

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

I choose to analyze J.D Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye and Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar on the basis that these two novels are considered two of the prominent novels which deal with the transition from adolescence to adulthood. In my opinion, the stage in life where one undergoes changes from being a teenager to becoming an adult is a confusing and complicated phase. During this stage, one does a lot of self-searching and self-discovering. This is also the stage where one feels intense loneliness and loses one's sense of direction, because one is expected to take more responsibilities for the first time in our life. J.D Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye and Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar are the two novels which are often referred to as the most reflective literary works on the issue of growing up. The Catcher in the Rye is even included as a compulsory reading in many American high schools' curriculum. They are both considered important novels in the American Literature, for they serve as rite-of-passage novels which centralize on the issue of adolescence and its entailing emotional adjustments toward adulthood. This type of novel is often referred to as bildungsroman or 'coming of age' novel.

A *Bildungsroman* /□bɪldʊŋs.ro□ma□n/, is a novel which traces the spiritual, moral, psychological, or social development and growth of the main character from childhood to maturity.

(<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bildungsroman>)

Coming of age is a young person's formal transition from adolescence to adulthood. ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coming of age](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coming_of_age))

“In these novels characters grow frustrated with the parameters of their world. At an early age, they leave home to get an education in the larger world. But during the separation from home, they regret the loss of innocence that connected them to childhood.” (Adamson, 2002: xi).

I would like to focus on the protagonists and their actions. A protagonist is the leading character around whom conflicts and events revolve in a literary work. These conflicts and events serve as tools in revealing the author’s central and dominating idea in the literary work.

The contrast between the behaviors of each character is what makes them come alive and enable the reader to believe in them. The characters react to each other and develop throughout a novel, and it is this action and reaction that usually makes up the majority of a good book.
(Reader and Woods, 1987: 57)

Therefore, I decide to analyze the theme through the protagonists in J.D Salinger’s The Catcher in the Rye and Sylvia Plath’s The Bell Jar.

I notice that the two novels share the same subject matter, which is “growing up.” However, the themes are slightly different from each other. Even though the two protagonists in the two novels share the same fate in the end, the causes which lead them to this shared fate differ from each other. This will be further analyzed in chapters Two and Three.

I choose to analyze novel in lieu of the other literary genres because I find novel most interesting. A work of prose presents detailed aspects of well-orchestrated literary elements in creating one particular or various directions to where the reader could explore. Hence, it allows the reader to come to his own understanding regarding the novel and how he would interpret it in his own way. According to Harry Shaw in his Dictionary of Literary Terms (1972), a novel is defined as "...a lengthy fictitious prose narrative portraying characters and presenting an organized series of events and setting. Every novel is an account of life; every novel includes conflict, characters, action, setting, plot and theme" (Shaw, 1972: 257). Therefore, I would like to analyze the "account of life" of the two protagonists in the two novels and come to my own interpretations of the central and dominating idea in the two literary works.

A renowned American writer, Sylvia Plath is well-noted for personal imagery and intense focus in her poems. Plath won a posthumous Pulitzer Prize for her Collected Poems (1981). The Bell Jar is her only novel, which has been said to be her autobiographical novel for its narrative similarities to Plath's own life-story. The book is considered a powerful exploration of adolescence. With J.D. Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye it is recognized as a classic of adolescent angst.

J.D. Salinger received major critical and popular recognition with The Catcher in the Rye. It has been said to be "reminiscent of Mark Twain's Adventure of Huckleberry Finn in many ways" (Adamson, 2002: 44). This is because Twain's protagonist in the novel also deals with the pressure to conform as an adolescent entering adulthood. Salinger's sudden popularity causes him to

withdraw from his social circles and decide to live in solitude. The American public has considered Salinger a sociopath – a fate similar to his main character in his The Catcher in the Rye, Holden Caulfield, who ends up becoming an anti-hero character.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The problems that will be analyzed in this thesis are:

1. What are the themes of J.D. Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye and Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar?
2. How do the protagonists in both novels help to reveal the themes?

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purposes of doing this analysis are:

1. To show the themes of J.D. Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye and Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar.
2. To show how the protagonists in both novels help to reveal the themes.

METHOD OF RESEARCH

The research approach in writing this thesis is new criticism or formalism. Therefore, the method of research used is library research. First of all, the two novels are read as the primary texts. I then search and gather the information needed for the thesis from some references and materials from the internet to support the analysis of the primary texts. Finally, I draw the conclusion.

THE ORGANIZATION OF THE THESIS:

This thesis is divided into four chapters, which are preceded by the Preface and the Abstract. Chapter One is the Introduction, which contains the Background of Study, the Statement of the Problem, the Purpose of the Study, the Method of Research and the Organization of the Thesis. Chapter Two deals with the analysis of theme in J.D. Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye, whereas Chapter Three deals with the analysis of theme in Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar. Chapter Four is the Conclusion, in which I conclude and compare my analysis in The Catcher in the Rye and The Bell Jar. The thesis ends with the Bibliography and the Appendix.