

The catcher in the cold war: 1950s society and the question of responsibility

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



According to Joseph Cummins, a researcher on teenage rebellion in the 50's and 60's, in 1946, 3.4 million babies were born in the U. S, which is more than ever before. This was followed by 3.8 million in 1947. After 1954 4 million babies were born every year until 1964 when the baby boom tapered off. These children came of age in the 50's and 60's and immediately began to rebel. (Cummins) As parents were faced with a new, more dangerous form of teen rebellion to match the historically tense times. While all the attention was turned to up keeping new societal norms and pushing communists out of 50's America, teens like Holden were allowed to simply slip through the cracks and watch as their own mental states deteriorated without the proper treatment. Although people say the book *The Catcher in the Rye* is not a social commentary on the ills of the 1950's Salinger provides a first-hand account on the societal norms, historical tensions, and psychological states at the time, proving that responsibility fosters hypocrisy.

This time period is infamous for its invisible war against communism as well as the unsettling need to live a cookie cutter life style following the economic boom. Parents found a safe place in the suburbs being able to provide more for their children than their parents had ever provided them. There were certain rules that needed to be followed, and if they weren't followed, children were shipped off. Professor at Stanford Richard Powers states, " A significant proportion of the adult generation disapproved of the values and lifestyle of the teens, and were doing something about it, including setting new rules, restrictions and prohibitions. Boy's hair touching the ears wasn't allowed, punishable by expulsion. Most girls weren't allowed to wear pants. The new slang - hipster talk - bothered most adults. It was part African

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American, part beatnik and part street gang... an offensive combination in the eyes of the status quo." (Powers) This comes off as extremely controlling and bit hypocritical seeing as parents wouldn't allow their children to be their own individual. This is something everyone has wished for and is entitled to, this was being ripped from them which led to the isolation and loneliness among teens. While attempting to juggle teenage rebellion parents also had another growing concern, the spread of communism. Alan Nadel puts it like this " This all played out through publicized trials of suspected spies and subversives, Loyalty Oaths, Hollywood and Academic purges, as well as extensive anti-communist legislation." (Nadel) This made this time very difficult on the average man because every citizen was both the threat and the threatened. The constant thought that anyone around you could be a enemy waiting to strike could drive anyone bonkers as well as having no truthful test of loyalty. This shows through Holden's speech as well as the continuous use of the word ' phonies' referencing the need to always be on guard against ones friends, neighbors, and family members.

Political tensions at the time were at an all time high, and the American people reflected that in the way they carried themselves and in their rhetoric. Alan Nadel, author of " Rhetoric, Sanity, and the Cold War: The Significance of Holden Caulfield's Testimony," states " This aspect of fiction could not be more emphasized than it is by Holden Caulfield's speech, a speech which, moreover, reflects the pressures and contradictions prevalent in the cold war society from which it was forged." (Nadel) Holden's use of profanity throughout the book showcases his growing irritation, this could be

reflected back onto politics in this time period. At one point, the US and the Soviet Union were wartime allies but in peacetime quickly became enemies due to conflicting ideologies and competition when it came to global interests. This bred a form of paranoia that reshaped foreign policy for years after the cold war. History. com states, " Many people in the United States worried that communists, or " subversives," could destroy American society from the inside as well as from the outside." (History. com) Holden represents this paranoia the American people were feeling at the time in The Catcher in the Rye when he heads to New York, hags a cab, then proceeds to ask the cab driver many questions which only brings about irritation in the driver as well as making him suddenly more paranoid and questionable of Holden. (Salinger Page 82) People at this time were constantly on edge, always on the lookout for the enemy in hiding. This reflects back onto the cab driver because at time in order to not be suspected of being in bed with the enemy it was a necessity to look, and act like everybody else. The 50's was an era of great conformity in a political time period of disarray and disloyalty. Everyone led the same cookie cutter lifestyle, some afraid to fall out of line in fear of being a suspected communist. This time period was also littered with less than professional school environments and abstinence only sex education that in the end only hurt the children.

Despite many notable attempts from schools to make their programs better, they still faced difficulties in defining the goals of family life and sex education. According to Rose M. Somerville, an author on family life and sex education, states, " The fact that some of the difficulties are contradictory

merely compounds the problems.” (Somerville) This itself screams hypocrisy at the highest of levels To define the goals of family life correctly the need for sex education becomes even higher. How is a child expected to understand the severity of their choices as an adult without having knowledge of how to handle adult problems? Isn't that what the school system is paid to do for Americas children? Not teaching children the importance of safe sex and how to avoid unwanted pregnancies can make or break their futures as well as the future of Americas children. As the baby boomers grew up and started to blossom into individuals, parents began putting an end to things like boys with long hair, jeans, rock n roll, and fast cars because these were all deemed as unethical and not the societal norm. This is questionable considering when the parents of this generation were themselves teenagers they too wished for freedom and individualism, in a sense one could say they were rebelling. If children didn't follow through with their parents' wishes they were packed up and shipped off to boarding school in hopes they would be 'molded' into a more productive member of society when if put in their shoes wouldn't wish this upon themselves making their morals and fitness to be parents up for debate. As Holden states in the book “ They didn't do any more damn molding at Pencey than they did at any other damn school” (Salinger Page 2) this shows that the schools themselves didn't mold the students into anything special, they simply heavily encouraged the students to fall in line, which many did with ease. They attended all the football games, sitting on the sidelines tirelessly cheering for their team, despite not knowing why they liked them in the first place. They learned all the material, simply because they were told to. They

scored high on all the state tests, because they were expertly trained in how to pass them.

It could be argued that in these days, no one ever had a thought of their own. They were always being told what to wear, what to say, and what to do. Take this example from Salinger: "The game with Saxon Hall was supposed to be a very big deal around Pencey. It was the last game of the year, and you were supposed to commit suicide or something if old Pencey didn't win." (Salinger Page 1) Again the morality of these parents is up in the air once you encourage your child to live a life they do not want to live and force them to participate in things that in the end they have no interest in. The theory alone is shaky, but it lacks evidence to support the argument for the cookie cutter life style other than simply "I told you so." That by itself can be stressful for a child on top of the rejection of who they really are inside as and, in Holden's case, trauma over the loss of his brother drove him nearly out of his mind and the belief is it was for the greater good? If the reader really begins to analyze Holden it could be inferred that Salinger is referencing the end of the book where Holden suffers a mental breakdown and following that is sent to a psychiatric hospital for treatment. Holden himself didn't fit into societal norms, like, for example, not going to the most important football game of the year, he didn't take his own life but a psychiatric hospital visit however can definitely be categorized under, as Salinger states, "or something." (Salinger Page 1) Throughout the book, the reader watches as Holden's frustration begins to eat at him slowly leading to the deterioration of his mental state. The book begins with Holden acting like

a seemingly normal teen brimming with angst but as the book continues it becomes evident that something is wrong with Holden, not just normal teenage rebellion.

However, no one else seems to recognize what Holden is going through and he is labeled just another teenage rebel, and for that fact most adults choose not to bother with him due to the difficulty he presents. Carl Pickhardt, a psychologist, puts it this way, " Parents usually dislike adolescent rebellion, it's not only that it creates more resistance to their job of providing structure, guidance, and supervision." (Pickhardt) Holden was not the only teen in this time period with this problem, many teens found it hard to express themselves and many mental illnesses were overlooked due to political tensions and the comfortability provided by the economic boom. This raises questions about why his parents didn't get him help after the passing of his brother and before it was too late, at a time when grief counseling was most definitively needed. This brings about a sense of selfishness that was prevalent in cold war society that allowed a cycle of hypocrisy to live on even as it does now in modern day society. Joseph Cummins, a researcher on teen rebellion in the 50's and 60's, claims, " Since millions of baby boomers were raised in the affluent suburbs that had sprung up after the war, they began their rebellion against the materialism of their youth." (Cummins) Differentiation between parent and child led to many disagreements and hypocrisy directed towards their children because parents thought they knew what was in the greater good for their child. Many, though, rejected the materialism of their upbringing while their

parents embraced it, parents became angered with their children for taking advantage of a comfortable lifestyle they wished they could have enjoyed when they were younger and believed they were ungrateful. This left teens feeling isolated and unaccepted with no one to turn to, wishing they had someone to love them for who they are, something that at one point, their parents wished for as well. This could just as well lead to rebellion for the sole purpose of attracting attention, Psychologist Joseph Cummins explains, “Rebellion can cause young people to rebel against their own self-interests — rejecting childhood interests, activities, and relationships that often support self-esteem. It can cause them to engage in self-defeating and self-destructive behavior” (Cummins) This is exactly what Holden decides to do.

If analyzed closely, Holden’s actions reflect a need to be accepted and a cry for help that he tried to express through rebellion. This drives Holden to do things he wouldn’t in his right mind do, and in turn, drives him to the brink of insanity. It all comes to a peak when Salinger writes, “Somebody had written fuck you on the wall. It drove me damn near crazy. I thought how Phoebe and all the other little kids would see it, and how they’d wonder what the hell it meant, and then finally some dirty kid would tell them.” (Salinger Page 201) The idea of someone else getting robbed of their innocence, in his case when his brother had died, drove him absolutely mad. Holden never wanted someone’s mind to go where his had gone, especially not the one person he cared about the most, his little sister Phoebe. The death of his brother ultimately opened Holden’s eyes to all the bad there was in the world, it was like a surgical intervention on a patient who hadn’t gone under

anesthesia yet. It was painful jolt into a new world he wasn't prepared for, and Holden will have scars that will last forever, whether they be visible or not. He wanted to save Phoebe from that, he wanted to save everyone from that, but they didn't want his help. Not everyone shares this opinion however, some critics say that responsibility doesn't foster hypocrisy among adults, it only fosters understanding. Of course, no child likes to be told what to do by their parents but sometimes in the end it is for the greater good, even if they haven't come to that conclusion themselves yet. Psychologist Carl Pickhardt claims, "The parent knows best because new exposure puts the teenager at the mercy of inexperience and ignorance" (Pickhardt) Sureley when they were younger parents didn't like eating their vegetables, but they were forced anyway because in the end, it made them healthier. In turn they urge their child to eat their vegetables despite the unappealing taste knowing that, in the end, it will to make them just as healthy. With that in mind there is still the remaining question of why make someone do something you wouldn't do yourself, if it truly is for the other person's greater good shouldn't they believe that too as well as have the right to make choices for themselves? It is still argued that the responsibility of being a parent brings about a new sense of understanding of the greater good, but yet in this time period Rose M. Somerville states "These Obstacles were to loom even larger, Among such obstacles were the following, difficulties in defining family life, fear, and uncertainty when facing changes." (Somerville) If the parent themselves are unsure how could they be expected to know what is best for someone else?

Nonetheless, teenage rebellion was a muffled call for help whose signs were blatantly ignored in the face of budding communism, the need to fit in, and the cold war proving that hypocrisy makes roots in those who take on more responsibilities. In order to fix this problem among families that is found even in modern day society we must encourage parents to become more empathetic when facing their child's problems, this can bridge gaps in family members and can improve mental health among children by letting them know they are accepted and they are loved for who they are. Let this be a lesson and from before us from here on the rule of thumb for every society should be ' If I couldn't get through this, why should I expect someone else to?'

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