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“It was hot as hell and the windows were all steamy”

A Queer Reading of *The
Catcher in the Rye* with
Didactic Considerations

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Introduction

Performing a queer reading of a classical novel in a classroom can be a complex undertaking, especially if it is a matter of an L2 environment. In order to keep it close to the learners' prior knowledge and to keep the amount of pages relatively limited, J.D. Salinger's classical novel would be a good choice. As Hekanaho points out: "*The Catcher in the Rye* oscillates between straightness and queerness, set in the closeted gay space of the American 1950s" (97). Although initially having been banned from libraries and reading lists and ignored by critics, the novel is, in Salzman's words: "one of the most popular, and more importantly one of the most read, of all works of modern fiction" (2). The title of this essay is a quote from a scene in the shower room in one of the early chapters. The protagonist Holden Caulfield reports: "It was hot as hell and the windows were all steamy" (Salinger 23). This and other passages could be read as homo-erotic episodes, the essay will suggest.

The novel is frequently used in the English teaching classrooms of Swedish upper secondary schools, which suggests that discussions based on the text regarding sexuality and the term *queer* in general can be conducted in a productive way. *The Catcher in the Rye* has often been related to as a coming-of-age *Bildungsroman* that follows the protagonist during a couple of winter days that he spends on his own in New York, before breaking down mentally and ending up at an institution, from where he narrates the story. However, the text leaves several gaps that a queer approach helps to fill in. Hekanaho, for instance, focuses on the "depiction of non-hegemonic masculinity and sexualities" (90) in her reading. Or as a review in *Journal of Homosexuality* describes it: "Holden Caulfield, with all of his turmoil and uncertainty, remains a continuing reminder

of the high price America pays in its young males for absent, uninvolved fathers, desexualizing childhood, and for despising physical and emotional intimacy between males” (Ferguson 118).

Several other critics have also dealt with elements in the novel related to sexuality. Duane Edward’s essay, originally published in 1977, explicitly points out several characters, that the protagonist encounters, as homosexuals. Holden’s personal conflict is however rather explained by his sexual ambivalence and inability to relate sexually to females (Edward 150). In an article about how to teach so-called controversial elements from this novel, Helen Frangedis brings up homosexuality as something related to the same two peripheral characters that Edward has referred to, but does not assume the protagonist Holden to be non-straight himself. Nor does her article make connections between his mental breakdown and sexual anxiety.

The discussion about the notion of sexuality as such is central for a queer theoretic approach, since there are several ways to perceive sexuality as a term. Jonathan Culler discusses a shift in the viewpoint: “Previously, there were homosexual acts in which people might engage; now it [is] a question, rather, of a sexual core or essence thought to determine the very being of the individual: Is he *a* homosexual?” (6). Sexuality will in this essay be treated as something “constructed, experienced, and understood in culturally and historically specific ways” (Sullivan 1). Thus, the essay will build on poststructuralist, anti-essentialist and postmodern concepts of identity, gender and, not least, sexuality. Understanding episodes of *The Catcher in the Rye* from a queer perspective will not imply the protagonist’s being *a* homosexual, but will rather, as Peter Barry describes it: “foreground homosexual aspects of mainstream literature which have

previously been glossed over” and “expose the ‘homophobia’ of mainstream literature and criticism” (143) due to their ignoring of homosexual aspects.

The previous work that this essay will most closely be based on, is Pia Livia Hekanaho’s critical essay “Queering Catcher: flits, straights, and other morons”, not least because she also relates her queer analysis of *The Catcher in the Rye* to Sedgwick’s theory about the homosocial continuum. In her essay, she develops and comments on Edward’s observations, but from a more problematising and critical queer position: “As a process, queering destabilises sexual identity categories and finds ‘queer spaces’, points of ambiguity and alternative perspectives, in language and culture” (Hekanaho 90).

The questions that this essay will problematise are in regard to the protagonist’s internal sexual conflict and his mental breakdown, as well as the notion of masculinity at a boarding school and how it affects the identity of a young boy. In order for such a discussion to be relevant, inspiration will be sought from an influential feminist in the queer theoretical field, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Her term ‘homosocial continuum’ (Sedgwick 1) will be central for explaining the protagonist’s relations to other boys in the novel and thereby identifying some textual passages as homoerotic episodes and expressions of desire, that would otherwise have been left without a closer reading.

Gay/lesbian subtexts can be observed in many mainstream literary texts that are not specifically part of an LGBT-genre (Greenbaum 71). One good example is Joseph Conrad’s *Typhoon*. As Gregory Woods observes: “This is not a novel by a homosexual writer, as far as we know; nor is it explicitly about homosexual characters. Neither of these facts prevents its being amenable to gay readings. You might call this the process of queering the canon. It works in parallel with canonising queers” (14). Related to the

discussion about queer canons, Woods suggests that readers and critics have to “rediscover lost texts and reassess texts undervalued by straight critics” (11). That is precisely what this essay will propose to do with *The Catcher in the Rye*.

Finally, another question that the essay will take into consideration is how a queer interpretation of Salinger’s novel could be used in the classroom and how such a discussion would relate to the present Swedish curriculum for the upper secondary school. A reading of that official document and several didactic articles about teaching and dealing with LGBT-themed literature in classrooms shows that queering pieces of literature is both motivated and useful. The sense of feeling alone and the idea of voices being silenced are two recurrent central themes that the articles deal with. To read explicitly LGBT-themed literature for young adults is one way to address questions about heteronormativity and sexuality in general, with the aim to show that “there are many ways to be sexual in the world” (Greenbaum 71). But to limit the possibility of bringing up discussions about heteronormativity and homophobia only to readings of something experienced as a certain LGBT genre is not the only way to go. Several sources talk about the possibility of using mainstream literature and applying queer theoretical analyses to them. Greenbaum believes in guiding the students towards exploring subtexts, not only queer texts, on their own (72), whereas Woods sees “capacious lucky-dips, in which any page one turns to will offer a potential gay reading” (9).

This essay will show that *The Catcher in the Rye* contains several “lucky-dips” and passages that offer possibilities for queering the text and thereby initiating several fruitful discussions in the classroom. These discussions would not necessarily be only about homophobia, heteronormativity, masculinity or sexuality in general, but also about the

role of literature in our everyday life. Ultimately, discussing the queering of literature in a classroom also presents a good opportunity for a general discussion about the role of the critical reader and the possibilities that reading and interpreting texts offer us as citizens in a democracy.

Homosociality in a Masculine Microcosm

The protagonist Holden seems to come from a very conservative family that is causing him problems with his identity. Already on the first page, he states that he does not want to talk about his “lousy childhood” (Salinger 1), since his parents are “touchy about anything like that, especially [his] father” (1). A set of conservative values seems to form part of Holden’s background, which is also connected to his studying and living at several boarding schools. These environments could be regarded as same-sex masculine microcosms, in which all the different expressions of male desire that, according to Sedgwick, are part of an unbroken ‘homosocial continuum’ (1-2), are represented. At Pencey Prep, the school where the first chapters of the narration take place, Holden has developed several bonds with his fellow male students.

Hekanaho states that boarding schools for boys are “an archetypal example of a male homosocial environment and form a significant milieu in Holden’s narrative” (94). A relevant question is whether Holden likes to inhabit a masculine microcosm where he is surrounded by male values and norms. Gregory Woods makes the following observation: “A boy may love boys in such a place without, once he leaves it, ever being tarnished by actually having to be homosexual. Boarding-school is the citadel of the passing phase” (326). Perhaps, this is precisely what terrifies Holden, since it forces him to face his inner

desires and their objects, namely other boys. The following quote shows that Holden is not entirely convenient about living in a world with only men around him: “I like to be somewhere where you can at least see a few girls around once in a while, even if they’re only scratching their arms or blowing their noses or even just giggling or something” (Salinger 2). Without females around, the environment is more patriarchic and homophobic, and thereby a less secure place to boys who struggle with their own masculinity. Problematizing this aspect is a central part of a queer reading of the novel.

Towards the end of the narration, Holden commits to his sister: “God, Phoebe! I can’t explain. I just didn’t like anything that was *happening* at Pencey. I can’t explain” (152). Indeed, unpleasant things did occur during his stay at various boarding schools. One situation that seems to be particularly etched in Holden’s mind occurred at a previous boarding school, Elkton Hills, where a boy decided to commit suicide rather than take back something he said about a bully: “I won’t even tell you what they did to him – it’s too repulsive – but he *still* wouldn’t take it back, old James Castle” (153). One reading of this is that the other boys raped him, wherefore he finally jumped out the window.

This scene is part of Holden’s internal conflict, since he is well aware of the fact that it is not all roses in a masculine microcosm, where even rape can occur without being punished adequately: “All they did with the guys that were in the room with him was expel them. They didn’t even go to jail” (153). The text indeed never explicitly points out James Castle as being raped. However, it should be possible to assume this fact, given – as Lucy Valerie Graham points out – that:

In canonical literary narratives of the West, rape is often depicted as ‘unspeakable’, as severed from articulation, and literary references to hidden rape stories cannot but bring into relief the complex relationship between literary silences and the aftermath of actual violation. (439)

The literary silence in *The Catcher in the Rye* of an assumed rape story is just another symbol of how the masculine microcosm at a boarding school influences a young boy’s mind. Such environments are patriarchic. Sedgwick states that: “From the vantage point of our own society, at any rate, it has apparently been impossible to imagine a form of patriarchy that was not homophobic” (3). Hence, boarding schools are also homophobic institutions, where boys with unstable perceptions of their masculinities and sexual identities will face many obstacles. Holden Caulfield is a good example of this.

Holden feels disillusioned about the failure to uphold a male fraternity at Pencey based on true homosociality, where the male inhabitants would promote the interests of each other, according to Sedgwick’s description of the term as a “men-promoting-the-interests-of-men” phenomenon (3). He uses his neighbour Ackley as an example of someone being side-lined, “[j]ust because he was boring and pimply” (Salinger 151). These worries reflect his own fear of not fitting into the fraternity due to his conflicts and confusions about sexuality and identity. We observe the same pains when he reflects about another patriarchal institution:

but I *do* know it’d drive me crazy if I had to be in the Army and be with a bunch of guys like Ackley and Stradlater [...] all the time, marching with

them and all. I was in the Boy Scouts once, for about a week, and I couldn't even stand looking at the back of the guy's neck in front of me. (127)

Despite the hostility that the norms of masculinity cause Holden during his stay at Pencey, the novel provides us with plenty of evidence that he in fact misses to be part of this same-sex microcosm. Towards the end of the novel, a disillusioned Holden states: "So I got the hell out of the park, and went home. I walked all the way. I wasn't tired or even drunk any more. It was just very cold and nobody around anywhere" (141). We can relate this to how it was in the shower with Stradlater at Pencey: "hot as hell and the windows were all steamy" (23). One possible interpretation is that Holden actually misses the microcosm at Pencey, which explains the concluding words of the novel: "Don't ever tell anybody anything. If you do, you start missing everybody" (192). Holden misses everybody, "[e]ven old Stradlater and Ackley, for instance" (192). What he really misses is to be close to and desire other boys, which a queer reading would suggest.

Homosocial, Homosexual and Triangular Desire

Sedgwick describes her vision of the structure of the continuum of male homosocial desire as something that includes patterns of friendship, mentorship, entitlement, rivalry and, finally, sexuality of different kinds. However, she argues that "no element of that pattern can be understood outside of its relation to women and the gender system as a whole" (1). Interesting for a queer reading of *The Catcher in the Rye* is to include the so-called 'mimetic character of desire,' coined by the French philosopher René Girard, in a discussion about the relations of desire between the male characters in Salinger's novel.

If we apply Girard's representation of desire by use of a triangle, where there is a mediator through whom the subject desires an object (Girard 2), we would arguably be able to establish an erotic triangle between the protagonist Holden, his roommate Stradlater, and Jane Gallagher, a girl that they both know. By looking at this triangular schematisation of the characters' desires, we can better understand the relation between the two boys from a queer perspective, related to Sedgwick's theory of an unbroken continuum of male desire (2). The homosocial relation to Stradlater is so important to Holden that he sees Jane as a potential threat. A mainstream interpretation would be that Holden is frustrated about losing Jane to Stradlater. However, Girard's model can be used for a productive queer reading where Holden is rather anxious about losing Stradlater to Jane. As Hekanaho states: "The idea of Stradlater being sexually intimate with Jane makes Holden anxious: the reader might speculate as to whether the cause of his nauseating anxiety is his jealousy of Jane or of Stradlater" (94).

Holden desires Stradlater and when Jane comes between them, he confesses: "I was getting sort of nervous, all of a sudden. I'm quite a nervous guy" (Salinger 29). Given that he knows Jane, Holden maybe assumes that Stradlater is the type that Jane likes. He sees her as a rival and a potential danger to his relation to Stradlater, even if he is not capable of understanding or defining that certain male-male relation. This incertitude is what makes him nervous and is a crucial point of understanding his internal conflict, which is tightly related to his own sexuality (Edward 149-50).

That Stradlater, not Jane, is in fact the desired object of Holden can be observed in the following quote: "I kept thinking about Jane, and about Stradlater having a date with her and all. It made me so nervous I nearly went crazy. I already told you what a sexy bastard

Stradlater was” (Salinger 29). Using Girard’s model of mimetic desire, Jane is a mediator whom Holden envies for being closer to his desired object than he can ever get. Such an interpretation also offers an understanding of Holden’s fixation with calling up Jane all the time, something he never manages to do, which even Stradlater pays attention to:

‘Jane Gallagher. Jesus.’ I couldn’t get her off my mind. I really couldn’t.

‘I oughta go down and say hello to her, at least.’

‘Why the hell *don’t*cha, instead of keep saying it?’ Stradlater said. (28)

From a queer viewpoint, we could claim that Holden in fact desires Stradlater, the mediator of his desire for Jane. Girard suggests that one must turn to the impassioned subject “[w]hen the ‘nature’ of the object inspiring the passion is not sufficient to account for the desire” (2). Jane and her female ‘nature’ are not sufficient for Holden and therefore he rather desires the mediator, namely Stradlater. Thus, Girard’s model can be useful when examining Holden’s failure to engage sexually with females (Edward 150), and his passionate devotion to several male characters in the novel, including his rival Stradlater. Such a viewpoint helps us to understand Holden’s mental breakdown as a result of the conflicted relation to his own sexuality and desires.

Holden is very attached to the physical aspects of other boys. This could be a reflection of his own struggle with the notions of masculinity and identity, not least from a sexual aspect. Introducing Ackley in chapter 3, the narration is all about his physique: “He was one of these very, very tall, round-shouldered guys – he was about six four – with lousy teeth” (Salinger 16). With Stradlater, it is even more passionate and verbose:

Stradlater was more of a secret slob. He always *looked* all right, Stradlater [...] He always *looked* good when he finished fixing himself up, but he was a secret slob anyway, if you knew him the way I did. The reason he fixed himself up to look good was because he was madly in love with himself. He thought he was the handsomest guy in the Western Hemisphere. He *was* pretty handsome, too – I’ll admit it. (23)

Between the lines, we see that Holden is very interested in the physical appearance of other boys around him and he pays a lot of attention to Stradlater’s looks and habits. It seems evident that the reason for Holden’s noticing and mentioning all these details in his narration has to do with his desire for Stradlater, which is more erotic and sexual than just ‘homosocial.’ Otherwise he would not have paid such attention to Stradlater’s unclothing and body moves; for example: “He started getting undressed. He didn’t say one goddam word about Jane. Not one. Neither did I. I just watched him” (35), or: “Stradlater was putting on his tie, in front of the mirror, when I got there. He spent around half his goddam life in front of the mirror. I sat down in my chair and sort of watched him for a while” (28). Another potentially homo-erotic passage is:

Then, when he was taking off his tie, he asked me if I’d written his goddam composition for him. He walked over and read it while he was unbuttoning his shirt. He stood there, reading it, and sort of stroking his bare chest and

stomach, with this very stupid expression on his face. He was always stroking his stomach or his chest. He was mad about himself. (35)

This passage could be read as a rather tender scene that suggests a homoerotic desire in the narrator. The last sentence about Stradlater being mad about himself could likewise apply to Holden. He also seems to be mad about his roommate, maybe even in a sexual way. This is what a queer reading of the novel can stress, as a deconstructive strategy that aims to “denaturalise heteronormative understandings of sex, gender, sexuality, sociality, and the relations between them” (Sullivan 81).

The acquaintance with Stradlater ends up in a fight, which seems to be caused and engendered by Holden’s sexual desire for his male companion. Even here, in a fairly dangerous situation, Holden cannot avoid being fixated by some very intimate parts of Stradlater’s body, as in: “Get your dirty stinking moron knees off my chest” (Salinger 39). There is something potentially erotic about these details that the narration consistently makes use of, for example in the following quote: “[Stradlater] got all undressed, down to his shorts, and I lay on my bed and lit a cigarette” (36). The tension is ever present and a queer reader expects something like the following to occur:

All of a sudden – for no good reason, really [...] – I felt like jumping off the washbowl and getting old Stradlater in a half nelson. That’s a wrestling hold [...] where you get the other guy around the neck and choke him to death, if you feel like it. So I did it. I landed on him like a goddam panther. (26)

The quote above is of great importance since it reflects Holden's inner thoughts and his erotic desires for Stradlater. There may be other explanations of Holden's action, but a queer reading casts light on the internal conflict regarding sexuality that is going on in the protagonist's mind. The quoted event occurs right after Holden asks Stradlater about his date, which could have provoked Holden's sexual frustration even more. On a later occasion, Holden cannot restrain his desire anymore and it ends up with his attacking Stradlater: "All I know is I got up from the bed [...] and then I tried to sock him, with all my might, right smack in the toothbrush, so it would split his goddam throat open" (38).

A possible queer interpretation of this event is that Holden releases his sexual aggression that is built up within him during the stay at Pencey and especially during his having to share a room with someone of whom he has the following perception: "I already told you what a sexy bastard Stradlater was" (29). The fight with Stradlater did not end fortunately for Holden, but a queer reading could pose another question. Namely, if the outcome is not precisely what Holden truly desires: "Anyway, the next thing I knew, I was on the goddam floor and he was sitting on my chest, with his face and all red. That is, he had his goddam *knees* on my chest, and he weighed about a ton. He had hold of my wrists, too" (38).

From a queer point of view, it is possible that Holden really enjoyed being beaten down by Stradlater. After all, it is a way in which he comes into a more intimate physical contact with his roommate. Namely, there are not many other opportunities in a homophobic and hetero-normative environment for a boy desiring other boys to explore the realm of being physically intimate but through a fist fight. Therefore, a queer reading

can be used for implying that even if Holden tries to convince us of how much he hates Stradlater (“Id’ve killed him”), the truth behind his action has to do with his sexually desiring his opponent. The fight turned out to be a good way to become intimate with Stradlater. In Hekanaho’s words: “the physical intimacy is achieved through fighting, a violent act which nonetheless demands closeness and engagement” (97).

Assuming that Holden enjoys being physically close to Stradlater, even at the price of being hit and wounded by him, is by no means an absurd thought. There is plenty of textual evidence that Stradlater did not want to hurt Holden. He even warns him clearly of provoking his physical response: “‘Now, *shut up*, Holden, God damn it – I’m *warning* ya,’ he said – I really had him going. ‘If you don’t shut up, I’m gonna slam ya one’” (Salinger 38). But Holden’s desire is stronger than his ability to think rationally and avoid entering a fight he probably knows that he has no chance of winning. Instead of falling quiet, Holden sees his chance of keeping Stradlater close to him: “He got up off me, and I got up, too. My chest hurt like hell from his dirty knees. ‘You’re a dirty stupid sonuvabitch of a moron,’ I told him” (39). In fact, Holden wants Stradlater to come back. He desires physical contact with his roommate and a fight is one of the opportunities to pursue tightness in a potentially homophobic environment, such as a boarding school.

Right afterwards, Holden states that it is hard to knock somebody out and he realises that he has just managed to get Stradlater to the point where he wants him: “When I looked up, old Stradlater was standing practically right on top of me” (39). This quote suggests that, in fact, Holden is greatly satisfied with his achievement. Another possible assumption is that Holden knows Stradlater well enough to know that he would feel bad for having knocked Holden down. Hence, he could generate feelings of fraternal caring

within Stradlater by becoming a victim of violence, which is also a part of Holden's desire. In the following quote, we can see that Holden knows that Stradlater is not completely indifferent to Holden's well-being and that he is pleased with his violator's reaction after the combat:

‘Why the hell don’tcha shut *up* when I tellya to?’ he said. He sounded pretty nervous. He probably was scared he’d fractured my skull or something when I hit the floor. It’s too bad I didn’t. ‘You asked for it, God damn it,’ he said. Boy, did he look worried. (39)

This episode is a good representation of male homosocial desire. In their masculine microcosm, there is need for male emotions and tenderness. Even a supposedly straight and masculine character, such as Stradlater in this case, takes part in a play of social bonds between males, with the objective of ‘men-promoting-the-interests-of-men’ (Sedgwick 3). A queer reading provides new perceptions of the relations among males, especially in a closed environment like a boarding school. Stradlater seems to show more stability in his (hetero)sexual identity than Holden. However, this does not prevent him from nurturing and caring for other boys around him. This is a good example of the unbrokenness of the continuum between ‘homosocial’ and homosexual, that Sedgwick describes (1-2). It also explains Stradlater's reaction after the fight with Holden: “‘Listen. Go wash your face,’ Stradlater said. ‘Ya hear me?’” (Salinger 39). Had there not been any ‘men-promoting-the-interests-of-men’ at Pencey, Stradlater would not have paid any attention to how Holden was looking after their fight.

Another reason for Holden's provoking Stradlater could be a desire to come into contact with his own unstable masculinity. He acknowledges that this is just about the second fight in his life, of which he has lost both. Likewise: "what scares me most in a fist fight is the guy's face. I can't stand looking at the other guy's face, is my trouble" (81). This is probably due to his admiring male faces. However, the taste of blood on his own face caused by another boy seems to excite him and symbolises physical closeness to someone. He desires it intensively, but cannot achieve it as long as he sees a heterosexual relationship as the only possible one. This is in fact what frustrates him throughout the whole novel. A queer reading of *The Catcher in the Rye*, thus, also helps us to understand Holden's issues with his identity and his mental instability.

When Stradlater is cold towards Holden, another desire comes into play: "I got feeling so lonesome and rotten, I even felt like waking Ackley up" (44). The sexual desire for Stradlater gets replaced by a more homosocial desire for being close to, probably, any other man. Ackley is the first that crosses Holden's mind when he thinks about boys that could give him some comfort in a situation where he feels rejected. In order to restore a certain emotional stability, he needs to turn to a male that he does not desire sexually, which apparently is not the case when it comes to Ackley. Here, the discussion about the 'homosocial continuum,' according to Sedgwick's definition, seems to be productively relevant. Men have the same needs and rituals for looking for comfort and help from each other as women do. But there is a difference in the perception of it, since, according to Sedgwick: "the diacritical opposition between the 'homosocial' and the 'homosexual' seems to be much less thorough and dichotomous for women, in our society, than for

men” (2). A queer-feminist suggestion would hence be that his sex is one explanation for Holden’s instability and failure in finding peace at a boarding school.

When it comes to Holden’s devotion to Ackley, it could be explained from the other end of Sedgwick’s continuum, namely the homosocial rather than the homosexual. Holden probably identifies with the outsider Ackley and the homosocial desire within him works as a glue that keeps him close to that boy, although he tries to convince us through his narration that he detests Ackley. On one occasion, Holden asks another companion if he minds if they invite Ackley to join them for a night in town: “The reason I asked was because Ackley never did anything on Saturday night, except stay in his room and squeeze his pimples or something” (Salinger 31).

He tries to convince us that he does this out of compassion for Ackley, whereas a queer reading would suggest that he has some kind of desire for this boy. However, this desire does by no means have to be sexual. It could also be a matter of searching for comfort, comradeship and protection from a fellow male. This phenomenon could be understood as a part of a same-sex desire connected to that between two men loving each other, in the same way as “an intelligible continuum of aims, emotions, and valuations links lesbianism with the other forms of women’s attention to women” (Sedgwick 2).

A good example of homosocial desire is when Holden turns to Ackley in his room after the fight with Stradlater in their own room. The desire in Holden towards Ackley is evident here and we can clearly see that he has worked out his plan of sleeping in the neighbouring room already in advance: “‘Hey,’ I said, ‘is it okay if I sleep in Ely’s bed tonight? He won’t be back till tomorrow night, will he?’ I knew damn well he wouldn’t. Ely went home damn near every week end” (Salinger 42). As we can observe, Holden is

seeking comfort from Ackley, whom he wants to be close to. This gives us a good image of the unbroken continuum that Sedgwick discusses. The relation to Stradlater contains erotic elements, which we have been able to observe from the scenes in the shower and their room, including their fight. That relation could be interpreted as based on homosexual desire. The relation to Ackley, however, is rather of a homosocial sort. Holden does not find Ackley attractive in any way, but he recognises that he wants to be close to him as a male in need of comfort from another male.

Based on this very passage, we could conduct several interesting discussions in the classroom. One possibility is to ask the students why they think that Holden wants to sleep in Ackley's room that night. Another is to ask them to define Holden's relation to Ackley and Stradlater respectively. One possible response would be that he is sexually attracted to one of them, whereas the relation to the other is rather 'homosocial.'

Ambivalence Leading to Holden's Mental Breakdown

Holden's attitude towards sexual issues reveals his inner thoughts and desires and could be related to his own repressed sexuality. During his stay at a hotel after having left Pencey, he observes unorthodox sexual activities in some of the rooms opposite his: "The trouble was, that kind of junk is sort of fascinating to watch, even if you don't want it to be" (55). Holden likes what he sees, probably because it opens his mind towards realising and accepting that sexuality can find different expressions to the ones we have to learn in a normative society. Furthermore, Holden himself at times seems to be a "pervert," a word he uses to depict many others in his narration. "I mean that's my big trouble. In my mind, I'm probably the biggest sex maniac you ever saw. Sometimes I can think of very

crumby stuff I wouldn't mind doing if the opportunity came up" (56). From a queer perspective, we could assume that this involves homosexuality and other non-normative sexual expressions. An explanation to Holden's exhibitionistic attitude (Edward 151) would be that Holden, as Sarah Graham claims: "fears his own desires so much that he has completely repressed them and his fascination with looking is a symptom of his consequent inability to connect intimately with another person" (58).

Accordingly, Edward draws the conclusion that Holden's conflict is reflected in his inability to relate sexually to women: "Clearly, Holden has a problem with females" (151). There are plenty of examples of this during Holden's conversation with his old student adviser, Carl Luce, who himself is assumed to be gay by several critics (150; Hekanaho 93). Another good example is the encounter with the prostitute Sunny. Holden wants her to keep him company and talk, but cannot manage to go to bed with her.

Simplemindedly, Holden enjoys talking to Luce because of the topics he has information on: "He was always talking about [...] flits and Lesbians. Old Luce knew who every flit and Lesbian in the United States was" (Salinger 129). From the conversations with Carl Luce, we can however also observe Holden's normative attitudes towards sexuality: "Some of the ones he said were flits were even married, for God's sake" (129). Holden's reaction in this quote depicts the homophobic society that has affected the narrator's way of thinking. Sedgwick claims that "[f]rom the vantage point of our own society, at any rate, it has apparently been impossible to imagine a form of patriarchy that was not homophobic" (3). This helps us understand Holden's internal conflicts about identity, masculinity and sexuality. Edward claims that Holden is ambivalent, "and ambivalence is a certain indication of mental instability" (150).

This could be related to his homosexual desire, which he cannot manage to affirm, since he is “too busy repressing the truth” (149). A good example of this repression resides in the following passage: “He said you could turn into [a flit] practically overnight, if you had all the traits and all. He used to scare the hell out of us. I kept waiting to turn into a flit or something. The funny thing about old Luce, I used to think he was sort of flitty himself, in a way” (Salinger 129). Holden shows no signs of understanding or being inspired by the points that Carl Luce makes, namely that the notion of sexuality should not be understood as a simple dichotomous straight/gay opposition, but rather as a deconstructed queer identity. This notion is explained by Sullivan as something that “enables us to acknowledge the constructedness of meaning and identity and to begin to imagine alternative ways of thinking and living” (51). But instead of applying this way of thinking to himself, Holden looks for gay tendencies in others, probably in order to repress and avoid facing his own quivering identity.

Whatever the explanations to this may be, a possible interpretation of his final breakdown is that he realises what his internal conflict really is about after the night at Mr Antolini’s. Namely, the last night of the narration, Holden spends at his old teacher’s house. Although being exhausted – “I had a headache and I felt lousy. I even had sort of a stomach-ache, if you want to know the truth” (166) – he participates in a philosophical conversation with his old teacher, which we could also interpret from a queer perspective.

Antolini asks Holden: “[o]ne short, faintly stuffy, pedagogical question: Don’t you think there’s a time and place for everything?” (166). A queer reader would interpret this as a way of asking about his sexuality and a possible occasion for Holden’s coming out, either to himself or to the rest of the world. Eventually, Antolini manages to address his

worries about Holden: “I have a feeling that you’re riding for some kind of a terrible, terrible fall” (168). Although Antolini seems a bit uncertain in the text about the kind of fall that he foresees for Holden, there is plenty of textual evidence for a queer interpretation of it:

Then he said, ‘This fall I think you’re riding for – it’s a special kind of fall, a horrible kind. The man falling isn’t permitted to feel or hear himself hit bottom. He just keeps falling and falling. The whole arrangement’s designed for men who, at some time or other in their lives, were looking for something their own environment couldn’t supply them with. Or they thought their environment couldn’t supply them with. So they gave up looking. They gave it up before they ever really even got started. [...]’ (169)

It seems evident, that what Antolini is talking to Holden about in this very central passage, is male homosexual desire. Probably, he has this desire himself and he recognises the same suffering and uncertainty in Holden. Antolini does not want Holden to commit the same mistakes as he once did, regarding his sexuality and closeted living. Therefore, he explicitly says that the fall he is predicting for Holden is designed for *men* who “were looking for something their own environment couldn’t supply them with” (169), which could be read as accepted relations with other men. Antolini foresees Holden’s coming breakdown: “I don’t want to scare you [...] but I can very clearly see you dying nobly, one way or another, for some highly unworthy cause” (169).

Evidently, he warns Holden against a closeted life in denial and advises him to look for “the kind of information that will be very, very dear to [Holden’s] heart” (170). A queer suggestion would be that he is making reference to the history of gay literature as “one of the grandest of the grand narratives” (Woods 16), which would help Holden to deal with his own sexuality and identity. This passage is central for a queer discussion and offers a logical approach to the topic of gay literature: “Many, many men have been just as troubled morally and spiritually as you are right now. Happily, some of them kept records of their troubles. You’ll learn from them – if you want to. Just as someday, if you have something to offer, someone will learn something from you. It’s a beautiful reciprocal arrangement. [...] It’s history. It’s poetry” (Salinger 170).

Hekanaho sees this ambiguous advice to Holden from Antolini as a “survival kit designed to help a queer kid” (96). Obviously, by talking about a “scholarly fellowship that transcends history” (96), Antolini shows, what Gregory Woods calls: a “willingness to assume a trans-historical and cross-cultural unifying definition of gay culture” (9). Albeit, not referring explicitly to the terms gay or queer, he tries to steer Holden towards a more positive attitude to education and literature, because he knows that studying the history of gay literature can make an uncertain person realise that being gay can sometimes be a privilege and not automatically mean being side-lined nor powerless. As Woods explains it:

While it may be true that the history of male gay literature is, in large measure, a history of acts of censorship, it is often, also, a record of self-affirming male élites with access to advanced education and the means of

cultural production. There is at least as much power as powerlessness to be acknowledged in the history of male gay culture. (6)

After their conversation, Holden gets undressed and “in bed with just [his] shorts on” (Salinger 172). Despite his physical exhaustion, he is not at all indifferent to what Antolini has just talked to him about. Holden likes Antolini’s behaviour and wants to gain more information from him, just as he did when discussing “flits and Lesbians” with Carl Luce at the bar (129). Probably, he also likes what happens when he wakes up at Antolini’s: “What it was, it was Mr Antolini’s hand. What he was doing was, he was sitting on the floor right next to the couch, in the dark and all, and he was sort of petting me or patting me on the goddam head” (172).

Indeed, Holden narrates that his first reaction was: “‘What’re ya *doing*, anyway?’ [...] I mean I was embarrassed as hell” (172). However, we could assume that he did desire and maybe even like it. The embarrassment probably has to do with his enjoying that other men find it interesting to be gentle with him. This desire, whether homoerotic or of a homosocial art, seems relevant especially when considering the lack of positive male characters in Holden’s life. For instance, Holden’s father is present in the novel only through the echo of “*Daddy’ll kill you*” (149, 150). Therefore Holden reflects: “I wondered if just maybe I was wrong about thinking he was making a flitty pass at me” (175). He even starts thinking of going back to Antolini’s house: “I mean I started thinking that even if he was a flit he certainly’d been very nice to me” (175).

Antolini is the only male character that responds to the desire that Holden feels and subconsciously expresses to so many males in the novel. The fact that his desires are

unconscious is precisely what causes Holden to panic in the scene with Antolini (S. Graham 57). What scares him in this situation is probably that he, for the first time, encounters his desires and realises that they need not be unnatural. Given the fact that this is one of the last episodes narrated prior to Holden's becoming ill and ending up at the place from where he narrates the story, it could be assumed that it is precisely the discovery of a reciprocal male desire that ultimately causes his mental breakdown: "The more I thought about it, the more depressed and screwed up about it I got" (Salinger 176).

Didactic Considerations

Helen Frangedis suggest sex to be "perhaps the most controversial element which the teacher must deal with in *Catcher*," and she sees "direct confrontation [as] the best approach" (74). Examples brought up in her article are Holden's contacts with a prostitute, the "perverts" that he observes from his hotel window and the nocturnal encounter with Mr. Antolini at the end of the novel. By entering the realm of sexuality, we find a good many possibilities for classroom discussions about a queer interpretation of the work. Homosexuality can be a controversial issue to both teachers and students. However, teaching gay subtexts in literature can be seen as a responsibility of the teacher, in order to create inclusive classrooms and delegitimise the assumption that "lesbian and gay content is not there, that lesbian and gay students don't exist, that lesbian and gay experience is invisible" (Greenbaum 71). In a Swedish context, we also have an Education Act and a curriculum to relate to.

The Swedish Curriculum for the upper secondary school stipulates the fundamental values that the national school system should be based on already in the beginning

chapter: “Education should impart and establish respect for human rights and the fundamental democratic values on which Swedish society is based” (Skolverket 4). Keywords are understanding and compassion for others, and the document emphasises that the school should encourage all students to discover their own uniqueness as individuals. Gender, ethnic affiliation and religion, among others, are accompanied with transgender identity (or its expression) and sexual orientation as grounds for which no one in school should be subjected to discrimination (4).

Likewise, the curriculum explicitly names goals and guidelines that all who work in the school should relate to: “actively promote equality of individuals and groups,” “prevent all forms of discrimination, harassment and degrading treatment,” and “work for solidarity with disadvantaged groups” (10). A logical assumption would be that heteronormativity and homophobia are phenomena that limit the fulfilment of the values stipulated by the Swedish Education Act and national curriculum, wherefore their problematisation is to take place in all classrooms.

Among the traditional reasons for reading, such as acquisition of wisdom, enjoyment of art and pleasure of entertainment, Cart also suggests a fourth one: “the lifesaving necessity of seeing one’s own face reflected in the pages of a good book and the corollary comfort that derives from the knowledge that one is not alone” (46). Cart’s article discusses the role that queer and LGBT literature for young adults plays for problematising and fighting back heterosexism and homophobia in the classroom. It is especially important for students who may identify themselves as non-straight, since it relieves their feelings of being alone. Precisely this is also mentioned in the Swedish curriculum, which obliges all who work in school to “[c]ontribute to developing the

students' sense of belonging, solidarity, and responsibility towards people outside the immediate group" (Skolverket 10).

Based on these formulations, we can draw the conclusion that using queer theories in the teaching of literature, regardless of in the mother tongue or in an L2, is an important undertaking where the teacher plays a major role. One teacher who carries this out is Vicky Greenbaum, according to whom "all students should be aware of homoerotic subtexts in literature of the past, as well as being aware of more recent literature full of gay and lesbian voices" (71). Greenbaum states that in less hospitable surroundings, gays and lesbians often wish to be assumed heterosexual. This is also a case in many schools and, as we have seen, the Swedish curriculum requires from all who work within the institutions of education to work against all types of exclusion (Skolverket 10). Clark & Blackburn identify classrooms as "significant sites for combating homophobia and heterosexism in schools", and claim that "reading LGBT-themed literature is one of the best ways to do this work" (25).

The term *LGBT-themed literature*, however, tends to be problematic since it does not involve new queer approaches to mainstream literature, such as *The Catcher in the Rye*. Greenbaum refers especially to the episode where Holden visits Mr Antolini and states that "entire classes began to notice the often ignored (or tiptoed-around) moments" (72). Assuming that every voice in literature is straight can be seen as an instrument of a "regulatory regime" and oppressive structures (Butler 13-14), and thereby, as a consequence, part of the norms and structures that contribute to some students' feeling alone. Greenbaum suggests that the teacher should correct this error through conscious awareness, since "invisibility and silence hurt gay and lesbian people" (71).

A queer reading of *The Catcher in the Rye* could therefore be seen as a way of achieving several aims that the Swedish curriculum stipulates, including anti-discrimination and tolerance. By showing that it is possible to understand the relations between the characters in the novel through the notions of homosexual or homosocial desire, or simply by bringing up the possibility of the protagonist's not being necessarily straight, all students will have a chance to gain a new outlook on life and the surrounding world. As Greenbaum concludes: "Students, gay and straight, will benefit from inclusiveness of all kinds," since "self-acceptance, acceptance of others, and a literary intelligence cognizant of the many texts lurking in humankind, are fostered through inclusive teaching" (74).

Mentioning all subtexts, not only the homoerotic ones, is one of the rules that Greenbaum has set for her own teaching, "so that students can begin noticing them on their own" (72). In her article about the controversial elements in *The Catcher in the Rye*, Frangedis names homosexuality briefly: "Finally, the teacher will have to address the topic of homosexuality when Holden finds himself the victim of what seems to be a "flitty pass," [...] from Mr. Antolini" (74). That article is, however, directed mostly towards raising an awareness of "many of the misconceptions which make *Catcher* a perpetual candidate for banning in our schools" (74), and does not problematise why homosexuality should be perceived as a controversial element at all:

I recognize that *Catcher* is not a novel that one assigns students to read and analyze on their own. On the contrary, it demands structure, guidance, and strong teaching. The teacher must facilitate not only an appreciation of the

novel's literary merits but also a proper understanding of its controversial elements. (72)

But strong teaching also demands good knowledge and familiarity with the subjects on behalf of the teacher. One of Greenbaum's strategies to approach sexuality and queer subtexts is to explain "the long history of hiddenness which is most obvious in the literature taught in English classes" (71). Hence, the teacher needs to be familiar with both the history of gay and lesbian literature and with specific works that could be used in the classroom for the performance of productive readings and discussions of queer subtexts. The "brief homosexual encounter" between Holden and Mr. Antolini, as well as the other queer aspects of *The Catcher in the Rye* presented in this essay, could be regarded as what Cart names: "small moments having little lasting impact on the evolution of gay and lesbian literature published specifically for young adults" (47). Nevertheless, for many young adults, these incidents and settings "may well have been their first exposure to homosexuality in literature," he concludes (47). This is another aspect of why a queering of this novel in a classroom teaching situation is motivated.

By using a mainstream novel that was not written within a special LGBT genre, the teacher not only challenges the students to be more observant readers, but such an undertaking also fulfils many tasks that the curriculum imposes on the profession and helps the students to gain a new perception of the world. In Greenbaum's words: "What students need now, I think, is a balanced view of literature: gay and lesbian students need to know that voices like theirs are active, and straight-identified students need to see that there are many ways to be sexual in the world" (71).

Conclusion

Using *The Catcher in the Rye* in a teaching situation is a fruitful undertaking that could be performed in multiple fashions. One highly productive approach is to analyse the novel from a queer perspective, which is what this essay has proposed to show. If related to the Swedish curriculum for the upper secondary school, we can argue that queering novels traditionally used in the classroom is a way of creating inclusion, giving voice to groups often left in silence and feeling alone (Greenbaum 71), and combating heterosexism and homophobia in schools (Clark & Blackburn 25).

The Catcher in the Rye is a text that provides us with several episodes suitable for a queer analysis and problematisation of the heteronormative assumption that there are only straight characters in literature. Queer theory challenges the notions of a supposed unity “squeezing out difference, perpetuating binarisms and dichotomous formations” (Walters 7), and by problematising the assumed heterosexuality of the characters in *The Catcher in the Rye* with one’s students, much knowledge and new perspectives on the world can be gained. As this essay’s didactic section has shown, such activity fits well into the pattern of the aims and norms of the Swedish education system.

In order to work productively with the above mentioned topics in a classroom, the teacher needs to be familiar with queer theory as such, which is not always an unproblematic undertaking. This essay has shown possible ways to apply theories on the basis of a particular mainstream piece of literature. Sedgwick’s theory about an unbroken continuum of male homosocial and homosexual desire is a recurrent theme and has been central for the interpretation of the boarding school, Pencey Prep, as a homosocial

microcosm where the protagonist Holden has been able to develop different types of desire to other males.

An analysis like this would not allow the exclusion of the notion of masculinity as a term in its own right. In consequence, this discussion also relates to gender, as a category closely related to sexuality. Turner refers to Sedgwick and her insistence that we cannot understand desire and repression without understanding gender, “which in our culture is inextricably related to sexual practice and sexual identity” (4). In this essay, gender and sexuality have been interconnected in the section where triangular mimetic desire between Holden, Stradlater and Jane Gallagher has been discussed. Likewise, the lack of females in the masculine microcosm as a potential problem and cause of Holden’s mental illness has been discussed in the first section of this essay.

The strong focus on male relations has however left out aspects of how the novel deals with femininity, which could produce another interesting reading of *The Catcher in the Rye*, and thereby another aspect of a queer analysis of this text. Sexuality and gender are closely related to each other in the sense that they can both be analysed as something “not natural, but rather [...] discursively constructed” (Sullivan 1). Politics, desire, gender, sexuality and representation are domains that for queer theorists cannot be understood as isolated, where one is primary and determining the rest, but we have to understand how they interact with each other if we want to create a fascination (Turner 4). This essay has tried to combine several of these domains in order to create such a fascination.

The remaining question is how the conclusions of this work will be perceived once they are applied in an authentic classroom situation with young learners, whom the teacher challenges with new viewpoints of the world surrounding us. Can a

“poststructuralist tradition where there are no objective or universal truths” (Sullivan 41) be made understandable to adolescents used to beholding the world in binary oppositions and believing that such answers are right to give in school? Hopefully, reading and discussing *The Catcher in the Rye* from a queer perspective with one’s students will show that new thoughts need not necessarily be “queer” to the modern-day young generation.

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