

## CHAPTER FOUR

### CONCLUSION

After careful analysis of the experiences of the two protagonists in the two literary works, I conclude that both The Catcher in the Rye and The Bell Jar share the same subject matter, which is “growing up.” However, each book has a theme that is slightly different from the other. Although both protagonists in both novels experience mental depression due to their efforts to cope with life as they are transitioning from adolescence into adulthood, I noticed that the causes of their mental depression differ from each other.

In Holden’s case, he becomes mentally depressed in trying to reject the world of adulthood around him as phony, something which he does not want to belong to. He sees development toward maturity as losing one’s innocence. As such, he tries hard to preserve his innocence by identifying the things in the world which he rejects as phony. To Holden, adulthood consists of people who have given in to society and become something they are not. This state of constant rejection of the world frustrates Holden and leads him to mental depression. Therefore, the theme of The Catcher in the Rye is “resistance to conform in the process of growing up may well result in a depressive mental state.”

On the other hand, the theme of The Bell Jar is “the process of adjustment in growing up may cause a depressive mental state.” Similarly, Esther Greenwood

in The Bell Jar also has to cope with the issue of entering adulthood with much emotional turbulence. Unlike Holden, however, Esther's primary concern is about how to live up to the expectations of others and the pressure of choosing a career path to pursue. There is also the issue of proper codes of behavior, especially in regards to sexuality. Furthermore, the protagonist in The Bell Jar, Esther, also experiences mental depression. Unlike Holden, Esther does not reject the world of adulthood as phony. Instead, Esther longs to embrace it. What frustrates Esther is that as the parameter of her world expands she is faced with many different choices in life, most of which promise her success and yet she is not able to seize them all. As a very brilliant woman living in the era when most other women are confined to serving men and occupying themselves with menial household duties, Esther defines success as earning a good income by being a writer and having the ability to be equal to men. She finds, however, that her society has its own different standards and expectations for men and women. Esther finds that the society she is living in is a sexist society. Being a woman who is ahead of her time, she tries to breach the societal standards and fulfill her own expectations by herself. However, she is often held back by those around her and constantly reminded of her place in society. Thus her pursuit of success which she views as a necessary element of growth and adulthood cannot be met simply because she is not given the space to move and time to explore her potentials. She is also required to make constant adjustments as she goes through life as a small town girl who suddenly finds herself in a big city. There are new values and expectations which confront her. As she accepts each new value and tries to fulfill

each expectation, she finds herself making constant adjustments. Eventually, this leads her to mental breakdown.

In my opinion, the process of growing up requires making adjustments toward oneself and one's society in order to adapt well to the norms and expectations of the society. However, the process of adjusting oneself during the transition from adolescence to adulthood is in itself depressive, especially for those who are not apt to change. These themes are derived from careful perusal at the protagonists' experiences in facing their adolescence and adapting into their adulthood. Both protagonists end up institutionalized. However, Esther Greenwood's ending is more resolute, whereas Holden Caulfield's ending is still very much an open-ending without much resolution offered to the readers. Having been written in the early 1950s, The Catcher in the Rye has an open ending, which is interesting because the open-ending narrative technique is mostly found in contemporary novels. I view this simply as a way the two authors would like their readers to accept their novels. Plath's resolved ending gives the readers resolved feelings about Esther's depressive experience. On the contrary, Salinger's open ending allows the readers to draw their own conclusion about what they think would happen to the protagonist after having gone through the incidents in his life which lead to his mental depression. The narrative technique of not offering a resolved ending to the readers, in this case, intensifies the sense of depression that Salinger is trying to convey.

The Catcher in the Rye and The Bell Jar are both novels which deal with the issue of growing up and its entailing aspects. In my opinion, coming of age is never an easy experience. One goes through a lot of adjustments, not only toward

one's surroundings, but also toward oneself. The search of identity becomes a major issue for teenagers during their growing-up periods. In the same manner, Holden Caulfield and Esther Greenwood, the protagonists in The Catcher in the Rye and The Bell Jar respectively, both undergo the same experience in their process of growing up. What sets them apart is how each of these protagonists ends up coping with the changes in their lives as the result of their growing up. Holden rejects the changes as phony, whereas Esther is frustrated by not being able to seize all opportunities which she perceives as the definition of a successful life.

Having said that, I think the authors' purpose to present such themes is mainly to bring to the surface the importance of allowing oneself time for proper transition from adolescence to adulthood. Attempts to rush or refuse the transition may result in maladjustments and depression. The Catcher in the Rye is mainly focused on male teenagers as the protagonist in the novel is of a male gender, and the author is a male also. In the same manner, the target audience of The Bell Jar is female readers. These coming-of-age novels clearly point out the fact that growing up is very difficult to cope with for a lot of teens. As such, teens must be carefully understood and be allowed sufficient time to go through the transition into adulthood.