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## "All that David Copperfield kind of crap": The Explicit and Non-Explicit Unreliable Narrator

**Raul Palma**

Ph.D Scholar

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Holden Caulfield of *Catcher in the Rye*, is not in the mood to share "...all that David Copperfield kind of crap" (Salinger 3), opting to zoom in and out of the noteworthy events in his life, noticeably withholding information from the reader. He is often considered an unreliable narrator by critics. On the contrary, David Copperfield seems a visage of order and honor, narrating his life story from beginning to end. This research essay explores explicit and non-explicit character unreliability and sympathy through the lens of Caulfield and Copperfield, while considering aesthetic strategies.

Charles Dickens considered *David Copperfield* to be his most autobiographical book ("The Personal History"). As evidence of an autobiographical correlation, critics point to Dickens' complex relationship with his father, which is consistent with Copperfield's portrayal of the bonds he forms with the male figures in his life (Tambling xxi). Like *David Copperfield*, *The Catcher in the Rye* is also considered a biographical book (Lee 185). When Salinger graduated from Valle Forge, he spent some time in New York city before leaving for Europe, much like his character Holden Caulfield ("J.D. Salinger").

Both Dickens and Salinger chose to "mask" (Dufresne 221) their identities and their artifice by writing fiction, not memoirs. Unlike memoirs or biographies that honor the literal fact, literary fiction presents reality through the eyes of a narrator. Using a narrator to create distance between the reader and the author intensifies literature's ability to accomplish more than representing a truth to the reader; it places an invented narrator at the center of the author-reader relationship, thus, offering a direct link between the reader and the author's aesthetic creation.

These two novels, written in truths, half-truths, and fabrications, are narrated by characters that believe they exist: "they are at once real and unreal" (Wood 107). These characters are oblivious of the author; they are representations of real people; they have memories: Copperfield remembers Pegotty "with no shape at all" (21), and Caulfield remembers what happened the day he left Pencey Prep (Salinger 4). However, the reader understands that these characters belong to a work of fiction; they do not actually exist, that is, until the author persuades the reader otherwise.

James Wood, a professor of Literature at Harvard and a writer for the *New York Times*, poses an epistemological question: "Is there a way in which all of us are fictional characters, parented by life and written by ourselves?" (110). Epistemology, using the five senses to perceive reality, is distinct to aesthetics, re-creating reality. When an author smells an orange, he or she is experiencing reality in the now, developing a physical, visual, and olfactory image of the orange that is true to the author's ability to perceive reality. However, when an author reflects on the experience of smelling an orange, writes about it, that author is using language to recreate an experience; a similar connection can be established in the relationship between the reader and the text since a reader must re-imagine the author's language, consequently, reconstructing an imagined reality.

Often, the difference between non-fiction and fiction is quickly defined as what is true and what is invented. However, fiction provides a unique meeting place for epistemology and aesthetics. When "mimetic persuasion" (Wood 238), a writer's attempt to disguise the puppet's strings, thereby, convincing the reader that the aesthetic reality represented in a work of fiction is credible, is achieved, the reader has little reason to doubt the legitimacy of the text's reality. By reading the text, meeting the author half-way, and converting the language into sensory images, the reader becomes immersed in the work, uniquely bound to the text through the process of creative re-creation.

One method of achieving "mimetic persuasion" is to have the narrator imitate a human being. According to Robert Sussman, having a filter through which to see the world is a necessity for humans (qtd. Van). Sussman believes humans lie in order to protect their self-esteem (qtd. Van). It is then a logical extension to assume that an unreliable narrator may appear more mimetically persuasive than a reliable narrator since humans also protect their ego.

The significance of a narrator's reliability is best described by Wayne C. Booth, where if the narrator "is discovered to be untrustworthy, then the total effect of the work he relays to us is transformed" (158). According to Booth, an unreliable narrator has a tendency to speak or act against the "author's norms." Traditionally, Lolita's Humbert Humbert, a pedophile narrator with a knack for gaining the reader's sympathy, has been the poster-character for unreliability (Wood 5). He begins his narrative by stating, "You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style. Ladies and gentlemen of the jury..." (Nabokov 9), and sets forth to win the readers sympathy over by appealing to the reader's emotions: "I knew that the hopelessly poignant thing was not Lolita's absence from my side, but the absence of her voice from that concord" (308). All the while the reader is aware that Humbert is a pedophile and rapist, yet the reader is persuaded by Humbert's painful loss and can sympathize with him.

The author is tasked with "mimetic persuasion" (Wood 238). The degree of persuasion that must occur in order to stimulate character sympathy varies and will often depend on how far the aesthetic reality sways from what may be considered common place. In an explicitly unreliable character, like Holden Caulfield, the reader attains sympathy when he or she infers beyond the character's manipulation of the story, while in a non-explicitly unreliable narrator, Like Copperfield, the character establishes authority and credibility over the story by feigning his or her trustworthiness, much like Humbert in *Lolita*, who also establishes credibility, but is burdened with a greater degree of persuasion.

### **Explicit Character Unreliability**

Holden Caulfield of *Catcher in the Rye*, is not in the mood to share "...all that David Copperfield kind of crap" (Salinger 3), opting to zoom in and out of the noteworthy events in his life, noticeably withholding information from the reader. *Catcher in the Rye* then exists at two different levels: what Caulfield has to say about the story and what the reader can infer from his truncated telling.

On the first page of *Catcher in the Rye*, Caulfield protests revealing personal details about his life because his parents would have "two hemorrhages apiece" (Salinger 3) Caulfield goes on to tell the story anyway: "I'll just tell you about this madman stuff that happened..." (Salinger 3). Rather than beginning directly with his telling of the "madman stuff" (Salinger 3), Caulfield chooses to reference his parents, even his brother D. B., offering them as excuses for his truncated telling. Caulfield draws attention to his ego—"the human personality which is experienced as the 'self' or 'I' and is in contact with the external world through perception"

("ego"); as a result, the narrative is compromised, which creates "a secret communion... between the [author] and the reader behind the narrator's back" (Shen, "Explication"). The reader acknowledges that he or she is being misled and looks for answers by considering the author's purpose.

By feigning an "I don't feel like going into it" attitude, Caulfield inadvertently influences the telling of the story (Salinger 3). The reader, expecting to learn about the "madmad stuff," is first exposed to Caulfield's disconnected relationship with his family (Salinger 3). A rift is created in the text: the narrative is in motion and moving towards the events of the summer, but the narrator is holding onto valuable information—the relationship with his family. The reader can only speculate as to why Caulfield withholds information: bored by the story, ashamed of his family, just to name a few.

Since Caulfield is aware of Dickens' novel *David Copperfield*, which he cites at the opening of the novel, but is resistant to its methodology, Caulfield implies that he intends to go against the canon, resisting widely-accepted literary methods in order to illustrate that regardless of historical pasts, authorial interpretation, cultural influences, Caulfield is free to construct his own identity, which he deliberately states to the reader: "Besides, I'm not going to tell you my whole goddam autobiography or anything" (Salinger 3). Caulfield is setting the framework for his narrative, letting the reader know what he is willing to discuss and what he is not willing to discuss.

While Caulfield is not physically human, he is a character, Salinger's aesthetic representation of a human; Caulfield "does not know he is not real" (Wood 110). Having Caulfield narrate the events of his youth through "a filter" creates a moment of rhetorical aporia, making Caulfield, not just the main character and story-teller, but an unreliable character who, considering his ego, allows the story to exist off the page; the reader must make "inferences," as Booth suggests (86). As a result of Caulfield's limited narration, the reader understands Caulfield best when he or she considers his narrative in relation to what he is unwilling to share.

### **Non-explicit Character Unreliability**

Copperfield narrates his entire life story in a hierarchical structure. By "[speaking] for or act[ing] in accordance with the work" (Booth 158), Copperfield draws attention to the story-telling, not his ego. Enraptured in the various plot lines, sympathetic towards Copperfield's coming-of-age trials, the reader is seduced by Copperfield's narrative—a story telling approach just as unreliable as Caulfield, but an approach that is not as explicit. Since Copperfield's unreliability is built in to the sensory details of his telling, the manipulation of the story occurs at the level of the reader's construction of the story, not the reader's opinion of the narrator.

David Copperfield begins his narrative by stating, "Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show" (Dickens 11). Copperfield, seemingly, intends to tell the story of his life, regardless as to whether he appears heroic or villainous; there is an objective tone in Copperfield's declaration, which seems to relay that Copperfield has no intention of manipulating the reader, having checked-in his ego at the start of the novel. This tone is consistent throughout the novel, despite the fact Copperfield succeeds in unreliably accounting for his story by presenting the story through the biased glare of his own "filter."

Mostly, Copperfield seemingly allows scenes to exist with little narrative interference. During the opening lines Copperfield states, "these pages must show" (Dickens 11), implying that Copperfield feels compelled to narrate the truthful account of his life. With the attention of

a news paper reporter, accustomed to fact-checking, Copperfield states that he is "record[ing]" the day of his birth "as [he] has been informed" (Dickens 11). On being born at the stroke of midnight on Friday, a sage woman present at his birth believed he would grow-up to be unlucky and would be able to see ghosts, to which Copperfield states, "I need not say anything here... nothing can show better than my history the accuracy of that prediction" (Dickens 11); thus, offering the reader an opportunity to make up his or her mind. Each of these techniques helps persuade the reader that Copperfield intends to be a credible and reliable narrator.

Even when Copperfield lapses, manipulating a scene through the use of a "filter," he is quick to apologize. For example, at a time when Copperfield is pressured into hosting Uriah Heep for the evening, which he dislikes "intensely," Copperfield's composure slightly falters:

"As [Heep] sat on my sofa, with his bony knees drawn up under his coffee cup, his hat and gloves upon the ground close to him, his spoon going softly round and round, his shadowless red eyes, which looked as if they'd scorched their lashes off, turned towards me without looking at me, the disagreeable dints I have formerly described in his nostrils coming and going with his breath, and a snaky undulation pervading his frame from his chin to his boots, I decided in my own mind that I dislike him intensely" (Dickens 352-353).

To a degree, Copperfield's perception of Heep is charged by his disdain for him. Describing Heep's eyes, dints, and undulations are enough to indicate Copperfield is observing Heep through a "filter." Perhaps, if Copperfield had a positive opinion of Heep, the "shadowless red eyes," might be described as "rosy, lucid eyes," as an example. However, Copperfield's mild descriptions of Heep do not interrupt the flow or telling of the story. Furthermore, Copperfield apologizes for romanticizing his disdain for Heep by stating "...for I was young then and unused to disguise what I so strongly felt" (Dickens 353).

Copperfield does not need to interrupt the narrative in order to tell the reader how he feels about Heep. Instead, he simply transitions from an objective narrator into a seemingly partial narrator, quick to paint his emotions into his descriptions of Heep. Furthermore, Copperfield's telling does not attempt to influence the reader's decision—as to whether Copperfield is a hero or not. The narrative matches the "author's intention," (Booth 158) and Copperfield acts as a reliable vessel in Dickens' story, emphasizing his quest to show the story over his ego. Still, Copperfield undeniably manipulates the story to discredit Heep; the reader is quick to accept Copperfield's apology. Since Copperfield is the only medium the reader has in perceiving Heep, the reader is inadvertently influenced by the way Copperfield perceives the story; thus, Copperfield's bias is built in to the images of the story.

Whether it is Caulfield or Copperfield's intention or not, they create distance between the reader and the author; the degree of distance, the "filter" (qtd. Van), they create varies. Nonetheless, the reader relies on the narrator when recreating the language of the novels in sensory images and ideas. If those images are described in a way that subtly connotes a certain perception by the reader, then the story is being manipulated to fit the narrator's purpose.

### **Reader-Narrator Sympathy**

Although Caulfield and Copperfield are distinct story-tellers, pitted against each other by Caulfield's remark "all the David Copperfield kind of crap," (Salinger 3) these narrators are both equally characterized to the degree that they tell a story in respect to their ego. Neither is simply an author's puppet; they are characters affected by the story they have been tasked with narrating. The filter through which Copperfield and Caulfield perceive and relate their reality is

representative of their own ego, which makes both narratives unreliable and, by proxy, an imitation representative of humanity, not the author.

According to W. G. Sebald, "Fiction that does not acknowledge the uncertainty of the narrator is a form of imposture," (qtd. Wood 4). Sebald believes that narrators should not be the "directors" or "stage-hands" of the story, but they should complement the illusion of fiction, intensifying the sense for the reader that fiction is at once "real" and "unreal" (Wood 4). Sebald is addressing fiction, but his comments can also relate to the writing of non-fiction, where often times an objective reporter or author presents the facts of a story as if he or she were a "director" or "stage-hand." This rigid narrative approach limits the reader's opportunity to discover something new in the text. Aside from the facts presented, little exists that would mimic the complexity of reality.

Capitalizing on the narrator's reliability in order to create distance between the author and the reader intensifies the reader's experience with the text, consequently creating distance between the reader and the reader's own reality. When the reader interacts with the text, there are certain sensory details that must be populated by the reader (Nims & Mason 3-6). Additionally, the reader is tasked with reading the author's words and bringing the text to life. The novel is then partially attached to the reader; each reader will have a different opinion of the respective narrator and that narrator's intentions. Where Booth established that an unreliable narrator is likely to cross the author's intended norms (159), it can likely be inferred that an unreliable narrator may breach or tip-off the reader's trust in the narrative; thus, the rift between author and reader offers a foundation for free-range creative synthesis on both sides of the writer-reader spectrum.

However, Wood states that "to see a world and its fictional people truthfully may expand our capacity for sympathy in the actual world," (171-172). If villainous narrators, such as Humbert Humbert, can influence a reader's sympathies through "mimetic persuasion," then it is possible for a reader to sympathize with both a seemingly reliable and explicitly unreliable narrators, so long as the reader's aesthetic reaction to the fictional text convinces the reader's epistemological understanding of reality.

Furthermore, a reader's response to an unreliable narrative could develop a heightened sense of sympathy in the reader if the reader "truthfully" understands the narrator's reason for filtering the narrative. This fact could be likened to a child lying to his parents about cleaning his room in order to play with his friends during summer vacation; the child is unreliable, but parents may sympathize with the bigger picture; this child's summer vacations are fleeting; childhood will soon pass; there will be time to clean and be responsible as an adult, but the freedom of summer vacations will be long gone.

### **Reader Sympathy with an Explicit Unreliable Narrator**

At the start of *The Catcher in the Rye* there is no evidence that supports a reason behind Caulfield's unreliability. Caulfield seems to be going against academic norms by discrediting Dickens' *David Copperfield*; however, Caulfield's unreliability is buried in the narrative: "Where I want to start is the day I left Pencey Prep" (Salinger 4). Later, Caulfield reveals that he's forgotten to mention an important detail. It turns out Caulfield didn't leave Pencey Prep: "They kicked me out" (Salinger 6). A brief explanation of the narrative inconsistency is never provided. However, Caulfield lied to the reader by manipulating the logical order of the events. Even though Caulfield eventually fesses up and clarifies the story, the reader now realizes the narrator cannot be trusted.

Booth believes that simply lying is not sufficient evidence to consider a character unreliable (159). However, Caulfield stands between Salinger's story experience and the reader. Furthermore, there are certainly some details that Caulfield does not wish to share with the reader, "I don't feel like going into it, if you want to know the truth" (Salinger 3). Caulfield's unreliability lies in the motive behind his narrative deceptions. He is too rebellious of a narrator to share his emotions. Instead, Caulfield relies on the reader to infer the emotions; the reader needs to identify why Caulfield is manipulating the story. Once the reader attributes the story's manipulation to Caulfield protecting his ego, the reader can infer that Caulfield is a troubled narrator, struggling to piece together the events of the summer.

For example, when Caulfield reveals that he's been expelled from school, he has this desire to feel a "good-by" (Salinger 7). Then, "all of a sudden," he recalls a moment with his friends. They were kicking a football around one night. "It was getting darker and darker and we could hardly see the ball anymore, but we just kept on doing what we were doing" (Salinger 7). Caulfield doesn't explain what made him think about that moment, but the reader can infer that it may have been a time when Caulfield felt like he belonged. Caulfield mildly alludes to this by saying, "If I get a chance to remember that kind of stuff, I can get a good-by when I need one" (Salinger 8). The reference to the "good-by" at the end of the passage fills Caulfield's emotional distress at the beginning, which is related to his expulsion. Rather than caustically venting on his expulsion, Caulfield transports the reader to an image that Caulfield would much rather have the reader associate with him.

As a narrator, Caulfield is rebellious; he is fighting with his desire to confront and hide his emotions. Although Caulfield is arguably "scared," and "tricked" by his vanity and desire, his narrative disguises his emotions (Salinger 10). When expressing a certain fondness for Mr. Spencer, Caulfield says, "I know that sounds mean to say, but I don't mean it mean. I used to think about old Spencer quite a lot, and if you thought about him too much, you wondered what the heck he was still living for" (Salinger 10). In this excerpt, Caulfield does not wish harm on Mr. Spencer. On the contrary, Caulfield expresses that he is sympathetic to his old friend, and afraid of the mortality associated with Mr. Spencer's age. Still, Caulfield expresses sentiment through verbal irony. Rather than directly stating his intention, Caulfield, once again, protects his ego by approaching his sentiment for Mr. Spencer in a roundabout fashion.

Caulfield's jagged narrative is inundated with exposition. Throughout most of the novel, he tells the reader the story, only occasionally slowing down to show the reader through scene. Often, when Caulfield settles into a scene, his narrative voice overpowers the story experience; it is almost as if he is trying to shield his self from the vulnerability of an active scene. In this way, the narrative focuses more on the identity of the character's narrative ability, rather than the experience of the story, and the reader is taught to read Caulfield as a narrator with something to hide.

### **Reader Sympathy with a Non-explicitly Unreliable Narrator**

David Copperfield's purpose for telling the story of his life is seemingly transparent; he seeks to discover whether he will be the hero of his life or whether that distinction belongs to someone else (Dickens 11). As Copperfield leads the reader through his childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, the reader assumes that Copperfield is staying true to his original empirical mission; however, masked behind Copperfield's elaborate narrative is the simple truth that Copperfield is relaying his story to the reader through his own perspective, enhancing sensory details in order to

win over the reader's sympathies. If Copperfield intends to be the hero of his own life, then he will certainly depict his life in a manner that attaches sympathy to him.

The formality of Copperfield's narrative disguises his tone. Rather than using contractions or excessive adverbial devices to make a statement on his story, Copperfield uses literary devices. He feigns the good observer, trying to describe his life in the best possible detail, but his poetic descriptions embed tone into the images.

When Copperfield returns to school with Mr. Wickfield he describes the school as being, "a grave building in the courtyard, with a learned air about it that seemed very well suited to the stray rooks and jackdaws that came down from the Cathedral towers..." (Dickens 215). Although Copperfield set out to tell the story of his life as honestly as he could, he infuses his telling with descriptions that influence the reader's perception of those images. That the school was in a courtyard would be an objective observation; however, that the school was a "grave building" is Copperfield's opinion. The humor in Copperfield's allusion to the "stray rooks and jackdaws" further intensifies Copperfield's charisma with the reader. The reader has no reason to discredit Copperfield's opinion that the school is an old joke.

Since Copperfield maintains the illusion of a reliable narrator, the reader learns to trust and sympathize with Copperfield; the reader has had no reason to believe that Copperfield is not a credible source. With no indication that Copperfield may be embellishing his account, the reader is taught not to look between the lines or to infer beyond Copperfield's narrative. On the contrary, Copperfield keeps the reader busy in interpreting his multi-layered poetic descriptions.

A more pronounced example of Copperfield's tone inflected by literary devices occurs when Copperfield described Doctor Strong as being "as rusty, to my thinking, as the tall iron gates outside the house; and almost as stiff and heavy as the great stones that flanked them..." (Dickens 215). Doctor Strong is neither a rusted gate, nor a rock, yet Copperfield teaches the reader to examine Doctor Strong superimposed over the metaphorical weight of these two images. Although Copperfield has not stated whether or not he is particularly fond of Doctor Strong, the reader is led to believe that Doctor Strong is a kind of mild obstacle: a rusted gate, a stiff rock. These descriptions also lend to Doctor Strong's personality, where the reader can infer that Strong is old and strict, immovable.

There is little that differentiates Copperfield's poetic narrative from Humbert's "fancy prose style" in *Lolita*. Both Copperfield and Humbert present a narrative under the guise of an objective account: Copperfield in terms of uncovering whether he is the hero of his life or not, Humbert in terms of letting the reader decide whether he is guilty or not. Both narrators take poetic liberties when telling the story. Copperfield provides the illusion that he is presenting an empirical analysis of his life. Humbert refers to a journal he had memorized, which was destroyed some years back. Critics would not hesitate to consider Humbert an unreliable narrator (Wood 5), yet while Copperfield shares many of Humbert's unreliably narrative characteristics, he is often considered trustworthy, even by other fiction narrators like Caulfield.

The greatest divide between Copperfield and Humbert is that Copperfield is not romantically involved with an underage girl; therefore, it is easier to trust and sympathize with Copperfield over Humbert, since the amount of "mimetic persuasion" required on behalf of Dickens is far less than what would be required of Nabokov. Thus, Copperfield's embellished narrative is interpreted by the reader as a series of details, which the reader does not consider questioning, particularly, since the reader relies on the sensory details Copperfield provides when recreating the aesthetic reality through reading.



By creating ambiguity, separating the author from the narrator and the narrator from the reader, a sort of electricity is required to bring a text to life, like the flashing electrodes between the synaptic clefts in our own minds. The facts and details in fiction are obscured by filters: unreliable observations, limitations, sympathetic associations, and the simple observation that fiction is not static; it changes over time for the reader and the writer.

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