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Senior Seminar

1 May 2015

Disgusted with Depression: A Look into the Mind of Holden Caulfield

Depression has become a common theme or topic in not only literature but everyday life. From commercials promoting the latest depression medication to films romanticizing the side effects of depression, society has become concerned with how to deal with or explain this absence of happiness. There have been many discussions concerning the causes of depression, but no one has really been talking about its relation to other negative effects such as disgust. Clinicians and scholars of emotion alike have not considered whether or not certain things disgust us because we are depressed or we are depressed because certain things disgust us. In J.D. Salinger’s coming-of-age novel *The Catcher in the Rye*, both depression and disgust are driving factors in the life of the protagonist Holden Caulfield who struggles with the prospects of adulthood. But while Salinger uses the term “depressed” to describe events or situations that make Caulfield feel a certain emotion, he may actually be using the word interchangeably as a form of disgust. The term surfaces frequently throughout the novel and often in relation to events that might not strike us today as “depressing.” For example, when Caulfield sees dog feces, globs of spit, and cigar butts all over a park, he states that those things “depress” him. In reality, he is so disgusted by their sight that he has to get away from them. By looking at various conversations regarding disgust from the likes of psychologist Silvan Tomkins and writers Robert Wilson and William Miller as well as the cultural and historical conversations surrounding depression, I propose an explanation for Salinger’s approach to disgust in *The Catcher in the Rye*. From this, I deduce whether or not Caulfield is using the word “depressed” as a catch-all term for the emotions he is feeling or if he is just genuinely unhappy with everything that takes place throughout his story.

When considering the cultural conversation surrounding depression and disgust, it is important to place it in the public sphere. As mentioned previously, depression is a recurring topic in everyday life. Seemingly everyone can relate to the side effects of depression on one level or another. Whether it is a medically diagnosed case or a self-diagnosed situation, there has always been a common denominator amongst the sufferers: they are not *happy*. However, a question arises concerning whether or not their depression stems from internal or external conditions. Why does someone get depressed when they look at a certain image or hear a specific sound or experience a particular event? Aside from life-changing tragedies it is difficult to pinpoint the exact causes of why we become depressed. Are we depressed because of our environment or are we depressed because of our own inner demons? The same question can be posed for literary characters. By looking at depression through the focus of disgust, I am able to better understand the mindset behind the depressed character of Holden Caulfield regarding the objects of his unhappiness and his physical/emotional responses to these objects.

The science surrounding disgust was first discussed in 1963 by psychologist Silvan Tomkins as a part of his “affect theory” which organized human emotions into nine categories and focused on the physical aspect of the emotion: e.g. when one is disgusted they raise and protrude their lower lip and put their head forward and down. According to Tomkins in his book *Affect Imagery Consciousness*, disgust is a physical response:

Disgust is fundamentally a defensive response which is auxiliary to the hunger, thirst and oxygen drives. Its function is clear. If the food about to be ingested activates disgust, the upper lip and the nose is raised and the head is drawn away from the apparent source of the offending odor. If it has been swallowed, it will produce nausea and it will be vomited out either through the mouth or nostrils. (356)

From a technical standpoint, this definition of disgust makes sense, but it is seldom applicable when it comes to discussing its role in *The Catcher in the Rye*. Salinger rarely gives us these physical cues that Caulfield may or may not be exuding. Therefore, it is difficult to conclude whether his thoughts/actions can be placed within this framework. Tomkins goes on to say that “The awareness of disgust . . . is not limited to offensive tastes and smells but readily accompanies a wide spectrum of entities which need not be tasted, smelled or ingested” (356). Basically, Tomkins is saying that seeing or thinking about something particularly disgusting can also evoke the disgust response. This particular definition can be used while analyzing Holden Caulfield’s disgust patterns.

Tomkins writes “Disgust may be aroused by a very attractive sex object, if there is both a strong wish for and fear of sexual contact. In such cases, paradoxically, the less disgusting the object, the more disgust may be felt if fear exceeds desire” (357). In *The Catcher in the Rye,* Caulfield experiences this phenomenon after watching the prostitute he hired take her clothes off. Salinger writes, “She stood up and pulled her dress over her head. I certainly felt peculiar when she did that. I mean she did it so sudden and all. I know you're supposed to feel pretty sexy when somebody gets up and pulls their dress over their head, but I didn't. Sexy was about the last thing I was feeling. I felt much more depressed than sexy” (123). Caulfield’s actions show both this “strong wish for and fear of sexual contact” that Tomkins is talking about. In the pages preceding this moment, Caulfield tells us that he has always wanted to have sex but had never gotten around to it due to certain circumstances. He was feeling rather “sexy” as he puts it before the prostitute came, but as soon as she took her clothes off and his impending loss of virginity was upon him, Caulfield could not go through with it. Salinger chooses to say that Caulfield is “depressed” about the situation, but it is far more appropriate, as seen by Tomkins’ definition, to view his response as a form of disgust. Caulfield attempts to distance himself from the situation by telling the prostitute that he just wants to talk with her which further supports Tomkins’ view that, “Disgust is primarily nonetheless an act of distancing the self from an object . . . It is possible to be disgusted at attractive objects only under the condition that imitation of them, or increased closeness, or incorporation of them is also tabooed” (357). In Caulfield’s mind, it is taboo to lose his virginity to a prostitute, and because of this he feels what he calls “depressed.”

Salinger uses the term “depressed” as a sort of catch-all phrase for the various emotions that Caulfield experiences throughout the novel. After combing through a couple of Salinger’s lesser known works such as *Franny and Zooey* and *Nine Stories*, it is apparent that the continual use of “depressed” is exclusive to the character of Caulfield due to the word only being mentioned a handful of times in the other books.[[1]](#footnote-1) Perhaps Caulfield himself does not know how to describe his emotions other than “depressing” because he himself has fallen into a depressive state. Because of this, the other references to depression throughout the novel should be further analyzed to delve into Salinger’s true intentions for using this word so loosely.

Though disgust can have certain physical qualities related to it, its exact definition has been up for debate. For example, while Tomkins and *The Anatomy of Disgust* author William Miller view disgust as a universal emotion that all people feel in nearly the exact same way, author Robert Rawdon Wilson believes that disgust is an experience that is informed by one’s surrounding culture and background. In his novel *The Hydra’s Tale: Imagining Disgust*, Wilson pulls back the layers of disgust across various mediums. “Disgust,” as Wilson argues, “is both physical and moral, concrete and metaphorical, can also be a matter of stimulation, of pretense and make-believe” (12). Be it physical or make-believe, there is not just one way of describing disgust because it is entirely dependent on one’s upbringing as well as what is happening on a cultural level at the time. Just because something might seem “disgusting” now, that doesn’t mean that people will feel the same way about it in ten years. Wilson writes, “[As] new objects of disgust appear . . . old ones vanish or are displaced into ordinariness” (28).

In contrast, scholars such as Silvan Tomkins and William Miller have taken a more universal approach to disgust. Miller tends to make sweeping generalizations concerning the universality of the subject. He calls disgust something that “ranks people and things in a kind of cosmic ordering,” (2). Then, he backs these claims with extreme examples such as “Even in the Middle Ages, with its presumably high thresholds of disgust, disgust-backed norms were the hardest to violate. One simply did not drink pus, even back then” (159). Miller’s approach basically focuses on the objects that *everyone* finds disgusting and Tomkins’ approach focuses on how they responded to these objects. While Wilson does not flat-out ignore these approaches, he challenges them by arguing that they are founded on old-fashioned concepts. According to Wilson, disgust is much more intricate than the models proposed by Tomkins and Miller. “Disgusting acts and objects are both various and variable, shape shifting and Protean to an extreme degree,” Wilson writes (Wilson xvi). It is truly a multifaceted emotion. Therefore, to understand it within this context, it is imperative to observe the surrounding culture.

In his review of *The Hydra’s Tale,* Nat Hardy sums up Wilson’s main argument rather nicely saying “Wilson argues that a disgust response is less universal and more relativistic; it is a reaction rising out of a variety of factors dependent upon psychological development, social conditioning and cultural codes” (426). Basically, we are products of our upbringing, thus how we respond to disgust is determined by how we have been conditioned to behave socially. As our morals change, our disgust responses will continue to change with them (Hardy 426). So what does all of this mean in relation to Holden Caulfield? Simply put, it means that his aversion (or disgust) with certain things throughout the book was caused by his upbringing and cultural environment. He does not just find things “depressing” (i.e. disgusting) because they are universally depressing. He feels aversion toward them because they affect him in a way that conflict with his core values (values that are unique to everybody). Therefore, it makes sense to address his depressive state from an internal perspective rather than solely looking at external factors. If Caulfield is trying to express feeling disgusted by using the term “depressed” then it is because he has been culturally brought up to not know the difference.

When focusing on *The Catcher in the Rye* and its uses of the word “depression,” it is not difficult to unearth examples for analysis. The word and its variations (i.e. “depressing,” “depressed,” etc.) come up almost incessantly throughout the novel. The first uses of the word take place in Chapter 2 when Caulfield visits the house of his aging history teacher, Mr. Spencer:

The minute I went in, I was sort of sorry I'd come. He was reading The Atlantic Monthly, and there were pills and medicine all over the place, and everything smelled like Vicks Nose Drops. It was pretty depressing. I'm not too crazy about sick people, anyway. What made it even more depressing, old Spencer had on this very sad, ratty old bathrobe that he was probably born in or something. I don't much like to see old guys in their pajamas and bathrobes anyway. (11)

In this instance, Caulfield uses “depressing” to describe a situation that he finds unappealing (i.e. gross/disgusting) There is no textual evidence that he is actually depressed in the traditional sense of the term. It is not necessarily a situation that makes him feel unhappy as a person; it simply grosses him out. Now, one might stretch as far to say that Caulfield is depressed (i.e. *actually depressed*) because he has caught a glimpse of the way sickly old people live, and he recognizes his own impending mortality or something along those lines. But that is just not the case. This is not even a situation where Caulfield is only *emotionally* disgusted or mentally disapproving. This is actually one of the few instances in the novel where contextual clues insinuate Caulfield’s *physical* disgust for an event. He describes seeing medicine scattered about, smelling Vicks Nose Drops in the air, and seeing the ailing Mr. Spencer in nothing but a ratty bathrobe and pajamas. These are all sights and smells that we can see Caulfield being disgusted toward. When he smells the Vicks, we can almost picture him raising his upper lip and nose and drawing his head away from the offending odor as Tomkins puts it. A few pages later, he once again emphasizes his disgust towards the situation when Mr. Spencer is about to lecture him. He says “All of a sudden then, I wanted to get the hell out of the room. I could feel a terrific lecture coming on. I didn't mind the idea so much, but I didn't feel like being lectured to and smell Vicks Nose Drops and look at old Spencer in his pajamas and bathrobe all at the same time. I really didn't” (14). Caulfield did not mind the lecture, but he just could not handle it with all of the stimuli surrounding him. It physically disgusted him, and he had to get away from it.

Another instance of Caulfield exuding disgust although saying he is depressed is when he is describing the state of Central Park in Chapter 16. He says, “It was lousy in the park. It wasn't too cold, but the sun still wasn't out, and there didn't look like there was anything in the park except dog crap and globs of spit and cigar butts from old men, and the benches all looked like they'd be wet if you sat down on them. It made you depressed, and every once in a while, for no reason, you got goose flesh while you walked” (153). Once again, Caulfield is describing things that would traditionally be disgusting to most people in most situations. Caulfield’s imagery of “dog crap and globs of spit and cigar butts from old men” is by no means a pleasant one, and it radiates his disgust towards the matter. He even tells us of a physical reaction he has while walking around these objects (i.e. goose flesh). It is not necessarily a typical disgust response, but it is a physical response nonetheless that has little to do with depression and more to do with being taken aback by what he is seeing (which is most likely disgust considering the subject matter).

Caulfield again expresses disgust towards the end of the novel when he is at his sister’s school and sees vulgar graffiti on a nearby wall. However, this time, it is more of an emotional disgust than a physical one:

Somebody'd written ‘Fuck you’ on the wall. It drove me damn near crazy. I thought how Phoebe and all the other little kids would see it, and how they'd wonder what the hell it meant . . . and how they'd all think about it and maybe even worry about it for a couple of days. I kept wanting to kill whoever'd written it . . . I kept picturing myself catching him at it, and how I'd smash his head on the stone steps till he was good and goddam dead and bloody. But I knew, too, I wouldn't have the guts to do it…That made me even more depressed. (260-261)

Caulfield is not only disgusted by the writing on the wall, but he is also disgusted with himself for knowing that he did not have the gall to back up what he was thinking. He calls it being “depressed,” which *does* make sense because it alludes to his lack of self-worth, but it is all based on the disgust he is feeling in that situation. Caulfield has a physical response to the “disgusting” writing when he eventually tries to rub the graffiti off the wall with his hand. This coincides with Tomkins’ observation that disgust is primarily an act of distancing one’s self from an object. By erasing the words, Caulfield not only distances himself from the object but also gets rid of it altogether. The object itself is ugly (disgusting) in the eyes of Caulfield and has no business being inside a school. In the article “Disruptive affects: shame, disgust, and sympathy in Frankenstein,” James C. Hatch discusses the stigma surrounding disgusting objects. He quotes Slavoj Žižek who writes, “The ugly object is an object that is in the wrong place, that ‘shouldn’t be there.’ This does not mean that the ugly object is no longer ugly the moment we relocate it to its proper place; rather, an ugly object is ‘in itself’ out of place’” (qtd. in Hatch 35). The graffiti disgusts Caulfield because it does not belong there and because its subject matter is disgusting no matter what medium it takes place in. He summarizes his anguish when he says “If you had a million years to do it in, you couldn’t rub out even *half* the ‘Fuck you’ signs in the world. It’s impossible” (262).

Now, sometimes it is safe to say that Caulfield actually *does* show language and symptoms of depression throughout the novel. It’s not as if every time he mentions being depressed he really means being disgusted. For example, in Chapter 13 when he is at the hotel, he says, “The whole lobby was empty. It smelled like fifty million dead cigars. It really did. I wasn't sleepy or anything, but I was feeling sort of lousy. Depressed and all. I almost wished I was dead” (118). This is one of those situations where Caulfield is unhappy with his life and upset about the position he has gotten himself into. He is in a lousy hotel, surrounded by a bunch of phony people, and he is all by himself. It is quite obvious that he is going through some form of depression at this stage in the novel. Almost wishing that he was dead has more to do with being depressed than being disgusted (though they can be relative to one another).

Caulfield’s genuine depression also comes up in Chapter 20 when he is at a piano bar. He says, “When I finally got down off the radiator and went out to the hat-check room, 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” (198). Depression is strongly associated with feelings of loneliness and despair. Again, Caulfield is by himself and contemplating every decision he has ever made. On top of that, he is drunk and has little money to spend. Up until this point, the event with the prostitute has taken place, and he has just dialed his old girlfriend, Sally Hayes, who promptly hung up on him. Caulfield is lonely and just wants somebody to talk to, but no one seems to care. He has got nowhere to go and no one to see. All that is left for him to do is to cry. This physical response to everything that has happened to him is the tell-tale sign of him being sincerely depressed and the language he uses lines up with these emotions.

The physical symptoms of Caulfield’s actual depression are also apparent when he tries to eat something thinking that it might make him feel better. He states, “I didn't eat the doughnuts. I couldn't swallow them too well. The thing is, if you get very depressed about something, it's hard as hell to swallow” (255). This response lines up well with the psychological attributes of depression. In Bev Cobain’s book *When Nothing Matters Anymore: A Survival Guide for Depressed Teens*, she addresses this phenomenon and writes, “When you’re depressed, your brain and body can’t work together well enough to help you function normally. Your body depends on your brain to tell it to eat, drink, sleep, move, and feel. When your brain and body stop ‘talking,’ you’re unable to process these important messages” (36). Caulfield was not only *saying* that he was depressed; he was also feeling its symptoms.

Caulfield’s uses of the term “depressed” throughout the novel are not strictly limited to disgust and unhappiness either. Sometimes it takes on a different meaning depending on the context. When he is having a conversation with his younger sister Phoebe, for example, she says things that apparently “depress” him, but it is more so implied that Caulfield is irritated:

‘You don't like anything that's happening.’ It made me even more depressed when she said that. ‘Yes I do. Yes I do. Sure I do. Don't say that. Why the hell do you say that?’ ‘Because you don't. You don't like any schools. You don't like a million things. You don't.’ ‘I do! That's where you're wrong--that's exactly where you're wrong! Why the hell do you have to say that?’ I said. Boy, was she depressing me. (220)

Caulfield’s responses to Phoebe’s remarks seem defensive and make him appear genuinely upset. It reads more like he is annoyed with what Phoebe has to say because he does not agree with her at all. If the term “depressed” was swapped out with the term “annoyed” or “irritated,” the sentences would make just as much sense if not even more, especially because of the explosive language that he uses toward her. This example supports the argument that Caulfield has been using the term “depressed” to describe situations and emotions that are not necessarily traditionally depressing. He not only uses the term when he is unhappy and lonely, but he also uses it to label objects that disgust, annoy, or bother him. Sure, these objects might *also* make him unhappy (which is depression in its simplest terms) but there are better words that can be used to describe these feelings. Because of this, the question is not whether or not Caulfield is using this term because his vocabulary is lacking. Clearly, he is an intelligent and competent writer. Rather, it is *why* does he feel the need to use this term to describe the way seemingly everything makes him feel?

When analyzing the relationship between depression, disgust, and Holden Caulfield, it is necessary to put it into context within the culture of the era. *The Catcher in the Rye* was written in the late 1940s and takes place during that time as well. Therefore, it is understandable that Salinger would write Caulfield’s character using the language and social customs of the mid-twentieth century. According to an article published in 2010 titled “How an Age of Anxiety Became an Age of Depression,” depression was hardly considered an issue in this era:

Depression was usually considered a relatively rare condition involving feelings of intense meaninglessness and worthlessness often accompanied by vegetative and psychotic symptoms and preoccupations with death and dying. Moreover, depression was more likely to be associated with hospitalized patients than with clients of general physicians…during the 1950s and much of the 1960s, the concept of ‘depression’ barely existed for submelancholic conditions. (Horwitz)

“Depression” as a term simply was not as widespread as it is today. It is not that people were so much happier in the 1950s that they did not get depressed. It is just that they did not think to call it by that name. Instead, doctors identified a person’s bouts with stress, nerves, and tension as “anxiety.” Rather than being depressed, they were anxious (Horwitz).

Harrison Smith’s 1951 review of *The Catcher in the Rye* (two days before the novel was publically released), takes a psychoanalytic approach to Holden Caulfield and addresses the issues that are characteristically wrong with the protagonist. He writes, “What was wrong with Holden was his moral revulsion against anything that was ugly, evil, cruel, or what he called ‘phoney,’” (12). With this being one of the earliest reviews of the novel, it is beneficial to know that someone in the 1950s could clearly see that something was *off* about the character of Caulfield. Though he does not label it necessarily as “depression,” Smith picks up on Caulfield’s overarching root of unhappiness. He states, “The group of ‘intellectuals,’ the grinds, and the athletes were all phonies to him. But Holden’s sense of the phoniness is never contempt. It is worse; it is despair” (13). Caulfield has lost any and all hope for not only himself but for almost everyone else as well, and that leads him into his depressive state. It was not until the 1970s that the world started to pick up on the multi-faceted characteristics of depression and begin to label them as so (Horwitz). In his 1977 article “Holden Caulfield: Don’t Ever Tell Anybody Anything,” Duane Edwards flat out writes, “Holden isn’t ‘normal’: he’s a severely depressed adolescent telling the story of his youth while in a mental institution” (556). Though this statement seems matter-of-fact and forthright, it was an idea that was likely to have not even been considered in the previous two decades before it.

Of course, it should be noted that Caulfield is not an average 1950s teenager. He actually *is* in a mental hospital (while telling us his story) and most likely being treated for symptoms of actual depression. He even mentions that he has been talking with a psychoanalyst. So it is safe to say that he knows what depression is and that he knows he has it. Therefore, it is not unusual for him to be using the term “depressed” as a catch-all for many of his emotions that made him particularly unhappy. It is likely that being clinically diagnosed as depressed has caused Caulfield to use the term to explain what he has been feeling no matter what the situation might have been. Since *The Catcher in the Rye* is told from this narrative point-of-view and in the past tense, it would be a mistake to assume that Caulfield felt the same way about everything while experiencing it than he does while reminiscing upon it. Now that he has had time to look back on these events with a new perspective (i.e. he has actually been depressed this whole time!), he can only label everything that has happened to him as “depressing.” Basically, any people, ideas, events, or places that made him feel anything other than happiness, (which there were many) were the causes of his depression.

Holden Caulfield is one of those rare characters that never seem to fade away from literary discussion. Introduced to the world in the summer of 1951, Caulfield brought with him the attitude, bravado, and self-reflection of the teenage everyman and gained a following of readers who could not help but relate to his views on life. Sixty-four years later, we are still talking about him. Throughout its run as arguably the quintessential coming-of-age novel, *The Catcher in the Rye* has been critiqued and analyzed constantly for its themes regarding depression. Though there has been much speculation on Caulfield’s inner demons and loss of innocence, disgust had never been brought into the conversation until now. While the semantics regarding disgust and depression are still up for debate, there is a relationship between them that comes to fruition in *The Catcher in the Rye.* Because Holden Caulfield has been diagnosed as “depressed,” his retelling of the story is far from an accurate representation of what he really felt as the events unfolded. He is an unreliable narrator. His overuse of the term “depressed” only emphasizes just how far he has slipped into his state and how much he is trying to validate his emotions. Throughout the “real” story, Caulfield *did* feel disgust when he visited Mr. Spencer and inhaled the scent of Vicks Nose Drops, he *did* feel nervous when he was with the prostitute, and he *did* feel annoyed when he was talking to Phoebe about his interests. He *did* have all of these emotions,but these were reactions that could have only happened in the moment. In the present, they were all merely events that made him unhappy and facilitated his depression. With that being said, it all comes down to this: Holden Caulfield has told us the story that he wants us to believe. But the truth is he cannot even believe it himself.

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1. The term “depressed” is used three times in *Franny and Zooey* and only twice in *Nine Stories*. Salinger uses the term fifty times in *The Catcher in the Rye*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)