

Conformity in the
catcher in the rye by
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**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Be your goddamn self

Today's society has a habit of believing that normalcy is to be expected, while individuality is often rejected. In the novel *The Catcher in the Rye*, by J. D. Salinger, the author introduces the reader to the character Holden and his tale of coming of age. Holden wants to have a simple life with his own individuality by not conforming to what society considers normal. Even though he's expected to behave in a certain way, personality and individuality play an important role in allowing oneself to learn from the decisions and actions one may make in life. He has a conversation with his teacher Mr. Spencer, " Life is a game, boy. Life is a game that one plays according to the rules." " Yes, sir. I know it is. I know it." Game, my ass. Some game. If you get on the side where all the hot-shots are, then it's a game, all right—I'll admit that. But if you get on the other side, where there aren't any hot-shots, then what's a game about it? Nothing. No game. (2. 12) Because Holden's standards and beliefs are different from those in the society he lives in, he can't function in that world.

Holden is sixteen years old, and is a junior at a school called Pencey Prep. He gets expelled for failing four out of five of his classes. Holden is smart and complex, he tells his story in a sarcastic way. Though he never says so, he wants to live in a beautiful and innocent world and finds the ugliness of the world around him very painful. He uses sarcasm as his way of protecting himself from the pain and disappointment of the adult world.

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary, conformity means the actions that replicate the acts of the majority of people in a society or group; the condition of

obeying or agreeing with. Holden faces circumstances that force him to make his own decisions. He often rejects making decisions built off what others believe are correct. For instance, Holden buys a hat but does not wear it the way someone usually wear one. Holden states, " The way I wore it, I swung the old peak way around to the back—very corny, I'll admit it, but I liked it that way. I looked good in it that way" (3, 17-18). This is one of the many times Holden chooses to do something because he likes it a certain way, instead of the compliant to other people's standards.

Consistent with Merriam-Webster Dictionary, the word individualism means the desires of each person appear more significant than the desires of every person in a society or a group. Holden shows the idea of individualism with his judgments towards the previous prep schools he has attended and the people who went there. He states " Pencey was full of crooks. Quite a few guys came from these very wealthy families, but it was all full of crooks anyway. The more expensive the school is, the more crooks it has—I'm not kidding" (4). Holden shows his feelings towards the people that attend the prep school in a blunt way. He tells you that anyone who goes to a prep school must be from a wealthy family or be a crook. Holden makes it known

Holden repeatedly has thoughts about life in prep schools and how those who attend must be phonies. Holden does not adjust well to following rules. The idea of doing the same things as everyone else in his school does not appeal to him, so he gives up on trying in hopes of not having to go back to another prep school. Consequently, Holden attends various prep schools that he either flunks out of or gets kicked out. In chapter six, Stradlater says to Holden, " You always do everything backasswards." He looked at me. " No

wonder why you're flunking the hell out of here," he said. " You don't do one damn thing the way you're supposed to. I mean it. Not one damn thing" (41).

Stradlater tries to explain to Holden that compliance would make his and everyone else's lives much easier. Holden does not want to make his life easier; he wants to make his own choices with his own outlook on things without seeming to succumb to the pressures of society and its conformities.

Through Holden's view, the reader experiences the effect of him being forced to go into prep school resulting in Holden turning away from the idea of emerging exactly like everyone else. At a young age, Holden was most likely exposed to conformity by always having his parents send him away to new schools to have him change. Holden does not want to take the " safe" route by responding to each question the same way as everyone else. In fact, Holden wishes to challenge traditionalism through the idea of being an individual. Each time Holden tries to escape from these " phonies," it gives you a clue about how he values honesty and his response towards people who don't have this same value. Holden tries to justify himself to Sally by saying he wants to achieve something different and not just be a phony. " It's full of phonies, all you do is study so that you can learn enough to be smart enough to be able to buy a goddam Cadillac someday, and you have to keep making believe you give a damn if the football team loses, and all you do is talk about girls and liquor and sex all day, and everybody sticks together in these dirty little goddam cliques" (131). As his days go by, he realizes that most people in society are not genuine. The truth angers Holden and he daydreams about running away, escaping from society, and living in a cabin away from everybody. This is an unbelievable idea that is

barely even an option for him. He decides that he doesn't fit in society and he doesn't want to be a part of it. This thought would have never come across Holden's mind if he was like everybody else, but he isn't. Holden apparently can't deal with the situations around him.

When an individual is making a decision, they are not knowingly aware that their decision is significantly influenced by their surroundings. Holden decides to try and have a good time with Sally but, he can't enjoy the performance because the actors annoy him. He can't have a good time with Sally because she disagrees with him and wears a short skirt just to show off her "cute ass." Then when he goes to the blues club, he can't enjoy the music because he was too irritated by the person making the music. He decides that in all aspects of life, there will be phonies. There will be show-offs and celebrities. Through Holden's words, we can experience individuality at its peak which makes one consider the immediate impacts. The fact that someone is compelling him into these things causes him to defiantly turn away. Holden does not enjoy the pressures of having someone try to mold him into the perfect teenager. Holden takes matters into his own hands by rejecting ordinary society, in anticipation that making his own decisions will lead him down the right path. Holden wants to personify individuality by proving to society that being different is okay and doing so can help one find their true self. Holden does not see the point of having others tell him how to live his life and does not understand why people will not allow him to make his own decisions and be different. Holden is an example of how conformity can have a negative effect on a person at any age such especially a teenager like Holden.

The brightest part of Holden's life is his ten-year-old sister. Holden loves Phoebe very much. Even though she is six years younger, she knows his feelings and what he means, and he feels comfortable talking to her. Phoebe is intelligent, neat, and an excellent dancer. Her innocent purity is one of Holden's only sources of contentment throughout the book. She had a warm personality, and she never gave up on things like Holden seemed to. Phoebe is the only person that Holden does not think of as a phony. Phoebe represents the innocence that Holden is searching for throughout the book. He sees Phoebe as a person undamaged by the horrible realities of life. If he can spare her the pain in which he now finds himself, and "catch" her before she falls into the prickly field of rye, then somehow, he will have accomplished something important, greater than himself. Ultimately, his goal is to maintain his integrity and keep himself from ever acceding to the world of phonies, and through Phoebe, he can accomplish this.

As one makes decisions in life, people do not think of the harmful effect's predictability produces. When a person demonstrates being an individual, they are noticed more than a person who does the identical things as everyone else. Holden shows individuality is endangered, meaning that as time goes on, people become more hesitant to be different or go against what society thinks is acceptable. In school, no one knows how to just be their self, instead everyone just wants to "fit in". Social media now plays a big role in influencing the idea of fitting in. Kids of all ages watch television, use Facebook and find out the ideal way one should function. People want to make their mark on this world, but do not realize that unless the chain of traditionalism is broken, that goal will not be accomplished. Being an

individual is the most positive thing in society. If only you could teach individuality to make people feel less burden to fit in. Individuality gives you the confidence to go out into the world, not just happy but feeling content in doing so.

Holden decides to visit and stay with Mr. Antolini. After hearing about Holden's expulsion from Pencey, Mr. Antolini approaches the situation with Holden. He tells Holden what he fears will happen if he continues the path he is taking. As Mr. Antolini says, " I have a feeling that you're riding for some kind of terrible, terrible fall"(187). By this, he means that Holden should learn more about the " human condition" and confront or accept it, not just run away from it. I believe that Holden becomes defensive and starts to argue this idea because, in a way, he agrees and doesn't want to accept the truth. The truth is that Holden would rather point fingers at society and every imaginable person, rather than himself. This is a typical teenager.

If Holden wants to function suitably in a society, he can either change his morals or beliefs to fit his environment, or he can get mad at society and change his morals to the complete opposite and live without a social structure set in stone. The discussion of traditionalism is in fact addressing the larger matter of inner happiness. It is important to remember that staying true to oneself is more important than surrendering to society's definition of normal. So, personality and individuality play an important role in allowing oneself to learn from all decisions and actions one may make in life.

Works Cited

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