

Holden caulfield is the voice of adolescence

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Never before has the world changed so quickly. In America the saying “ out with the old, in with new” is a way of life. Cell phones, cars, iPods, and computers are always being improved and updated. People throw away valuable things for the chance to hold something new in their hands. It would be a shame to do the same thing to a literary classic such as J. D.

Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*. The book has been on the shelf for over 65 years, people wonder if the novel is relevant to youth anymore. As victims of the adult world, teenagers relate to why main character Holden Caulfield combats constant attacks on innocence that pressure him to grow up and the toll it takes on him. Holden Caulfield reaches the point in life when society expects a person to become an adult. Almost immediately after Holden is introduced to the reader, his conflict with who he wants to be and who society wants him to be is made evident. Holden goes to say good-bye to his teacher Mr.

Spencer, because Holden had flunked out of Pencey. While Holden and Mr. Spencer visit it is brought to the reader’s attention that this has happened to Holden before. When Mr. Spencer asked Holden how he felt about everything, he wanted to know how Holden felt about flunking out of Pencey, Elkton Hills, and Whooton. In society being expelled from three schools in a short period of time is a very big deal, but to Holden it wasn’t.

Holden tells the reader “ one of the biggest reason [he] left Elkton Hills was because [he] was surrounded by phonies” (Salinger 13). Holden saw flunking those schools as a way to avoid becoming an adult-a term he has coined as “ phony.” Society is telling Holden it is time to grow up, be responsible, and

follow the majority. Holden told about how the headmaster Haas at Elkton Hills was a “ Phony.” He said that “ if some boy had...old funny-looking parents...[he] would just shake hands with them and give them a phony smile and then...go talk...half an hour , with somebody else’s parents”(Salinger 14). Holden is also afraid that by becoming an adult he is setting himself up to become a” phony” person like Hass and other adults he has met.

The time era in *The Catcher in the Rye* was the 1950’s, a time where society put a great amount of emphasis on being an adult. In Richard Settersten Jr. and Barbara Ray’s article “ What’s Going on with Young People Today? The Long and Twisting Path to Adulthood” they state that “ by the 1950s and 1960s, most Americans viewed family roles and adult responsibilities as being nearly synonymous. For men, the defining characteristic of adulthood was having the means to marry and support a family...

by their early twenties...most young men and women were recognized as adults, both socially and economically” (Settersten Jr. and Ray 21). Holden is being pressured to embrace the life of an adult man. It’s his only option to move up in life and to be referred to as a man instead of a boy. Holden is so obsessed with guarding his innocence that he’s willing to always be a boy because men in his eyes are phonies.

In present day America society still puts that sort of pressure on today’s youth. Settersten Jr. and Ray state “ Much of the media attention and public debate on the subject of the changing transition to adulthood start from the assumption that something is wrong with young people today as they take

longer to “grow up,” that the “fault” is of their own doing” (Settersten Jr. and Ray 36). Every adolescent at some point is pushed into a big world of unknowns; they are undressed from their innocence and bathed in the phoniness it takes to survive the adult world. Holden tries to hang on tight to his childhood to prevent it from being taken away.

Holden not only wants to preserve his own innocence by not growing up, but also the innocence of the rest of the world. He tells his sister Phoebe that he wants to be the catcher in the rye. He told her that he pictures thousands of little kids running around in a field of rye while he waits at the edge of a cliff, so he can catch them before they run and fall off (Salinger 173). To Holden the edge of the cliff is the thin line between innocence and adulthood, which is exactly the line he borders on in life. Holden has to grab children before they fall off the cliff and their innocence dies. Being the catcher in the rye comforts Holden because he will be guarding his own innocence at the same time, by always being able to stay on innocence’s side- where everything would always be the same.

Routine is innocent and offers comfort in a time where everything and everybody is changing. When growing up people depend on routine, whether it’s taking same route to school everyday, or the order they get ready in the morning. It’s no different than Holden’s dream job. The transition from childhood is both physically and mentally stressful for Holden. When Holden walks to the museum, the one place he remembers having complete innocence.

Holden said “ you ought to be able to stick them in one of those big glass cases and just leave them alone” (Salinger 122). It is ironic Holden wants to protect innocence with a fragile material like glass. Leonard Baer and Wilbert Gesler’s article “ Reconsidering the concept of therapeutic landscapes in J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*” they explained that even if it were possible for Holden to find a place where there is 100% innocence, it wouldn’t remain that way because places change overtime (Baer and Gesler 407).

Holden begins to wear down his body with the constant stress of protecting innocence and avoiding becoming “ phony.” As the story progresses so does the decline of Holden’s health. After failing to fall asleep, Holden sat up and realized “[he] still had [a] headache. It was even worse [than before.] And [he felt] more depressed than [he] ever was in [his] whole life” (Salinger 194).

Both Holden’s mind and body are experiencing stress from Holden’s unrealistic battle to stay young. The pressure to leave everything behind and transition into an adult weighs Holden down. After exhausting himself completely Holden succumbs to all outside forces that hold him back from becoming “ the catcher in the rye.” According to Baer and Gesler in their article “ Reconsidering the concept of therapeutic landscapes in J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*” Holden’s main obstacle was staying “ a child without defiling childhood by his current reality” (Baer and Gesler 410).

Ultimately that is the obstacle Holden couldn’t overcome. At the end of the book Holden watches Phoebe go around on the Merry-go-round, and when

she asks him to go on with her the next time and Holden says no, it represents Holden's acceptance that he can't keep his childhood or be "the catcher in the rye." He sees that the job he's had all along was being Phoebe's museum- the place she can go to for comfort that won't take her innocence. Holden ends up in a mental health facility that is located near Hollywood, where his older brother lives. The location is significant, because it is Holden's belief that Hollywood is phony.

This symbolizes that Holden reached the phony point in his life, and inevitably has entered adulthood. J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* gave birth to a character that has befriended generations of young people that thought they were the only ones exhausting themselves to keep their childhood and avoid the fake adult world. *The Catcher in the Rye* is a classic novel that has earned its place on book shelves everywhere.

The novel is still relevant to America's youth. It's their story. It is their museum, and it does not need renovation. Works Cited Baer Leonard D., and Wilbert M.

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