympathy for Christ, he admits that he doesn't believe in any religions (ibid, 130). Lack of existential meaning and feeling of belonging bring him on the verge of a neurosis.

Other signs of existential crisis such as irrational fear and anxiety also can be observed with Holden. When he proposes to Sally Hayes, whom he doesn't have any genuine emotions for, he admits that he feels as if he always needs to be in action; or else, he fears that something bad will happen. However, he knows that his actions do not have any rational purposes. This fear which is caused by the existential dread he experiences, is also revealed when he feels cold in the park. He fears that he has got the pneumonia, and he is going to die: "I kept worrying that I was getting pneumonia, with all those hunks of ice in my hair, and that I was going to die" (The Catcher in the Rye, 1951, 201).

3. HERZOG

Herzog was first published in 1964, a short time after the publication of J.D. Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye (1951), and it reflects the psychological spirit of the post war America as well as the ideas and emotions of its writer. Just like the story of Holden Caulfield in The Catcher in the Rye, Herzog has various elements that indicate to its autobiographical structure. The character Herzog, like the writer of the book, Saul Bellow, lived in Canada, came up from a Jewish background, had multiple marriages, and is an intellectual who has problems with the mass society that has come to live mechanically without any spiritual values. This spiritual vacuum can easily be inferred from the various letters that the character Herzog writes to different people throughout the novel as well as his behavioral attitude towards certain events that he goes through.

Herzog is an accomplished professor, who comes from a highly spiritual background that values religion and family relations. However, in spite of his religious background and his archaic side that dignifies social relations, Herzog is no longer able to place religion and family in the centre of his life. In a letter he writes to God he says: "How my mind has struggled to make coherent sense, I haven't been too good at it" (Herzog, 1964, 325, italics original). His Jewish origin is an important theme in the novel and provides important clues to the inner conflicts he has. He frequently thinks about his past and his family as a way to escape from the depression that surrounds him. This paradoxical aspect of Herzog's psyche might be illustrated with these sentences:

Moses loved his relatives quite openly and even helplessly. His brother Willy, his sister Helen, even the cousins. It was childish of him; he knew that. He could only sight at himself, he should be so undeveloped on that significant side of his nature. He sometimes tried to think, in his own vocabulary, whether this might be his archaic aspect, prehistoric. Tribal, you know. Associated with ancestor worship and totemism (Herzog, 1964, 78).

Although Moses Herzog's archaic spirit that values family relations, love, emotional dependency, passion is mentioned a few times in the novel, he is no longer able to pursue this spirit in a world where relations have more instrumental values than spiritual. The modern society that surrenders him is criticized with the following words for disregarding the individual and adopting a materialistic view of life.

In a city. In a century. In transition. In a mass. Transformed by science. Under organised power. Subject to tremendous controls. In a condition caused mechanized. After the late failure of radical hopes. In a society that was no community and devalued the person. Owing to the multiplied power of numbers which made self negligible (Herzog, 1964, 200).

Herzog's fragmented personality is one of the major elements that signal to his existential crisis. This fragmentation, which is caused by the clash between his strong cultural background where personality is more solidified and his own life that is characterized by suspicion and the decentralization of ego, causes Herzog to experience an identity crisis. The fragmentation of Herzog's personality can also be observed when the novel is analyzed stylistically. Although at the surface level focalization appears to be on Herzog as one whole person,



there at least four Herzogs in the novel: “the reflecting deliberating narrator Herzog, the fictionalized childhood Herzog presented as a character by the first person narrator; the idealized as Jewish Rabbi in his letters; and the last Herzog that wanders around” (Li and Xu, 2019, 43). Masayuki Teranishi (2007, 21) argues that the polyphonic structure of the novel is resulting from Herzog’s multiple subjectivities and makes it different from the monophonic pre-modern and modern narration that is characterized by the belief of absolute reality.

Another important sign that indicates Moses Herzog’s existential crisis is his disappointment in his entire life. Despite his tremendous achievements in his career, he realizes that the life he desires to live is not the one he has. This disappointment has been expressed in the beginning of novel: “Considering his entire life, he realized that he had mismanaged everything-everything. His life was as the phrase goes, ruined” (Herzog, 1964, 3). In the novel Herzog, Moses Herzog is not the only person who goes through an existential crisis. Herzog’s second wife Madeline is also experiencing a crisis and re-evaluating everything. Madeline is aware that marriage and family life cannot satisfy her ego, and she feels the need for intellectual growth (Aborani, 1983, 103).

Herzog’s existential crisis is also revealed in the mentions of his mental health. His ex wife, Madeline; his friend, Valentine, who has an affair with Madeline, think that Herzog is not mentally healthy and force him to see a psychiatrist, which he does. And, in various scenes Herzog himself doubts if they are right about his sanity. Actually the very first line of the novel goes as: “If I am out of my mind, it’s all right with me, thought Moses Herzog” (Herzog, 1964, 1). In order to escape this the existential crises that he faces mentally and emotionally, Herzog keeps his mind busy with writing letters throughout the novel, as well as trying to find comfort in Ramona, a woman he is in relationship with. However these therapeutic processes are not completed in the novel. Although Ramona is extremely willing to share her life with Herzog; and although Herzog, in a mental letter, writes to Ramona “Marry me! Be my wife! End my troubles” (ibid. 66), he never makes such an attempt to start a life with her. And, he never sends the letters to their addressees, which indicates that the psychological processes he applies to overcome his existential dread, are not completed.

4. CONCLUSION

Works of art and literature cannot be analyzed and interpreted independently of the psychological, social, and economic reality of the era they are written in and the autobiographical traits of their creators. Both Saul Bellow’s Herzog and J.D. Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye* were written in the early second half of the 20th century when great changes took place in every aspect of life. The destruction of the Second World War caused people to question the beliefs and social conventions of the past generations. The reality of modern age, which placed human being to the centre of the universe, and the religious faith that provided their spiritual needs were no longer able to satisfy the ego of the post war self. The deterioration of social connections and family relations created individuals that had more freedom on the one hand, but these individuals were existentially more vulnerable on the other.

In *The Catcher in the Rye* and *Herzog* the protagonists Holden Caulfield and Moses Herzog, who have been frequently associated with the writers of the books, experience an existential crisis. This crisis can be analyzed at three different levels: cognitively, emotionally and behaviorally. On the cognitive aspect it is seen that both of the protagonist do not have any realistic purposes with their lives, and are lost in the mass society that surrenders them. Therefore, they experience loss of meaning in their values. On the emotional level, it is seen that the characters are not able to pertain their sense of integrity anymore because the elements they might identify themselves with such as ancestral lineage and religious belief have been destroyed by the postmodern reality. The feeling of loneliness is another sign to the existential crisis that the characters undergo at the emotional level. At the behavioral level it might be observed that both of the characters experience relation loss and anti social behavior. Both Caulfield and Herzog do not have any solidified family relations and their relations with their friends deteriorate because of their anti social behavior that results from and adds to their existential dread. Considering the association between the characters and the writers of the books, it can be inferred that the existential crisis Holden Caulfield and Moses Herzog undergo reflects the reality post war America.

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