

Analysis of Holden's Tragedy from Utilitarianism in *The Catcher in the Rye*

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Abstract

The *Catcher in the Rye* is one of the most famous novels of Jerome David Salinger's works. In this novel, Salinger set the timeline of the story in the three days 16-year-old Holden left school and wandered New York. He shows the truest vision of American society from the high school student, Holden's perspective, since the end of the World War II. At that time, the United States in the 1950s had just won World War II and became a political, economic and military power. At the same time, Utilitarianism was popular among American people, and people's spiritual world was like a wasteland. This paper intends to point out the reason of Holden's tragedy by analyzing the relation of utilitarianism and Holden's characters. An analysis of utilitarian society, which is the background of the novel, is helpful for a deeper understanding of this book.

Keywords

The *Catcher in the Rye*; Holden; Tragedy; Utilitarianism.

1. Introduction

The Catcher in the Rye, as Salinger's representative work, was released at a special time, when American youth suffered from lack of thought and emotional indifference. Therefore, as soon as the protagonist Holden with a spirit of resistance appeared, he was loved by countless hesitant young people. In an instant, this middle school student who was wearing a red cap and denounced the "fake model" adult world became the target of countless young people to imitate. They felt that Holden's words were meant for them, and Salinger criticized hypocrisy. and consumerism, these express their dissatisfaction with society. Even today, this novel still has a huge influence, and the spirit of resistance conveyed in the novel is still sought after by countless young people. It is recognized as one of the "modern classic novels" in contemporary American literature.

This novel mainly tells what Holden, the protagonist, sees and hears about wandering around New York for three days after being expelled from school because of unqualified grades. Holden has a distinct personal image. Externally, he is an ignorant and rebellious bad boy. In fact, in his heart, he desperately yearns for a pure spiritual world, and he yearns to be the defender of pure childhood [1]. As he said,

Anyway, I keep picturing all these little kids playing some game in this big field of rye and all. Thousands of little kids, and nobody's around—nobody big, I mean—except me. And I'm standing on the edge of some crazy cliff. What I have to do, I have to catch everybody if they start to go over the cliff—I mean if they're running and they don't look where they're going I have to come out from somewhere and catch them. That's all I'd do all day. I'd just be the catcher in the rye and all. I know it's crazy, but that's the only thing I'd really like to be. I know it's crazy[4].

However the reality is completely different from his dream. Under the influence of utilitarianism, the material living standard has been rapidly improved, and the development speed of material needs and spiritual needs does not match, resulting in people's spiritual life

becoming extremely poor and empty. In a hedonistic utilitarian society, adults become hypocritical, sophisticated, and snobbish. The great difference between dreams and reality made Holden painful and depressed, so he chose to use rebellion to escape the real world. But in the constant struggle, he gradually lost himself, and finally derailed from the real world, and finally indulged in the beautiful spiritual world of his fantasy forever.

2. Utilitarianism

2.1. The Meaning of Utilitarianism

Since the development of human knowledge, the debate on the standard of "right and wrong" still persists, which has also created a variety of academic schools, and there are constant verbal criticisms against each other. "Right and wrong" is a moral criterion for judging individual behavior, and its main difference lies in the question of the proof of morality and the source of the right of moral criterion [5]. But all factions firmly believe in the existence of moral ethics. Among them, utilitarianism plays an important role in the theory of moral philosophy.

The principle of utilitarianism, also known as the principle of greatest happiness, was founded by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill in modern times, and it inherits and promotes the empiricist tradition, Epicurean hedonism and rational egoism public welfare. Thinkers headed by Bentham all believed that utility is pleasure itself, as well as avoiding pain. Regarding the annotation of the "right and wrong" standard, utilitarianism believes that the behavior that can promote "happiness" is "yes", and the behavior that is contrary to happiness is "no". Among them, happiness means expected happiness, and unhappiness means pain. It can be seen that utilitarianism does not consider the motives and means of individual behavior, and only evaluates whether the behavior is moral or not by considering the actual efficacy or benefit of the behavior result (whether to obtain happiness). At the same time, after the inheritance and development of Bentham and Mill, the basic viewpoint of utilitarianism was formed. There are not only quantitative and qualitative differences between bitterness and happiness, but also people, based on sensory experience, will choose the one that suits their own conditions. A higher goal of happiness, "It is better to be a dissatisfied man than a satisfied pig; it is better to be a dissatisfied Socrates than a satisfied fool"[5]. In the relationship between personal and general interests The highest goal of utilitarianism is to achieve the greatest happiness of the greatest number of people, and the goal of the actor is not the happiness of the actor himself, but the happiness of all people related to the behavior. On this basis, we can make a simple summary of the principle of utilitarianism: that is, the motivation and purpose of behavior is to pursue happiness and happiness, and the effect of behavior (whether it can bring happiness and happiness) is the criterion for judging morality or not. Just a means to gain joy and happiness.

From the above point of view, it can be seen that utilitarianism's evaluation of moral standards is too single, which is one of the reasons why it has been condemned by philosophers of other schools. A single moral standard leads to moral indifference. Utilitarianism is further divided into individual utilitarianism and social utilitarianism, while Bentham believes that collective and social interests are equal to the simple addition of individual interests. At the same time, the theory of utilitarianism emphasizes that individual interests and collective interests tend to be in harmony. Due to the complexity of human nature, this will inevitably lead to the emergence of self-interested tendencies. This is also one of the concrete manifestations of moral indifference. The ultimate goal of "self-interest" is to satisfy one's own desires, that is, "pleasure". It may stand for hedonistic utilitarianism, which regards pleasure as the only good and pain as the only evil. But the continuous enhancement of material desires will make people become more and more greedy, so they will choose a lower level of happiness compared with

their own conditions, so that they ignore the pursuit of the spiritual world (a higher level happiness), eventually become hypocritical and snobbish, and even lose social morality.

2.2. The Embodiment of Utilitarian Ideas in This Novel

For social and economic development, the utilitarian idea of pursuing maximum benefit is undoubtedly the most effective choice in the short term. "But what kind of things we humans do is justified or unjust, it may not be possible to use only utilitarian standards, because such standards may violate the basic rights of human beings" [2]. The goal of utilitarianism is efficiency, but human freedom and dignity, not efficiency, at least not just efficiency. The ultimate admiration for utilitarianism, that is, efficiency, will eventually lead to some people losing their humanity and heading for collapse. This was fully demonstrated in the United States in the 1950s.

America was going through a turbulent but extraordinary time in those days. On the one hand, the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union is going on. On the other hand, the United States had just experienced World War II, and it also made a fortune from the war, and the material was unprecedentedly prosperous. From the surface of society, it seems that everyone lives affluent, but in fact the gap between the rich and the poor has already gradually opened, the social atmosphere behind the economic prosperity is suffocating. Science and technology and modern industrial civilization dominate the rigid and mediocre life. The tide of science and technology pushes people forward, and the burden of life makes people's spiritual world lag far behind the real world. Utilitarianism became the mainstream thought of society. The ultimate pursuit of materialism destroys traditional values and behavioral norms, and people become degenerate, lacking goals and no longer pursuing ideals. Holden is also a typical representative of the "Beat Generation" in American society. The "Beat Generation" usually refers to the deviant, bohemian, unruly, subculture fringe figures who are not afraid to challenge the mainstream society. They dare to try anything, and they are extremely neurotic and frantically pursue emotional catharsis. I think the Beat Generation can be called utilitarian rebels.

Western "utilitarian" thought "sees the personal interests and egoism of the bourgeoisie as the universal moral code of human behavior"[3]. This is greatly reflected in the novel. The author mainly describes it through Holden's perspective, which is mainly reflected in the characters of the novel. Typical examples are the following: Holden's roommate is an extremely narcissistic person who has a bright appearance and a very sloppy behavior. He's just terribly narcissistic when he dresses up nicely. So he finds satisfaction by constantly dating girls, and the number of girls is a reflection of his identity with his appearance. Another typical example is Mr. Haas in the school. Whenever on Sunday, when he met the parents who were driving to pick up the students, he would run over to shake hands with each parent and talk cordially. If he met a parent who looked a little weird, he would smile slyly, then ran to talk to himself. Conversation with parents of favorable students. In his eyes, most of the people on the campus, including the principal, teachers, and students, are arrogant, chasing fame and fortune, and hypocritical. He felt very disappointed by this, and finally chose to leave the school. At the same time, he hates his father who is a lawyer. He thinks that a lawyer like his father "just makes a lot of money, plays golf, plays bridge, buys a car, and puts on a bad air"[4]. He also hates his mother, because she is neurotic: "The ears are sharp like a hound... Even if he coughs in Siberia, he can't escape her ears. So, he finally chose to enter society.

But when he entered the society, the ugliness of human nature in the society made him despair for a time. In the hotel at night, he saw gentlemen with femininity, and witnessed adult men and women squirting water with their mouths and playing with each other. He realized the filth and ugliness behind adults. In New York's feasting, he met drivers who deliberately detoured to overcharge, prostitutes and elevator workers who extorted five dollars more. In the society he

lives in, the desire for money, fame and fortune, and desire is revealed everywhere. The barrenness of the spiritual world makes most people in the society indulge in low-level happiness; in front of human nature, the "hypocrisy" of altruism is symbolically realized under the condition of satisfying self-interest, and the meaning of utilitarianism is beyond recognition. And this trend of thought has penetrated into every corner of society.

From Holden, we find him striving to pursue, maintain, and protect as much as possible the purity of others. In his heart, only children are pure and beautiful symbols, and the most important person to him is his sister Phoebe. But at Phoebe School, a school that symbolizes all innocence, the shocking "X You" is engraved on the wall. The pollution of the world of virginity made Holden grit his teeth and hate him: "I really hope to kill the person who wrote these two words with my own hands"[4]. In order not to be as innocent as his sister Phoebe When the child sees it, he wipes it off with his own hands, fulfilling his duty as a watchman with his own real actions. The image of hypocrisy and snobbery in utilitarian society contrasts sharply with the purity that Holden defends, thus further demonstrating the dehumanization of society under utilitarian influence.

3. Holden's Characters

3.1. Empathy

Holden's empathy is detailed in the book. As Holden passed the park's frozen lake, he wondered where the ducklings would spend the winter and where they would get food to survive; he hated the hypocrisy of the clergy, calling monks abusive "Silly bastards", as he said: "Anyway, they will never enter the monastery. With luck like mine, after entering, probably all the monks I meet will not be right. They are all stupid bastards, or just bastards"(Salinger 51). But he was still moved by the kindness of the two nuns. When he was in financial difficulty, he donated ten yuan to the two nuns during non-fundraising time. He also regretted that he had donated too little, thinking that if he had more money around him, he would have donated more. Worried that his expensive suitcase would hurt the self-esteem of his poorer roommates, he would secretly hide the suitcase in an unremarkable place; he would even give himself to a girl when he found out that the prostitute he hired was a young girl Feel sorry for the fall. As he himself said: "There are some people I may hate for a while...but I don't hate them for a long time. If I don't see them for a while...I miss them a little bit" [4]. In others When both show extreme sensitivity and desire for money, Holden's first concern is the self-esteem of others, which shows his strong ability to empathize. Holden's external image is rebellious and vulgar. He has also acquired bad habits such as profanity and smoking, but this is also influenced by the surrounding classmates and roommates. And his heart always yearns for innocence. He is essentially a good boy with delicate feelings, kindness and empathy. Even people he hates, like Ackley, will play with him and not leave him alone. He also fights with his roommate to protect the girl he likes, Joan, one of only two fights he's ever experienced.

Because of his strong empathy ability, when his sister handed him all the pocket money she had used to buy Christmas gifts in order to relieve him, he cried for the children's frankness and simplicity at the same time. He also worried that innocent children such as his sister would be assimilated by the hypocritical adult world in the future, and then had the desire to become a catcher in the rye.

"There's a bunch of kids playing games in a big field of wheat. Tens of thousands of kids. And I'm standing on the brink of that goddamn cliff. My job is to watch over there, if any kid goes to the edge of the cliff. Come, I will catch him. I do this all day long... I just want to be a catcher in the rye"[4].

It can be seen that Holden is a warm and kind good boy, and at the same time It forms a strong contrast with the final ending, thereby sublimating the main theme of the novel.

Holden has always been free from his pure spiritual world. Before he can find a way to adjust his anxiety and disappointment, he is also troubled by the experiences of others. Under the double pressure, Holden is destined to become a tragedy.

3.2. Timorous

Holden's timorousness is reflected in that he does not dare to fight against reality. Facing the dark side of society, his choice is to escape. I am not criticizing Holden's character. He is a real rebel and a pure defender in his bones. However, due to the limitations of age and experience, he cannot correctly understand the society and chooses to escape this most cowardly way. This character is reflected in two aspects, namely action and thought.

In action, for example, when he encountered the extortion of prostitutes and elevator workers, he was powerless to fight. After language negotiation failed, he cried like a child and was finally knocked to the ground. When he tried again and again to look old and slick, to learn to go to bars and order drinks and talk like an adult, but again and again he was recognized, rejected and ridiculed, he silently gave up trying. In addition, he was ignorant and ignorant on the surface. He was expelled from different schools several times, and even smoked and drank alcohol. In addition, he was ignorant on the surface, was expelled from different schools several times, even smoked and drank, and disguised himself as an ignorant and problem teenager, which was actually an escape.

And his cowardice in thought is embodied in the fact that after he encounters hypocritical and snobbish people again and again, and after experiencing one disgusting thing, he shrinks back, and he wants to escape from modern society and return to nature Seeking the world of innocence, and finally planning to get away from the hustle and bustle, go west to be a deaf and mute man, get a job at a gas station, use the money earned to build a cabin in the woods, and marry someone who is also deaf The dumb people live in it together, and from now on, they don't have to talk shit, and they don't have to associate with those hypocritical people. Let yourself be one with nature and enjoy the comfort, simplicity and innocence that cannot be found in a hypocritical society[7]. But in the end, because of the retention of his sister (the only beautiful person in his heart), he chose to stay, but he chose another escape method and lived forever in his own spiritual world through mental breakdown.

All of the above descriptions greatly demonstrate Holden's cowardice. Disguising himself as an ignorant and problem teenager was actually an escape. His timorousness in thought was embodied in his retreat from hypocrisy and snobbery. At the beginning, he tried to escape to Vermont and the forest, and then he broke down and lived in his own spiritual world forever, which showed his timorous to a great extent. Holden is in the stage of leaving innocence and entering the adult world, and his heart feels hesitation and fear. Therefore, his inner world has been wandering and wandering between childhood and adult world. He can neither blend into the current environment nor go back to his childhood, which makes him more confused, contradictory and lonely. Age and experience limited his ability to solve problems, which also led to his timorous, and thus his tragedy was born.

4. The Relation of Utilitarianism and Holden's Characters

Tragedy is to smash beautiful things for people to see, and Holden, the protagonist of this novel, silently and heroically expresses his protest to the hypocritical and snobbish adult world as a lonely hero. The inducement of Holden's tragedy must be composed of internal and external factors. The external cause is undoubtedly the oppression of human nature by the hypocritical and indifferent modern society dominated by utilitarian ideology, and the internal cause is the noble moral quality and character characteristics that are incompatible with Holden and reality.

4.1. Empathy and Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism requires people to maximize their personal interests as much as possible, while taking happiness as the only criterion for judging morality, which completely ignores the diversity of human emotions. One of the drawbacks of utilitarianism, already mentioned earlier, can lead to moral indifference. The reason is that the utilitarian morality regards effect and interests as the only criteria for morality, calculates the gains and losses of actions only with cold interests, and at the same time ignores the sense of morality, reverence, and piety that are contained in moral actions and serve as motivations and opportunities for actions, shame, conscience and other emotional experiences [6]. One of the hallmarks of moral indifference is a lack of empathy. Because of the existence of empathy, people will pay attention to the motivation of behavior in the pursuit of the greatest happiness, because people with empathy tend to consider others, and people who are too kind will never be able to do their best to the enemy on the road of competition. It will reserve a little leeway for the other party, and ultimately cannot guarantee the maximization of interests, which also violates the purpose of utilitarianism.

Excessive empathy allows Holden to have extremely high moral standards and spiritual pursuits, and he has a higher-level understanding of the meaning of happiness. His happiness is not limited to the pursuit of material things, he is eager to meet a confidant who has the same mind and resonate spiritually. In the novel, Holden pretends to be mature, hangs out in bars, and recruits prostitutes, just to meet a person who can truly communicate with him on an equal footing. He is not dominated by age and financial resources, but recognizes him spiritually. All the adults he met were just taking him as a joke. He never blames those who have hurt him, and even considers others from the other side's point of view. For example, it is described in the novel that he did poorly in the exam. In order to make the teacher not too sad, he wrote a paragraph on the paper to explain the reason. As a result, the teacher read the passage in a sarcastic tone, which was undoubtedly a complete humiliation to him, who had a strong self-esteem. But Holden still respected and loved the teacher as always. Spiritual loneliness made him feel confused, and reality had a great conflict with his values, and his high moral standards made him refuse to choose to compromise, but he couldn't find a way to redeem himself, which eventually led to a mental breakdown.

4.2. Timorousness and Utilitarianism

Perhaps the noble quality that was contrary to the mainstream of society at that time was one of the important factors for Holden to go to tragedy, but Holden's cowardly side was the key to his going to tragedy. Holden's cowardly side is reflected in his escapism in the face of the hypocritical, worldly adult world. In the novel, Mr. Andolini faced Holden's confusion and degeneration after dropping out of school, and said: "Man is the sum of social relations, we cannot exist independently of society, and all our values are created in society." The ultimate goal of utilitarianism, as stated in the theory of utilitarianism, is to achieve the happiness of the greatest number of people. "Because the actor is between his own happiness and the happiness of others, utilitarian morality requires him to be as impartial as a selfless, benevolent spectator." [5] Holden, a middle-class, family Well-off, at least materially, he can fully enjoy the happiness of the individual. But because of his own higher spiritual pursuit, that is, yearning for a beautiful and pure world, he is not reconciled to low-level happiness, but due to the limitation of knowledge, he only recognizes the drawbacks of utilitarianism, but cannot understand the essence of utilitarianism. Holden is at a critical stage in the transition from an innocent child to a secular adult. Limited by age and experience, he believes that compromise is a simple abandonment of ideal values, and the cowardly side of his character makes him give up fighting. Choosing to escape, he has since lost the goal of life, and through external rebellion and

assimilation to paralyze himself, deepening the real inner pain. This escape is a kind of spiritual exile, and eventually gets lost in his own spiritual world.

Holden was unfortunate because he lived in a depraved, numb age, and he lost himself in the lower pleasures of a utilitarian society; Holden was lucky because, in an extreme way, he eventually washed away. After this estrangement, he achieved spiritual liberation and lived in his own ideal world forever. His failure is that he does not know that people always need to be socialized, and a good society always needs some brave pioneers to strive for. We have to learn to live in hypocrisy and filth. Faced with the ugliness of human nature, we can save ourselves. While maintaining the pure wheat field in our hearts, we will "educate" the evil of human nature, and finally realize the greatest achievement of the whole society and even the whole human being.

5. The Relation of Utilitarianism and Holden's Characters

The discussion on the advantages and disadvantages of utilitarianism is still hot today, but it is undeniable that this idea has brought great advantages to social and economic development. At the same time, we also need to pay attention to the problems of moral indifference and lack of thought in the utilitarian society. Due to his personality, the utilitarian-dominated society was destined to lead Holden to tragedy, but his tragedy was great. After all, between the moon and sixpence, Holden firmly chose his moon.

The reason why *The Catcher in the Rye* can become a classic is not only the emotional resonance caused by Holden's spirit of resistance, but also the pursuit of a completely real world conveyed by Salinger's pen. Not bound by social shackles, all people-oriented, to obtain dignity and spiritual freedom. This is the essence of *The Catcher in the Rye*.

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