

Sexuality in the catcher in the rye by j.d. salinger



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The Catcher in the Rye by J. D. Salinger heavily probes the theme of sexuality – specifically, Holden Caulfield's immense turbulence over it. Even the title *The Catcher in the Rye* originated from Holden's misinterpretation a sexual poem, hearing "if a body meet a body" as "if a body catch a body" (Salinger 224). Caulfield is a manchild of sorts; he is a child not having selected an adulthood yet. Adulthood is the choice of a career, a formed personality, and acting in ways that your younger self would not tolerate. One way Holden personifies the frustrations of clinging to youth is through sex, or the lack thereof. His virginity, his disparity over his sexuality, and his censorship of sex all encapsulate his immaturity and teenage angst.

Holden is not involuntarily celibate. It is implied that he wants to have sex, and has had multiple opportunities, but never quite came around to actually taking action. Being a massive hypocrite, Holden isn't even entirely convinced he actually wants to have sex – he has a *lot* of hangups about it. Sex squicks him out. It's something he feels he should want, is told he should want, yet shows no demonstrable desire for. It's yet another part of an adult world that he isn't comfortable with, doesn't really understand, and views as "crummy" and dirty. This is shown through memories of playing checkers with Jane, who Holden recalls "wouldn't take her kings out of the back row" (Salinger 101), in contrast to Stradlater's apathy towards girls' hobbies in favour of carnal pleasures. Then there was Sunny, a young prostitute he also couldn't lay with because she wore a green dress. His inability to readily lose his virginity intertwines with the theme of innocence. Both Jane Gallagher, Holden's childhood love, and the colour green symbolize innocence. The loss of one's virginity or sexual innocence directly correlates

to the loss of childhood innocence. Following this logic, it is understandable why Holden is so upset at the idea of the very sexual Stradlater making advances towards Jane, who may have been sexually abused by her father in the past.

Another interpretation of the novel is that Holden is a repressed homosexual. If one were to read the novel from that particular perspective, then Holden's hangups about heterosexual sex suddenly make a lot more sense. The scene that stands out is when he's in his hotel room and spying on the couple on the other side of the hotel. The two love birds spit water, or "highballs", in each other's faces and frolicked in public as Holden watched on with disgust. The shallowness of lust repulses Holden, and he feels ashamed of his own experience of it. There is also Holden's frequent use of the word "flit", a derogatory term ascribed to homosexuals. More concerning than his observations and assumptions of "flitty-looking guys" is his seemingly baseless fear that he would "turn into a flit or something" (Salinger 186). This is further emphasized by his brief stay with Mr. Antolini, when he wakes up in the middle of the night with the former English teacher stroking his head. Mr. Antolini is a complex character, especially because we see him through Holden's unreliable eyes. Is Mr. Antolini, homosexual and physically attracted to Holden? Maybe. Is Mr. Antolini sexually pushing on Holden? Maybe. Is the sexual threat in Holden's head? Maybe. Either way, Holden is so frightened he flees. The ambiguity of the scene places the responsibility on the reader to make out what the truth is. And though Holden claims to be no phony, he hides his true self from everyone else by hiding behind his red hunting hat and various personas. And so it is quite possible that he is hiding

his own sexuality. Homosexuality, and most of his sexual thoughts therefore, repel him as he hasn't found a way to deal with himself. He has no emotional help and is completely lost, which only makes it worse. Of course, there is no definitive answer. Holden's sexuality is purposely left up to interpretation. There is always a chance he is bisexual or falls somewhere on the spectrum, whether that be more towards male or female attraction.

It is interesting to note that throughout the book, sex is explicitly censored. Not by the author, but by Holden himself. If anything, Salinger seems to make Holden see sexuality he can't erase, for example a "Fuck you" on the wall, which depresses him. Otherwise Holden always glosses over and is euphemistic about the sexual stuff he looks at, even though there's clues that he's obsessed about sex. He implies that sexual stuff happened to him a lot as he grew up. Given that he's 16 and shows that he is pretty incompetent at being with a girl, he's either lying or was sexually molested as a kid. He also talks about James Castle, who had bullies lock themselves in the room with him. He says to Phoebe, his sister, "I won't even tell you what they did to him—it's too repulsive" (Salinger 221). Given how graphically he describes the body hitting the floor, there is little reason to think that Holden censors violence, but he does censor sex. This proves how deeply dishonest he is with himself and others, but in ways that humans often *are*, and so he is familiar.

The reason why the book is so powerful is because Holden truly *learns* by the end of it. He's embarrassed, he's grown a bit, and regrets talking so much. In this way, he acts as a mirror. Everyone has cringe-inducing memories from their teenage years. Possibly something that one thought of as superbly

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important at that time, but causes one to wince when recollected later in life. This is Holden's moment. He left school, got in a fight with his peer over Jane Gallagher, hired a prostitute and failed to perform, was beaten and mugged by said prostitute and her pimp, embarrassed himself in front of girls, and then told someone about it. In him the readers see patterns that frustrate them, patterns that they also see in themselves. It forces the reassessment of personal narratives, prejudices, and desideria. It is for these reasons that *The Catcher in the Rye* became the classic it is today.

Works Cited

- Salinger, J. D. *The Catcher in the Rye* . Back Bay Books/Little, Brown and Company, 2018.