

Symbolisms of j d salinger the catcher english literature essay

[Literature](#), [British Literature](#)



Abstract:

The objective of this essay was to analyze the symbolisms of J. D. Salinger The Catcher in the Rye in order to understand the main character Holden Caulfield. For this purpose authorial intent was rejected and symbolisms were all of my own finding within then novel and with little use of secondary sources for discussion of findings, mainly Author's John Green analysis on the subject novel. It tries to follow the symbolisms in the order they appear in the story. Symbolisms are not only physical objects but they can as well be other characters that surround Holden in his journey through New York City. The main points the essay worked upon were other characters like D. B., Sally, Phoebe, Sunny and Maurice and their effects on Holden as well as things like the natural history museum, the " where do the ducks go in the winter?" question, the carrousel, and what all these mean to Holden and represent to the audience. The essay concludes that the journey undertaken by Holden Caulfield brings him to a new mindset of acceptance of the fact that everyone and everything changes with time. The symbolisms throughout his journey help the reader understand and relate to the peculiar and classic character that Jerome Daniel Salinger created for his novel The Catcher in the Rye. Contents

Symbolisms as a way of understanding The Catcher in the Rye's protagonist Holden Caulfield

Holden Caulfield is the protagonist and narrator of Jerome David Salinger's novel The Catcher in the Rye. Holden tells the story of his one year younger self, what he was like and what he did during 3 days in December after

leaving the latest high school that he has been expelled from. He is a character with which I, along with countless other readers, am easily able to identify emotionally throughout his story. This essay is an exploration into who is Holden and why is he so relatable via the analysis of the novel in hope of showing how the symbols a reader might find in it help the understanding of and empathizing with its complex main character, Holden Caulfield. Before we can delve into the whys and wherefores of Holden's personality it is important to establish a couple things starting with what is symbolism. Symbolism is the practice of using symbols, which are defined by the Encyclopedia Britannica as " a communication element intended to simply represent or stand for a complex of person, object, group, or idea" (Encyclopedia Britannica). In other words, it's something that means another, usually more complex, thing. Persons, actions, events, objects, etc. can all be symbols of things like feelings, ideas, concepts, etc. within a novel. The other that must be established from the get go in this essay is that authorial intent, the purpose the author (in this case J. D. Salinger) when creating whatever is being analyzed (in this case *The Catcher in the Rye*), will be dismissed. This on the basis that, even though it is the author who creates the stories, it's the readers who find meaning in them through, for example, symbols that the writer may or may have not anticipated; as internet performer, humorist and composer Ze Frank said " the unintended meaning that people project on to what I do is neither my fault or something I can take credit for" (Frank, 2012) and since I can't be sure whether the author pretended Holden's hunting cap to mean that he doesn't want to grow up or that he likes potatoes I must dismiss authorial intent. As such, all

the symbols and their interpretations in this essay were found by me and no more attention shall be given to Salinger's intentions. In the interest of chronology, the symbols will be worked upon according to the order in which they appear in the novel forming an image of Holden's personality made with the symbolisms in the end:

D. B.:

D. B. is the name by which Holden calls his older brother, a writer that now works mainly in Hollywood movies. Holden calls him a "prostitute" because he liked his stories before wrote for the film industry. Holden dislikes the movies, in part possibly because he feels his brother works only for money instead of writing good stories as he used to. D. B. visits Holden in the Hospital from where he is telling the reader his story. Holden likes D. B., his older brother has thought him a lot of things and so he is his favorite author. Yet, D. B. being a "prostitute" for Hollywood leaves Holden lonelier than ever since his main role model is now sort of a "phony" for writing movies as well as being across the whole country from where Holden lives in New York City.

Pencey Prep School:

Here we begin to see something that Holden does constantly throughout the whole novel which is judging. Holden is ready to call "phony" anything or anyone who he feels acts according to social status, what others do or untrue to how He thinks they really are. Our protagonist dislikes the school, partly because it's an all-boys academy, partly because he dislikes the principal and mainly because he just doesn't like nor cares for school very much. Pencey Prep is a sort of prison where Holden is forced to live along

people he dislikes yet he has to do it. He has to go through school, or so he's been told. Yet he thinks that people really go to school to make money as he says in page 170 " ' It's [boy's school] full of phonies, and all you do is study so that you can learn enough to be smart enough to be able to buy a goddam Cadillac some day' ." He doesn't really care for money so for him school is pointless torture.

Mr. Spencer:

Mr. Spencer was Holden's history teacher at Pencey yet Holden's didn't learn much history from him. What Mr. Spencer, a very old man, mainly taught Holden was how bad getting old is. They have a conversation in chapter 2 when Holden goes to Spencer's to say goodbye and besides how annoyed Holden gets by the old man, the protagonist can't help but be depressed for how Spencer can't even toss a magazine up into his bed because he is so old. Old age seems a sad end for life, that's the idea that Holden gets from his history teacher.

Lies:

For a boy who dislikes phonies, him lying appears at first somewhat counterintuitive but there's a difference between lying for whatever reasons phonies lie for than his own lying. He lies to make life easier, smoother and sometimes he lies for no reason at all as he exemplifies here "' If I'm on my way to the store to buy a magazine, even, and somebody asks me where I'm going, I'm liable to say I'm going to the opera. It's terrible.'" (p. 22). We begin to see a sort of justified double standard: one for the phonies and one for him. Happens as well with judging, he says it makes him sick that his

headmaster at Elkton Hills judged kids parents yet he calls him a phony for doing so. Holden judges bad people and lies but not for bad reasons, that's the reasoning he has behind it. In a way, lying could another manner in which Holden protects himself from pain. He can make up persons on the fly to not remember his reality whenever he doesn't need to. Same as he does when he "horses around" that he's been shot in the stomach and he has to hold it with his hands. It's both a childlike game and a way to scape, if in the futility of the imaginary games, for a moment of the misery and loneliness he feels.

Red Hunting Hat:

Near the beginning of the novel Holden talks about how he is sometimes a very mature guy, even though everyone only seems to notice when he is being immature. His red hunting hat is a of shield against maturity, against growing up. He wears it backwards, that's the way he likes it. He finds it fun and wears it almost everywhere he goes because it cheers him up. Holden is sad and lonely but at least he has his red hunting hat to protect him and make him smile a bit. He gives it to Phoebe when he sneaks into his house because he thinks it will protect her from the bad parts of growing up.

Jane Gallagher:

Throughout the novel Holden thinks about Jane Gallagher constantly. He wants to call her so maybe they can do something together but he never gets around to it because "he's not in the mood." What I think really happens is that he cherishes the memories of their summer times together and doesn't want to ruin them. Holden goes through the whole story with only

her memory, always avoiding calling her because he fears getting rejected by Jane. He thinks about Jane a lot because her friendship helped him deal with Allie's death, she was her last meaningful relationship he had that wasn't any of his family, something he misses. He goes around the city trying to make a connection with someone but no one is willing and he is too afraid to call Jane.

Allie's Baseball Mitt:

Holden had another brother besides D. B., younger Allie, but he died. The death of his brother has an impact on Holden, besides his ever increasing loneliness at the prospect of growing up and becoming an adult, a phony, because he lost Allie, one of his only friends. His little brother's death has given him pain and a loss of faith in the goodness of the world, since Allie was a very nice kid. Holden is traumatized by his death and fears losing things, for example memories, which is why he doesn't ever call Jane.

The lady on the train to New York and the two nuns:

Award winning author and YouTube vlogger John Green says that all through the first half of the novel all that Holden is doing is looking for someone that will listen to him. (Green, *Catcher in the Rye*, Part 1, 2008) I think that is spot on and that's why he likes the lady in the train and the two nuns at the dinner, because they are willing to listen to him. Even though he only talks "small talk" with the train lady and he lies the whole way through, Holden likes the lady as he says here "' I probably would've told her what really happened, but it would've taken too long. I liked her, though.'" Also worth noticing is that he keeps lying for no particular reason. The nuns he talks to

while having breakfast make him feel interested and he thinks they are nice, " She reminded me a little bit of old Ernest Morrow's mother, the one I met on the train. When she smiled, mostly" (p. 145). He also states that he enjoyed talking to them, which he would because he is lonely and looking for someone to have a meaningful conversation with.

The Ducks of Central Park:

John Green declares that Holden asking about what happens to the ducks means " what happens to me when the pond freezes over in winter?" (Green, *Catcher in the Rye*, Part 2, 2008) I recognize that it is a good interpretation and when two readers dismiss authorial intent and try to find symbols in a novel on their own, no one can say who is right or wrong. Yet I'm of the opinion that the main thing the questioning about the birds represents is the wonder and genuine curiosity of innocence. Giving it to John Green, the question of the ducks could be, as he says, about what happens next. What happens when it all changes? As Holden is going through his adolescence and is faced with loss, loneliness and unstoppable change, he is afraid of what will happen next, what will happen when he grows up, when the pond freezes over.

The hotel:

ExtendFaith Cavendish: Faith Cavendish is a lady of no great repute whom Holden calls to invite over for dinner. Sadly for Holden, not even she will talk to him. This just keeps driving the point that Holden is lonely and trying hard to reach out to someone. The 3 ladies at the bar: Again, young Holden Caulfield is only left sadder and more alienated after dancing. He just can't

relate with anyone. Sunny and Maurice: A young prostitute and her pimp, they serve to show Holden just how bad people can be.

Sexuality:

Sexuality is an important Holden throughout the novel. Holden speaks about it a lot because he thinks a lot about it, as most adolescent males do. Holden doesn't truly understand sex as he says here " Sex is something I just don't understand. I swear to God I don't." (p. 82) yet he strives to have it. I guess that's just natural. This thing that Holden doesn't understand could be interpreted as an opposite to innocence, which relates to his idea of being " The Catcher in the Rye."

Sally Hayes

Sally is a girl whom Holden used to date. While he is in New York, in his process of trying to find someone to talk to, he sets up a date with her. Sally seems to be the epitome of the phony as he says here ". . . but I knew old Sally, the queen of the phonies . . ." (p. 152) She represents exactly what Holden dislikes, yet his sexual attraction to her leads him to be interested in her. In this way, she works as symbol of the contradictory nature of Holden.

The Catcher in the Rye:

Holden, as I've said before, fears growing up. He dislikes this new world that is revealed to him every day, a world of phonies. He fears his little sister Phoebe will grow up to be in a world of Stradlater's. Holden wishes that he could protect the innocence of children by being " the catcher in the rye." He tells Phoebe that he would like to be a guard-esque man keeping children

playing in a field of rye from falling over a great cliff. He doesn't want Phoebe or any other innocent kid to lose its innocence and learn about things like sex. As Holden realizes that he cannot cling to his childhood he at least wishes to protect that of others. I've read people who say Holden Caulfield doesn't mature or grow up in the novel yet the following quote shatters any such criticisms: " The thing with kids is, if they want to grab for the gold ring, you have to let them do it, and not say anything. If they fall off, they fall off, but it's bad if you say anything to them." (p. 273). That quote makes it very clear that Holden has gone from hoping he could be a kid forever, to hoping that he can keep children innocent forever, to realizing that children must grow up and learn, and that he must not fear it but let it be. This constitutes a character evolution if I ever read one.

The Museum:

The museum of natural history is one of Holden's favorite places. He loves it because it always stays the same, everything changes but he can always go back to the museum and see it just as it was when he was a little kid. " Nobody'd be different. The only thing that would be different would be you." (p. 157) Holden says about the museum. It provokes a longing in him for the past, nostalgia of simple and happy childhood as he admits here " Pottery and straw baskets and all stuff like that. I get very happy when I think about it. Even now."(p. 155).

Phoebe:

Holden's youngest sibling, she's the opposite of Sally. Phoebe is described by Holden as an honest, pretty, nice and smart girl. She represents the

innocence of childhood and Holden must protect her which is why he gives her his Red Hunting Hat.

Mr. Antolini:

One of Holden's past teachers, Mr. Antolini is the only person in all New York besides Phoebe who seems like he is willing to listen to Holden. The protagonist respects him and considers him a good friend. Yet, as it always seems to do for poor Holden in this novel, things turn out bad when Holden wakes up to Antolini patting him on the head in a way Holden takes as "flitty" i. e. homosexual. Antolini represents broken trust and confusion for Holden.

The carrousel

When Holden takes Phoebe to the carrousel near the end of the story it sort of reaches a climax for Holden. Holden also learns here what I said before; he can't be the catcher in the rye but doesn't care anymore. He is too happy to care: " I got pretty soaking wet, especially my neck and my pants. My hunting hat really gave me quite a lot of protection, in a way; but I got soaked anyway. I didn't care, though. I felt so damn happy all of sudden, the way old Phoebe kept going around and around. I was damn near bawling, I felt so damn happy, if you want to know the truth. I don't know why. It was just that she looked so damn nice, the way she kept going around and around, in her blue coat and all." (p. 275) His hunting hat protects him but I can't stop him getting wet, same as it can't stop him and everyone else aging. Therefore, the carrousel at the zoo marks the culmination of Holden's

Caulfield 3 day adventure through the largest city in the United States. He has changed but more importantly, how he sees change has changed.

Holden Caulfield: the person

Through his story you get to know the transition between the Holden who gets kicked out of Pencey Prep and the Holden who is telling the story from southern California. Holden Caulfield during his 3 days alone in New York City is a young man growing up without a reliable role model, surrounded by what he calls phonies, compulsive lying for no reason, fear of growing up alleviated only by wearing a red hunting hat in a strange manner, all the happy moments he has are on his mind, the trauma caused by the loss of his brother, desperately wishing to be listened to, terribly lonely, afraid of change, discouraged by sex yet he can't stop thinking about it. At the end of his journey he comes out pretty much the same, but for one thing, the most important of them all; he has now accepted that life is a continuous stream of change and that it can be stopped. What Mr. Spencer said to him at the beginning of the story " life is a game that one plays according to the rules", can't help but resonate in my mind as I read 17 year old Holden Caulfield thinking positively about his future while also missing the times past. Maybe, just maybe, at the end Holden Caulfield accepted the rules and he's ready to play the game. And this is how, by understanding the elements surrounding the main character of J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* and giving them meaning according to the story one comes to understand Holden. His fears and motivations are pretty basic, being alone and sex, losing what you love and being happy, those universal feelings and in a time such as adolescence

when everything seems to be going at a 142% the normal speed, the voice of a lost kid you finds happiness is something that appeals to generation after generation of teenagers, including me.