

The character holden caulfield in "the catcher in the rye" essay sample



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Salinger, author of the teenage novel ‘ The Catcher in the Rye’, presents the character of Holden Caulfield to have both weak and strong qualities. He shows this through the use of his linguistic techniques. At a first glance it seems that the character of Holden only has weak points however, after a more in depth reading it is clear that he also has some strengths.

The first weakness to note about the character of Holden Caulfield is his judgemental tendencies. Throughout the first ten chapters this weakness becomes increasingly frequent. One example of this is when Holden goes to visit his history teacher, upon Mrs. Spencer’s opening of the door he comments, ‘ They didn’t have a maid or anything, and they always opened the door themselves. They didn’t have too much dough.’ By Salinger’s use of this sentence Holden is showed to be judgemental towards even those whom he cares for. This suggests that his personality wills him to criticize, as well as this he notices ‘ flaws’ others would not. On the other hand this could show a strength in which he is somewhat perceptive and notices many little differences others would not. Further on in the book Holden becomes alone and it seems that he either mentions others from his past so that he may judge them - ‘ something happened once ... I roomed with this boy, Dick Slagle, that had these very inexpensive suitcases’ - or begins to judge himself - ‘ but I’m crazy. I swear to God I am’. These examples highlight this fault even more whilst also forming a new one in the shape of low self-esteem.

Holden is shown to categorise those he comes into contact with by how much money they have. This weakness is shown by how Salinger mentions Holden's near disgust at things that aren't as good as his an example of this is in Chapter 15; Holden as made a comment about the nun's cheap suitcases and says ' I can even get to hate somebody, just looking at them'. This suggests that Holden believes that material items determine people's characters. This is a weak point as it shows his mind not only forces him to categorise but make premature judgements as well. Holden is also shown to categorize people by age groups. This means that he puts all adults into a typical stereotype and answers them in a way that ' all' adults would like to be answered. This is first evident upon Holden's visit to Mr. Spencer when he says ' while I shot the bull'; this suggests that he is making things up to please Mr Spencer. This quote also reveals another weakness in which Holden is not concerned about his future however seems to fixate on unimportant things; namely the ducks at Central Park ' Where did he ducks go'. Salinger's repetition of Holden's ideas about these ducks suggests that Holden is somewhat immature therefore revealing a weakness however this could perhaps be due to his possible mental instability which is also hinted throughout Holden's narration.

Salinger often uses sex references to make it out like Holden is ' sex-obsessed' which is a clear weakness. An example where sexual reference has been used in an inappropriate place is ' cold as a witch's teat'. In this simile Salinger uses the image of a ' teat' to suggest that Holden is obsessed with sexual aspects. Although he often mentions sex Holden is in fact, much to the audience's knowledge, a virgin who, soon after mentioning some

sexual acts, admits that they are 'crummy'. By the use of these to contradiction Salinger suggests that another weakness of Holden is that he seems to be floating between childhood and adulthood. This is also reflected in the image of him having grey hair on one side of his head yet normal hair on the other. It is arguable that the weakness of judging the adult world and constantly calling them 'phony' is down to a fear of the transition from the innocence of childhood into the adult world (this could be why he often leaves money behind 'what I don't spend I lose'; by leaving money behind he is not taking the responsibility that adults have for money onto himself).

Holden also shows hostility to Stradlater when he believes that him and his childhood friend, Jane Gallagher, have had some sort of sexual relation. This could either show strength in the character of Holden or a weakness. First of all Holden may be reacting out of jealousy as it seems that he likes to know both these people better than anyone else this is shown by him commenting about Stradlater 'He was more of a secret slob' and Jane 'she wouldn't move an inch off her kings'. If they embark upon having sex then, to Holden, they both know each other better than he does (this again could show immaturity). The hostility, however, could also be shown out of a protective instinct towards Jane showing that Holden can show compassion 'it made me so nervous I nearly went crazy. I already told you what a sexy bastard Stradlater was'.

Holden's final weakness that Salinger shows is his embarrassment about his intelligence. Throughout the novel Holden uses colloquial language to talk to the audience such as 'phony', 'lousy' and 'goddam'. These words suggest a need for attention and uneducation. Salinger uses these to show these

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qualities in Holden however; on some occasions Holden uses formal language. The use of formal language not only stresses what Holden is saying even more but also shows that he is educated and polite. An example of this is when he is speaking to his history teacher.

He always addresses him as sir and - mostly - doesn't use colloquial language ' yes sir. I know it is. I know it'. This piece of speech suggests that Holden has been brought up well and knows how to conduct himself in an acceptable manner therefore it is possible that this is how he would normally behave yet it is apparent he does not. There are many reasons why this could be. Firstly he does not want to seem out of place (this again shows immaturity and is backed up by the statement ' I hate it if I'm eating bacon and eggs or something and somebody else is only eating toast and coffee') therefore adapts his language and demeanour so that he is accepted by those who surround him. Secondly he is embarrassed by his good manner and ' intelligence' therefore acts in ways which would not be acceptable if his parents would be around and makes himself seem more obtuse than he actually is therefore becomes one of the things he hates; people who are ' phoney'.

Holden has many strengths however they are not as easy to identify, as he seems to try to almost hide them. Firstly Salinger portrays Holden to be considerate towards his family and the minute amount of true friends he has. Salinger shows Holden's high regard for his brother by the utilization of exaggeration. When first enlightening the audience about his brother, D. B, he exaggerates so that the audience believe that his sibling is better than he possibly is. Holden says ' and visits me practically every week end' this <https://assignbuster.com/the-character-holden-caulfield-in-the-catcher-in-the-rye-essay-sample/>

suggests that Holden would like this to be true as well as the fact that he does not want to say anything offensive – yet true – about him as he is his brother. Salinger also demonstrates Holden's pride by the use of short sentences such as ' he just got a jaguar' this has a slight boastful tone to it showing his pure pride and high regard towards his brother.

Holden also shows respect towards his parents however does not do it in such an obvious way (this may perhaps relate to his struggle to fit in; on the whole individuals his age would not be openly proud of their parents) this point is evident when he says ' they're nice and all – I'm not saying that – but they're also touchy as hell'. Holden also seems to realise that his parents have been through an amount of hardship therefore shows compassion for them ' she hasn't felt too healthy since Allie died. She's very nervous. That's another reason why I hated like hell for her to know I got the ax again'.

Holden may compose a negative picture of his parents purely because life with them may hold images of sadness and being let down therefore he tries to block these memories out by judging them such as ' my parents would have two haemorrhages a piece ... but they're also touchy as hell'. Salinger's use of exaggeration here suggests that Holden is trying to hide his true feelings therefore makes up this sentence. Exaggeration could be used to make the statement more believable yet it does the opposite thing.

In conclusion, the character of Holden Caulfield, featured in the novel ' The Catcher in the Rye' written by J. D. Salinger, is one who has both strong and weak points. He judges others whilst categorizing them by material

standards yet is compassionate and a strong analytical brain. To project

these personal attributes to the audience Salinger uses the Personal

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narrative of Holden Caulfield so that he can show his ideas. This gives the audience a first hand insight to this character's inner philosophy. Salinger also uses the linguistic technique of colloquial language and, in some instances, figurative language. Finally Salinger uses exaggeration to portray the character of Holden Caulfield so that his strengths and weaknesses are clear to the audience.