

Symbols in the catcher in the rye

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



Throughout J. D. Salinger's most famous work of literature, *The Catcher in the Rye*, the reader is exposed to several facets of symbolism that help give substance and characterization to the protagonist of the story, young Holden Caulfield. It is through these assorted symbols that Holden transforms from an average teenager to a socially disturbed and confused individual, constantly longing for something more. Holden's gray hair, the ducks from the lagoon in Central Park, and Holden's deceased younger brother Allie all help characterize Salinger's sixteen year old knight on his quest to find his true self in a world full of false facades and misleading motives. One of the first symbols to appear in the novel is Holden's gray hair. Holden describes himself by saying, "...I'm six foot two and a half and have gray hair. I really do. The one side of my head-the right side-is full of millions of gray hairs. I've had them ever since I was a kid." (Salinger, 9). The appearance of these uncolored hairs at such an early age is a great representation of Holden's inner struggles. For a long time, he has been caught between two seemingly conflicting worlds: the carefree world of childhood and the daunting and intimidating world of adulthood. This struggle finally emerges in a physical sense with the appearance of the gray hairs. Being the sixteen year old that he is, Holden feels average teenage emotions and longs to be able to make decisions on his own. When confronted with adult situations that could potentially have dire consequences, such as the episode with Maurice and Sunny in the hotel room, Holden shuts down and cries, much like a child. In essence, though, he still is a child, so the response is somewhat expected. These two conflicting forces within Holden's mind cause a great deal of issues throughout the progression of the novel. Another symbol that plays a

prevalent role in characterizing Holden is the ducks that frequent the lagoon in Central Park. "Do you happen to know where they [the ducks] go in the wintertime, by any chance?" (81) Holden asks his cab driver, to no avail; the driver becomes angered by Holden's seemingly useless and idiotic interrogation. These ducks, however, represent two aspects of Holden's personality. From one perspective, the ducks are representative of Holden's longing to escape from the issues he faces on a daily basis, both in a physical sense (his awkward appearance, dealings with others, etc.) and a psychological sense (his conflicting and contradicting mental viewpoints, psychosocial issues, etc.). He feels that if he could fly away like the ducks in wintertime, the problems would vanish and he could be free and happy. From another perspective, the ducks symbolize a means of constancy for Holden. Though they fly away in winter, they always return in the springtime. This cycle is predetermined and everlasting; it always has been, and it always will be. Holden longs for this reassuring and comforting feeling of a never ending routine. To be so enthusiastic about being a teenager, exemplified by his use of profane language, tobacco use, and thirst for alcohol, Holden really is somewhat frightened of the real world. He wishes everything would stay the same forever, but that is regrettably impossible. Perhaps the most revealing and enticing symbol in the novel that affects Holden's personality is the death of his younger brother, Allie Caulfield. Holden held a deep love and appreciation for his younger and seemingly more intelligent sibling. He speaks very highly of Allie: "He was two years younger than I was, but he was about fifty times as intelligent." (38). He also comments on Allie's generous and courteous attitude by saying that Allie "

was also the nicest, in a lot of ways.” (38). As the novel plays out, it becomes clear that Allie himself becomes an allegory for childhood innocence. Upon Allie’s passing, Holden seems to lose his sense of innocence. He is never really given the chance to grieve or mourn for the death of his brother. He is forced to face the situation as an adult would, not as a child. Because of this, Holden is tossed into the world of adult feelings and emotions when he is only thirteen years old. This is most likely the reason he has such a great deal of psychological problems as a sixteen year old. He feels that since he has already been forced to act as an adult, he must continue to act this way. The fact that he ends up in a mental institution at the end of the novel is a clear sign that Holden’s way of thinking is obviously confused and contrary to what it should be. Holden makes a somewhat profound statement in Chapter Two: “ People never notice anything.” (9). It is easy to notice, though, that several aspects of *The Catcher in the Rye* play important roles in Holden Caulfield’s personal development. These symbols relay specific messages to the reader that give deep insight into Holden’s mindset as a conflicted sixteen year old boy caught between the differing worlds of childhood and adulthood.