

The concept of consumer and its representation

[Literature](#), [American Literature](#)



The World Wars, being some of the most important events in history, changed society and created the modern world we know today. *The Catcher in the Rye*, by JD Salinger, is a critic of the new, modern world that was created in the post war era. Holden Caulfield, the protagonist, famously judges and criticizes almost everything around him. JD Salinger uses Holden's judgmental thoughts to demonstrate the detriment a society revolving around social class can be. Holden feels trapped in and tries to escape the prep school lifestyle, but finds himself at another in the fall. Holden judges the quality and price of suitcases of those below him, even at an elite prep school, and sees everyone socioeconomically above him as phony while everyone who is socioeconomically below him is depressing.

Marxism is the idea that "all war is class war"; the conflicts in society all stem from the separation between people based on their wealth. There is no social class separate from economic class. Holden and his family are in the upper class socioeconomically, meaning they are socially elite and economically wealthy. Holden, a naive teenager, knows that he is separate from others, because he's less cool or younger than they are, but he doesn't see the ways he looks down on others for their economic class. Holden brings up the quality of the suitcases of a roommate he hasn't seen in years. It's telling that he remembers such a small commodity and associates an entire person with this. Holden reduces his roommate, Dick Slagle, to the suitcases he took to school. Holden even says, "It isn't important, I know" but still goes on about how he "hate[s] it when somebody has cheap suitcases," (page 13). Holden associates himself with his suitcases that "came from Mark Cross, and they were genuine cowhide and all that crap,

and I guess they cost quite a pretty penny” (page 13). Despite that Holden didn’t succeed at this school at all, he thinks of himself as superior to his roommate for something so small as his suitcases. This connects to Marxism because an important belief in this theory is, first, that people are in the class socially that they are in economically, and also because of the idea of sign exchange value. Sign exchange value is the idea that “ a commodity’s value lies in the social status it confers on its owner” (Tyson 59). Holden is assigning a sign exchange value to these suitcases and oppressing his roommate through this. A critical inquiry at the University of Chicago connects the capitalist society that Holden lives in to the economic struggle represented by these suitcases. The critic says, “ Only a few can hope for suitcases, at the expense of the many, and enjoyment of them depends on shutting out awareness of the many. Furthermore, even the few are somehow blocked from enjoyment by the antagonistic striving required to secure one’s suitcases,” (Ohmann and Ohmann). Holden does not focus on how much he appreciates his suitcases, just the conflict that is caused by those who wish to have them. This is how a society revolving around social class and sign exchange value, like in the theory of Marxism, manipulates people into separating themselves from each other. JD Salinger, through Holden and suitcases, shows how relationships between people, even unconsciously, can be manipulated by their socioeconomic classes.

Besides exploring Marx’s ideas on how capitalism affects the relationship between people in different socioeconomic classes, Tyson explores the way that Marxism attempts to analyze the people in these classes and the way their class affects their life. Tyson implies that a Marxist criticism would

evaluate Holden's negative and judgmental thoughts as a function of his class and feelings towards being in that class. This is because Holden is a critic to others around him, but also to himself. He criticizes the situations that he puts himself into an even greater extent than those he does not. Holden chooses to hire a prostitute and chooses not to pay her the extra five dollars she demands. Holden puts himself in this situation, where money (socioeconomic class) is the central force behind this interaction between himself, the pimp, and the prostitute. But yet, despite causing the situation and being able to resolve it, which would put him in control, Holden feels trapped. He uses language to imply this in the scene, saying, " He was almost standing on top of me," (page 44). Holden also implies that his actions were not in his control when he says, " All of a sudden I started to cry. I'd give anything if I hadn't, but I did," (page 45). Holden even stays on the ground, after the pimp hurts him and leaves, saying, " Then I stayed on the floor a fairly long time, sort of the way I did with Stradlater. Only, this time I thought I was dying. I really did. I thought I was drowning or something. The trouble was, I could hardly breathe," (page 45). Although Holden is in control, both because he could have given the pimp and the prostitute money before they hurt him and because he is physically in control of his own body, Holden feels trapped. It is also evident that he feels trapped in his lifestyle as a member of the upper socioeconomic class in the way he tries (and fails) to evade the prep school lifestyle. A University of Chicago literary criticism points out that this relationship, between Holden and school, is important in seeing his relationship to the rest of society. The criticism says, "' School is the agency by which America more than most

countries consciously socializes the immature for entry into the approved adult activities: and so a boy's relation to school becomes a microcosm of the individual's relation to his society.' (Way)" (Ohmann and Ohmann)

Holden even goes as far as to say that he's going to move out west. He says his plan is to, " start hitchhiking my way out West. What I'd do, I figured, I'd go down to the Holland Tunnel and bum a ride, and then I'd bum another one, and another one, and another one, and in a few days I'd be somewhere out West where it was very pretty and sunny and where nobody'd know me and I'd get a job," (page 110). Holden has been expelled from four boarding schools, which is a function of his own actions, and is choosing to go out West. This would separate him from the upper class prep school lifestyle that he is obviously trying to evade, but it doesn't. Holden returns to a prep school in the fall and never goes out West to escape it. This is because Holden is trapped in his socioeconomic class; although he is apart of the privileged class, Holden is still oppressed by this societal structure. Lois Tyson explains this phenomenon, " The family unconsciously carries out the cultural " program" in raising its children, but that program is produced by the socioeconomic culture within the which the family operates," (Tyson, page 14). Holden goes back to prep school because of his family's wishes; his parents raised him in the " cultural program" of high class prep school because of their high class socioeconomic status. This " cultural program" is what Holden is trying to escape from because he feels trapped in it. Marxism would use this as an example of how people, even those in the upper class, are oppressed by the Capitalist system.

Holden Caulfield feels trapped in his lifestyle, but he doesn't realize that he is really trapped in a consumerist society that revolves around social class. He criticizes others for their suitcases or their breakfasts, but doesn't realize he is actually criticizing their standing in a capitalist, consumer driven society. Holden is a mesmerizing character; he is relatable to some and infuriating to others. But these ideas of Holden cannot be separated from his experiences as the socioeconomic elite. This elite has existed since the post World Wars, industrial lifestyle came to be. It is strange to think that all Americans are still living in a society that, despite being more accepting of identities and sexualities, continues to oppress people for their class and allow others to flourish at the expense of those below them. This is the model that allows the owners, CEOs, and other leaders of Walmart to make billions while their un-unionized employees work for minimum wage.