

## *Original Paper*

# A Comparative Study of *The Bell Jar* and *The Catcher in the Rye* from the Perspective of Bildungsroman

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Received: January 12, 2026      Accepted: January 31, 2026      Online Published: February 26, 2026

doi:10.22158/sll.v10n1p112

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/sll.v10n1p112>

### **Abstract**

*This paper explores the confusions and challenges encountered by young people in their growth through a comparative study of *The Bell Jar* and *The Catcher in the Rye*. The growth of young people is influenced by multiple factors such as social changes, family pressure, gender cognition and psychological predicaments. Esther and Holden exhibit distinct personality traits and coping styles when faced with confusion. This paper points out that adolescent growth literature should reflect the challenges and confusions teenagers encounter in real life and shape authentic, three-dimensional characters in order to guide young people to better cope with challenges and achieve healthy growth.*

### **Keywords**

*adolescent growth, confusion, *The Bell Jar*, *The Catcher in the Rye**

### **Introduction**

The 1950s and 1960s in the United States were known as the “Timid Fifties”, and the young people of that era were called the “Beat Generation”, whose living state attracted widespread attention. Esther and Holden, the protagonists in two classic novels *The Bell Jar* and *The Catcher in the Rye*, are typical representatives of the perplexed youth in the post-war era. “Since people are born into a specific ‘cultural magnetic field’, their words, deeds, thoughts and reflections are not determined by themselves, but by the cultural environment they live in” (Hu, 2009, pp. 81-82). These two novels depict the challenges and confusions experienced by the hero and heroine in their growth. Their growth process reflects the realistic problems and psychological predicaments faced by young people at that time. Esther and Holden, the protagonists of *The Bell Jar* and *The Catcher in the Rye*, experienced similar growth at roughly the same age: both were perplexed about themselves and uncertain about the future, yet their coping styles differed vastly. The distinct personalities and coping methods they displayed in

the face of life's difficulties provide profound food for thought for readers. Despite numerous similarities between *The Bell Jar* and *The Catcher in the Rye*—such as the protagonists' growth backgrounds, psychological predicaments and confusion about life—the two novels also have obvious differences. These similarities and differences will be analyzed and elaborated in depth in the following text to explore the enlightenment and lessons these two novels offer for adolescent growth.

Through a comparative analysis of these two novels, we can better understand the challenges and confusions faced by the two young protagonists in their growth, thus providing valuable experiences and lessons for young people. These two literary works not only have profound reference significance for Western adolescent growth novels in the 20th century, but also are a profound depiction of the psychological state of young people at that time, arousing people's thinking and attention to the current problems of adolescent growth.

### 1. Confusion amid Multiple Factors

*The Bell Jar* is an autobiographical novel published by Sylvia Plath, a renowned female poet of the American Confessional School, one month before her suicide, and it is also her only novel. The novel tells the story of a 19-year-old female college student who falls into confusion in her growth in New York and eventually suffers a mental breakdown. Almost all articles mentioning *The Bell Jar* at home and abroad refer to it as a “Salinger-esque female novel” and “a *Catcher in the Rye* for female readers”. *The Catcher in the Rye*, on the other hand, is a full-length novel published by Jerome David Salinger in 1951, which depicts the growth experience of the 17-year-old protagonist Holden during his three-day wandering life in New York after leaving school. Undoubtedly, *The Catcher in the Rye* and *The Bell Jar* share a common growth theme. Both novels tell the story of young people who have just entered society and are seeking their life positioning, which is the reason why the academic circle compares the two works. There are relatively few existing studies on the comparative research of these two works. Scholars at home and abroad have interpreted and discussed the novels from various perspectives such as feminism, existentialism and spatial theory, but there is little research on their comparison. Among them, Xiao Hai'ou interprets Esther's predicament as her excessive immersion in the world of others, while Holden is overly trapped in the self. Tian Enqiao argues in his paper that both Esther and Holden experience a life-death-rebirth cycle in their growth journey. Based on existing research, this paper compares the growth experiences of Esther and Holden in *The Bell Jar* and *The Catcher in the Rye*, explores the causes of adolescent growth confusion, and hopes to provide inspiration for adolescent growth works and the growth of young people themselves.

Both novels narrate the protagonists' growth process in the first person, and the protagonists are roughly the same age: Esther, the heroine of *The Bell Jar*, is 19 years old, and Holden, the hero of *The Catcher in the Rye*, is 17 years old. They are both at the turning point from campus to society, with their world outlook, outlook on life and values yet to take shape, and they are full of infinite longing for

society and the future. However, reality is not as good as imagined. Teenagers' sensitive psychology makes them rebels, and their immaturity determines their personality defects and inadequacies (Liang, 2008, p. 6). This part will compare the similarities in the two novels: the confusion and perplexity they experience under multiple factors such as society, family and education.

### *1.1 Pressure amid Social Changes*

The "Beat Generation" refers to American young people in the 1950s and 1960s, who were regarded as a generation of lost, rebellious and perplexed young people. The loss and rebellion of this generation of young people stem in part from the special social background of the United States at that time. After World War II, great social changes took place in the United States. Economic prosperity and scientific and technological progress improved people's living standards, but at the same time brought social instability and cultural conflicts. Externally, the government maintained the Cold War and launched the Vietnam War, with the fear of war hanging over everyone's heart; internally, it opposed communism and suppressed progressive forces, making many young people suspicious and resentful of the government and authority. At the same time, social problems such as racial discrimination and gender discrimination became increasingly prominent. Lacking the guidance of correct ideas, young people indulged themselves and fell into hedonism and disorder. Against such a social background, Esther and Holden embarked on their growth journey. There are many social influencing factors in the novels; to avoid verbosity, this paper selects several representative aspects: political repression, racial prejudice, hedonism and gender relations.

### *1.2 Assimilation under Political Repression*

The United States implemented political repression in the 1950s, opposing communism and progressive ideas at home. The opening of *The Bell Jar* reads: "That summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn't know what I was doing hanging around in New York". The government suppressed those who held different views, leaving people generally spiritually empty—just as Esther lingered in New York all day, wandering aimlessly. The Rosenbergs were to be electrocuted, and in the face of such a terrible punishment, Hilda was actually delighted. The sentence "I'm so glad they're going to die" appears three times in the novel's narration, reflecting Esther's shock at these words, as if they echoed in her mind endlessly. The novel compares Hilda to a ghost, revealing the ghastliness of her inner heart. She harbored such great hostility towards the Rosenbergs without truly understanding them, which shows that she had been assimilated under political repression.

### *1.3 Erosion by Racial Prejudice*

Racial discrimination, which was deeply unpopular, was still prevalent in the United States at that time. The description of racial prejudice in *The Catcher in the Rye* goes like this: "All I saw was a kid, a colored kid, going into the bathroom, with a wooden pass stuck in his back pocket, the same kind we used to have. Having that meant he was allowed to use the bathroom". At that time, people of color could not use the same bathrooms as white people and had to go to special bathrooms for colored

people. The pervasive political repression and racial discrimination around their growth proved that the existing politics was not as free and wonderful as advertised. Such an environment would subtly influence Esther and Holden's ideological concepts until they were also eroded by this way of thinking.

#### *1.4 Chaos in Hedonism*

After the war, against the backdrop of America's economic prosperity, young people pursued hedonism, unlimited freedom, and indulgence of their spirits and bodies. In terms of gender relations, they abandoned traditions, leading to chaotic sexual relationships. In *The Bell Jar*, Esther is attracted by Doreen's free and unrestrained lifestyle, yet the traditional values she has received since childhood make her unable to psychologically approve of Doreen's decadence and absurdity. When she witnesses the crazy and indulgent behavior between Doreen and Lenny, whom she meets for the first time, she even feels that she has also become dirty and ugly. She soaks herself in hot water, hoping to forget everything and be as pure as a newborn baby. Her boyfriend Buddy pretends to be innocent in front of her, but in fact, he spent an entire summer sleeping with a waitress. Esther cannot accept such a boyfriend at all, let alone his demand that she remain a virgin while he has chaotic sexual relationships, and still pretends to be innocent to continue dating her. Thus, Esther and Buddy go their separate ways. In *The Catcher in the Rye*, Stradlater also dates various girls frequently and flits between different sexual relationships. The adults staying in the hotel where Holden lives after leaving school also live in a state of moral chaos. However, both Esther and Doreen are in a contradictory state of mind about this. On the one hand, as adolescents, they yearn for sex and desire a beautiful love and sexual life; on the other hand, they fear sex and dare not get involved due to the influence of traditional concepts. Although Esther cannot bear such chaotic gender relations, she can no longer be a traditional "good girl" as she used to be. She first tries to seduce the simultaneous interpreter Constantine but fails, and then meets Marco with Doreen's introduction, only to be almost raped by him. After returning to the hotel, Esther throws away all her colorful clothes that attract the opposite sex, expressing her disappointment with such relationships and her mental breakdown. Holden, although he deeply detests all this in his heart, also finds these indecent acts quite fascinating. Unable to resist the temptation of various adult games and overcome his inner loneliness, Holden hires a prostitute through the elevator boy. Although he stops himself at the last minute due to the innocence that has not been completely lost in his heart, he is extorted by the elevator boy and the prostitute in a robbery-like manner. These are the two protagonists' explorations of growth in terms of gender relations.

## **2. The Absence of Mentors in Growth**

In traditional bildungsromans, the protagonists always have mentors to guide them through their growth and help them achieve epiphany. However, in these two novels, the role of mentors is absent. The family is the initial and most important "interpersonal network" for an individual's existence in society. Such an "interpersonal network" is by no means closed. "It is affected by the social

environment at all times, and all kinds of social problems will eventually manifest themselves at the end of the internal interpersonal network of the family” (She, 2016, pp. 89-90). Esther’s father died when she was nine years old, placing the burden of life entirely on her mother’s shoulders, and her father has been an absent figure in Esther’s growth. Esther’s mother is indifferent to her daughter’s inner thoughts and only cares about whether Esther can meet social expectations: learning German shorthand, finding a secretarial job, and marrying a successful man. She ignores Esther’s true feelings and needs, and even fails to provide support and understanding when her daughter falls into a mental predicament. For the mother, Esther’s problems are due to her lack of strong will, and she even considers her daughter being sent to a mental hospital an insult and a harm. Holden is born into a wealthy middle-class family with superior living conditions. His father is a successful lawyer, but Holden’s poor academic performance disappoints and angers his father, who often beats and scolds him. His mother is immersed in grief over the death of his younger brother and does not care enough about Holden. Neither parent can communicate with Holden at the inner and spiritual level. Mr. and Mrs. Caulfield, Holden’s parents, “failed to give Holden the parental understanding he needed” (Bloom, 2007, p. 21). His brother D. B. was once Holden’s idol, but he fell into the empty and meaningless life of adults after going to work in Hollywood, abandoning his talent and trampling on his wonderful works, thus gradually losing contact with Holden. His younger sister Phoebe is Holden’s spiritual sustenance and a symbol of a beautiful angel in his heart. “He cannot defeat the world, nor can he change it”; all he can do is try his best to protect Phoebe, because Phoebe represents “the innocent teenage world that Holden does not want to leave”, rather than “the false adult world” and “most of the people wandering around Holden” (Moore, 1965, pp. 160-161). However, Phoebe is too young to provide Holden with correct guidance and direction. Neither protagonist can obtain proper guidance and help from their family, lacking mentors in their growth.

Mentors in the growth process not only include family members; the relationship with growth partners is also crucial. Esther’s good friend Doreen is so unrestrained, forming a sharp contrast with the traditional Esther. Esther yearns to be like Doreen but cannot fully become such a person. Another friend Betsy is a traditional “good girl” whose goal is to become a housewife—a life that Esther cannot accept even more, as she cannot abandon her poetry and her career. Her boss Jay Cee is too rigid and serious, with no personal life outside of work and no attention to her appearance; Esther cannot accept Jay Cee’s lifestyle either. Therefore, none of Esther’s friends can become her role models for growth. For this reason, Esther often thinks of the fig tree: “One fig was a happy home with a husband and children, another was a poet, another was a brilliant professor”. “As I sat there hesitating, the figs began to wither and turn black... one by one they fell to the ground”. At school, Holden is not friends with Ackley or Stradlater, and his relationship with Mr. Antolini also ends because he fears it is a homosexual relationship. Holden does not love Sally, yet he wants to take her away from the hypocrisy of the adult world because of her beauty and proposes to wander with her. Of course, Sally refuses him,

and he also sees through that Sally is not like him—she has long been infected with the vices of adults. Holden yearns for friends in his heart. When he leaves school and meets two nuns on the road, and when Phoebe asks him what he likes, Holden thinks of his accidental conversation with the two nuns. Therefore, Holden's relationships with the people around him are not the true friendships he desires in his heart, and he cannot obtain the correct guidance from mentors in his growth.

### 3. Repression under the Educational Philosophy

Esther is an excellent student with good grades even in physics, a subject she dislikes. It is precisely because of this that she wins the opportunity to go to New York in an essay contest. In fact, an independent woman like Esther who yearns to realize her life value was not accepted by people at that time. In 1950s America, a woman's perfect life was to marry a good husband, have children, have a seemingly happy family life, and dedicate her whole life to this. At school, when she studies hard, her roommates sneer at her, saying "she is wasting her golden college years", but when they learn that Esther has a boyfriend, they are "surprised and full of admiration". At home, Esther's mother hopes she can learn shorthand so that she can serve her promising man—transcribing letters. All concepts tell Esther that she is wrong, and Esther also tries to change herself to cater to these so-called "correct" standards. She goes to social parties with Doreen but is almost raped, which brings her more harm and forces her to rethink whether she should cater to the mainstream society. Such ideas around her instill concepts that contradict her inner thoughts, leaving Esther bruised and battered instead.

Holden's school places an extreme overemphasis on academic scores. He is to be expelled for failing his exams, yet in contrast, the school turns a blind eye to his classmates Ackley's serious personal hygiene problems and Stradlater's chaotic sexual relationships. The reason why the school can achieve proud academic results is that it can expel students with poor grades at will. In Holden's eyes, Pencey Prep is full of hypocrisy, and the people it cultivates are all despicable and false. In *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden believes that there are obvious double standards at Pencey Prep. The school is extremely harsh on students who fail their exams and can expel them without mercy, but turns a blind eye to some students with misconduct and moral corruption. This unfairness makes Holden indignant. Holden observes the moral decay and bad conduct of some students in the school: his classmate Ackley has serious personal hygiene problems, and Stradlater has chaotic sexual relationships, yet these issues do not receive the school's attention and intervention. Pencey Prep regards students' academic scores as the only standard of success, ignoring students' personality, moral character and emotional development. The school prides itself on excellent academic results but neglects students' all-round development and personality shaping; this utilitarian educational philosophy repels Holden. In Holden's eyes, all the people cultivated by Pencey Prep are despicable and false. The school emphasizes superficial glory and formal rules, ignoring the authenticity of students' inner hearts and the expression of their emotions.

#### 4. Struggles on the Path of Growth

The multiple factors from society, family and education mentioned above make Esther and Holden's growth extremely difficult. Their language reflects their inner hearts. Esther's language is humorous at first, then turns into sarcastic black humor when she enters society, and finally becomes cold and matter-of-fact, full of depression and despair. Holden, on the other hand, swears constantly, and his language is full of cynicism towards the world. "Holden uses different cold, rude and often false vulgar language in public, but elegant language in his own secret world. Thus, Esther and Holden enter a stage of growth filled with confusion and perplexity" (Weinberg, 1966, p. 441). Both of them want to escape from real life: Esther wants to leave to write novels, learn shorthand, finish her graduation thesis, and even consider taking a year off school to be an apprentice to a potter or a waitress in Germany to learn German. Holden wants to flee to the West, pretend to be a deaf-mute so that he does not have to communicate with anyone, build a small wooden house of his own, marry a deaf-mute wife, and have his own children. But the reality is that they cannot escape, and even have death urges. They are confused about their identity transformation: Esther can no longer return to her former self, and Holden does not want to become a hypocritical and selfish adult, nor can he go back to his innocent and kind childhood. He wants to leave school and spend three days experiencing the adult world in New York. Esther originally planned to attend a summer writing workshop hosted by a renowned writer in New York but was not admitted. This unexpected blow deepened the confusion and frustration she felt during her trip. The once cheered-up Esther tried to make a summer plan for herself, including writing a novel, learning shorthand, completing her graduation thesis, and even considering taking a year off to study pottery or learn German in Germany. However, these plans are ultimately described by Esther as "a bunch of crazy rabbits", implying her gradual slide into mental breakdown: insomnia, inability to concentrate, neglect of personal hygiene, and ultimately leading to her mental collapse. Holden's three-day wandering in New York exposes him to the cruelty of reality and the hypocrisy of society, but he ultimately fails to find true growth and answers, instead falling into deeper loneliness and confusion—a moment regarded as the failure of his growth. Overall, Esther and Holden are repressed and troubled in political, family and educational aspects, and these factors together lead to the ultimate failure of their growth. They cannot truly realize their potential and inner needs, and eventually fall into loneliness, confusion and loss.

#### 5. Reasons behind Their Choices

Despite their similar growth confusion, Esther and Holden make very different choices: Esther loses faith in real life, attempts suicide several times unsuccessfully, is sent to the hospital for treatment by her mother, and is trapped under the bell jar; Holden decides to leave Pencey Prep to experience the adult world in New York for three days. In this process, their growth becomes alienated: Esther feels that she is always shrouded by the bell jar, and Holden yearns to be the catcher in the rye, having lost

faith in the adult world. Why do they make such different choices? This paper argues that it is due to their different personalities, genders and ages.

In terms of personality, Esther sets extremely high demands on herself, often ignoring her own strengths and overemphasizing her inadequacies in certain aspects. She often blames herself for not being good at cooking, shorthand, dancing, singing, lacking a sense of balance, being unskilled in horseback riding and skiing, and not being proficient in multiple languages. Esther thinks she has always been useless but has never realized this. She feels that she has no strengths other than winning scholarships and awards, and that this era is coming to an end—"the dates on the trophies are like the dates on tombstones". Esther is confused and disappointed, often trapped in self-doubt and self-abnegation. When she completely denies her achievements and regards herself as a "failure", she becomes her own enemy, losing appreciation and love for herself, and is prone to falling into the abyss of depression and mental breakdown. Holden, despite his constant swearing, never belittles himself. He detests the hypocrisy and injustice of society, and often shows indifference and unreasonableness to the people around him. He sets high demands on himself, often feels lonely and confused, and is full of doubts and challenges about life and human existence. Although he shows a dismissive attitude, his inner heart is full of longing for truth, purity and beauty. Holden has both a rebellious side and a pursuit of truth and beauty; he never gives up the pursuit of beauty, nor does he give up on himself.

Esther lives in 1950s American society, where social expectations and gender roles for women were very fixed and restrictive. Women were expected to be good wives and mothers, conforming to traditional family values, yet Esther has greater aspirations and pursuits in her heart—she yearns for freedom and independence but cannot find a lifestyle suitable for herself. Esther faces gender discrimination and oppression in society; she is controlled and exploited by men and cannot possess her own independent rights and the ability to make autonomous decisions. Such gender discrimination and oppression make Esther feel powerless and desperate, unable to break free from the social constraints on women. Esther has confusion about her gender identity and self-cognition. She has contradictory emotions and desires in her heart and cannot find her true identity and sense of belonging. Esther is trapped in the predicament of gender roles in society; she cannot find a suitable lifestyle and self-identity, and cannot break free from the shackles of traditional gender roles. This predicament makes Esther feel confused and desperate, ultimately leading to her mental breakdown. Holden, however, does not face such problems—even someone like Stradlater does not suffer from such predicaments.

Holden wants to be the catcher in the rye mainly because he detests the hypocrisy and injustice of society. He cannot stand the hypocrisy and pretentiousness of the people around him and resents the hypocrisy in society. Holden is disappointed with the hypocrisy and insincerity of the adult world; he hopes to protect those innocent children, keep them away from the depravity and hypocrisy of society, and preserve their innocent and pure hearts. At 17, Holden is in a stage of adolescent rebellion and

confusion, harboring strong doubts about society and life. He yearns to find something true and pure, and is angry and dissatisfied with the hypocrisy and injustice in society. Therefore, he hopes to be a watchman who protects the innocence of children, guarding them away from the worldliness and hypocrisy of society and preserving their purity and innocence. This pursuit and longing for innocence and truth drive Holden to want to be the catcher in the rye. In *The Bell Jar*, Esther has different growth backgrounds and emotional experiences from Holden, which make her unable to be the catcher in the rye like him. Esther is confronted with the hypocrisy of adults and the absurdity of society; her disappointment and despair with the surrounding environment make it difficult for her to find trust and hope in the world. She is confused and disappointed with social reality and cannot maintain the pursuit of innocence and beauty like Holden. In addition, Esther lacks a supporter and comforter like Phoebe, Holden's sister, in the story. Phoebe, Holden's younger sister, is an innocent and kind child who gives Holden strength and hope, making him feel the warmth of family and affection. Phoebe's existence has a certain healing effect on Holden, helping him find his direction and strength in the growth process. In contrast, Esther lacks such a supporter and comforter; she struggles in loneliness and despair and cannot find a source of healing and hope. Therefore, Esther cannot be the catcher in the rye like Holden, and her inner heart is full of disappointment with society and confusion about life.

## 6. Enlightenment from Growth

Based on the above analysis of *The Bell Jar* and *The Catcher in the Rye*, adolescent growth literature should reflect the challenges and confusions teenagers encounter in real life, shape authentic and three-dimensional characters, and enable readers to resonate with them. The plot and character behaviors should conform to the growth environment and psychological state of teenagers. At the same time, works should explore teenagers' cognition and exploration of self-identity in the growth process. The confusion, struggles and growth experiences of the protagonists should arouse readers' thinking about self-cognition and growth. Adolescent growth literature should pay attention to the emotional and psychological challenges faced by teenagers, such as friendship, love, family relations and self-cognition. Works can help readers understand and cope with these emotional problems and guide them to better manage their emotions and psychological states. Works can reflect the realistic problems and challenges of society, guide teenagers to pay attention to social issues, and cultivate their social responsibility and critical thinking.

From Esther in *The Bell Jar* and Holden in *The Catcher in the Rye*, we can draw several lessons about adolescent growth: every teenager has their own unique ideas, emotions and confusions in the growth process. It is important to respect the individual differences of each teenager and not simply categorize them or expect them to develop according to a certain standard. When teenagers face pressures and challenges from society, family, and themselves, it is crucial for parents and educators to listen to their thoughts and emotions. Providing support and understanding can help them cope with difficulties and

setbacks. At the same time, the establishment of self-cognition is very important in the adolescent growth process. We should encourage them to think about their own values, emotional needs and goals, and help them build self-confidence and independent thinking ability. Emotional health is essential for adolescent growth. Teaching them how to express emotions effectively, handle pressure and establish healthy interpersonal relationships can help them better cope with the challenges in life.

### Conclusion

Through a comparative study of *The Bell Jar* and *The Catcher in the Rye*, we can see the confusions and challenges faced by young people in their growth process. Multiple factors such as social changes, family pressure, gender cognition and psychological predicaments all have an impact on adolescent growth. Both Esther and Holden face confusion and perplexity in their growth, but their coping styles are different. The paper points out that adolescent growth literature should reflect the challenges and confusions teenagers encounter in real life, shape authentic and three-dimensional characters, and enable readers to resonate with them. At the same time, works should explore teenagers' cognition and exploration of self-identity in the growth process. Adolescent growth literature can help readers understand and cope with emotional problems and guide them to better manage their emotions and psychological states. Finally, the paper calls for attention to the problems of adolescent growth, guiding teenagers to better cope with challenges and achieve healthy growth.

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