

The portrayal of maslow's hierarchy of needs in the character of holden caulfield...

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



In Abraham Maslow's revolutionary paper that was published in 1943, he stated that there was an ascending hierarchy of needs for a person to attain which was key to our understanding of human motivation. Studying only individuals of a high intelligence and character, Maslow realized that they all shared a common hierarchy of needs that needed to be fulfilled in order to attain the highest level of humanity, also known as self actualization. The levels are Physiological Needs (food, water, shelter, etc), Safety needs (protection), Love Needs (sense of belonging), Esteem Needs (self love), and the highest point of Self Actualization. A person cannot advance from a certain level to another without fulfilling the previous level. For example, one could not get to Self Actualization from Love Needs without fulfilling their Esteem Needs. In his later years Maslow realized that there is an even higher level than the previous ceiling of Self Actualization and this is called Transcendence. Transcendence is the ability to explain the path of Self Actualization to others and help them attain it. Maslow also categorized these needs into Deficiency needs and Growth needs. Deficiency needs are characterized by lack thereof; such as the need for food and water. Growth needs are important to emotional growth and need to be gained to get emotional maturity. These needs can be disrupted by traumatic events such as death, loss of a loved one, etc. (McLeod). This interesting look into the human psyche is not only highly prevalent in the real world but in literature as well. In J. D. Salinger's novel *The Catcher in the Rye*, the main character, Holden Caulfield, fluctuates between the levels of Maslow's Hierarchy; however, by the end of the novel, he has finally reached transcendence.

In the beginning of the novel, Holden Caulfield, the protagonist, is in quite a despairing situation. When we first meet Holden he is “ standing way up on Thomsen Hill” where “ practically the whole school was there but [him]” (Salinger 3). Holden is completely isolated from society and is unable to integrate. The reason for this despairing outlook on life is that Holden experienced a traumatic death of his brother, Allie, which ended with Holden sleeping in the garage and “ breaking all of the goddam windows with [his] fist, just for the hell of it” (Salinger 39). Holden is so traumatized he cannot pursue anything else and he is still not over the death of his brother which is learned when he says that his “ hand still hurts [him] once in awhile when it rains and all” (Salinger 39). This is a very evident example of how deep the scars of Allie's death are to Holden's psyche. Due to the childhood traumas of his life, Holden arguably is at the very bottom of the hierarchy because he can only satisfy his basic needs of food and water. He has no sense of love or belonging at all because he cannot communicate with others. In turn he has no sense of safety either because he lost his brother at a young age and fears the things he loves being lost and taken away from him. He gets kicked out of boarding school because he cannot focus on anything higher than his basic human needs of food and water; a perfect example of Maslow's Hierarchy at work. Holden even describes himself as feeling “ miserable [he] felt so depressed you can't even imagine”(Salinger 98).

As the novel progresses, Holden is able to see a higher level of emotional intelligence as he feels safe when alone in New York. Therefore, Holden is gaining a level on the pyramid of needs yet he is constantly knocked down

while trying to attain a higher level. A prime example of this would be his attempt to reach the level of love and belonging by hiring a prostitute, which only ends bitterly as he is beat up and brought back down to where he was before. Holden is so emotionally wrecked by this experience that he “thought [he] was dying. I thought I was drowning or something. The trouble is I could hardly breathe”(Salinger 103). Our protagonist is effectively reduced to square one of the hierarchy and he even struggles to breathe which is an obvious human necessity.

This theme of Holden effectively taking two steps back before he takes a leap forward is quite recurring throughout the novel. Salinger is trying to show the reader that to gain emotional intelligence one must struggle greatly. Holden eventually regains his footing upon the mount of emotional intelligence, and is able to overcome the point he previously lost by getting a sense of love with Sally and realizing he does not need it. He even gets to the level of self esteem needs and is able to feel slightly confident in himself. However when he is so close to being emotionally mature, perhaps in the wrong manner, the rug is effectively pulled out from under him when he loses his emotional and physical security while staying at Mr. Antolini's apartment. When Holden awakes from a peaceful slumber, to in his words, Mr. Antolini “petting or patting me on the goddam head...Boy, I'll bet I jumped about a thousand feet” (Salinger 192). Holden is disturbed and reduced significantly in his emotional level.

All of these huge gains and losses are not at all for nothing. Holden eventually regains his footing another time and is able to finally have his

epiphany that he cannot save children from adulthood. He sees that "All the kids kept trying to grab for the gold ring, and so was old Phoebe, and I was sort of afraid she'd fall off the goddam horse..." and he realizes that in life 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." (Salinger 211), which brings him to the high point of self actualization. However then the question arises, "But how is Holden self actualized if he is in an insane asylum?" Eventually when Maslow realized that the highest level of his pyramid is transcendence or helping others reach self actualization, he added it to his hierarchy. Effectively, Salinger's placement of Holden in an asylum and having him write the book puts Holden on the highest level of transcendence. He is entirely, by writing the book, by telling his story to others, helping others reach self actualization.

Through the illustrations of J. D. Salinger in the life of his character, Holden Caulfield, the picture of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is quite visible through a psychological lens in *The Catcher in the Rye*. Holden endures many stages of Maslow's Hierarchy but ultimately ends up at the highest point of transcendence after his virtual odyssey through New York. It is in this manner that Holden Caulfield symbolizes something that all people can relate to which is the struggle to find meaning in life which he ultimately does after a frantic time. He rises from despair and grief to a higher point and helps others achieve that. If one were to venture a guess as to what happens to Holden afterwards it is highly possible that he has joined the

society he had abhorred and helps others realize their purposes in life thus being ultimately transcendent.