

# J. d. salinger's the catcher in the rye: connections to literature

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Although all novels are different, they seem to share a common notion: the reflection of reality through the eyes of the author. Even though a novel is a work of fiction, its purposes are to inform, entertain, or educate readers who live in the real world. Because of that, realistic scenes, themes, and characters must be included in the novel to establish a personal relationship between the readers and the book. Likewise, in the case of J.

D Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, Salinger painted the image of Holden Caulfield on the canvas of his own life. J. D. Salinger's personal experiences and beliefs are reflected in the settings, the protagonist, and the themes of *The Catcher in the Rye*. Salinger had a fairly typical childhood growing up in the 1920s. He was born on January 1, 1919 to Sol Salinger and Marie Jillich (McGrath).

Born in New York City, he spent most of his childhood there (Telgen 117). When he was growing up, academic excellence was not one of Salinger's priorities (117). After failing several prep schools, he finally graduated from Valley Forge Military Academy in Pennsylvania (117). Yet, with an IQ of 115, he never did finish his post-secondary education (Hipple 106; Miller 551). In 1937, Salinger traveled to Austria and Poland to learn his father's business, but he was dissatisfied with it and returned to America (McGrath). Although unremarkable, his childhood did impact his literary contributions.

Salinger's early adult life revolved around his experiences in WWII. In 1942, Salinger was drafted for the war, based in Tennessee and then in England (Miller 552). He was one of the Allied soldiers fighting in Normandy on D-Day (Miller 552). During the time that Salinger was writing *The Catcher in the*

Rye, he experienced a dramatic situation (Hipple 107). His wife Sylvia, a French physician, divorced him in 1946, a year after their marriage (107).

In 1955, Salinger remarried Claire Douglas; they had a daughter together in 1955 and a son in 1960 (Miller 552). The relationship did not last, and they ended up divorced in 1967 (Mulligan 350). Similar to his childhood, Salinger's adult life was also influential to his writing career. Although best known for *The Catcher in the Rye*, J. D.

Salinger also contributed other short compositions. He officially began his writing career when he took a short story course at Columbia University, where he had an opportunity to publish in *Story* magazine (Telgen 117). After that, his literary career became increasingly more popular, appearing in numerous magazines (117). However, several of Salinger's stories from the 1940s have never been republished because he refused such republications (117). He published *Nine Stories*, *Franny and Zooey*, *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters*, and *Seymour: An Introduction*, and "Hapworth 16, 1924" in 1953, 1961, 1963, and 1965 respectively (McGrath; Miller 552).

Salinger is recognized for his vivid depiction of young Americans during the post-WWII era as they are searching for their future (Mulligan 351). Despite his limited collection, Salinger is arguably one of the most popular American authors of the 20th century. Published in 1951, *The Catcher in the Rye* faced major criticisms for its controversial depiction of teenage angst. After WWII ended, the US emerged as the most powerful nation in the world, with 30 million children born in a period of 18 years following the war (Kallen 24-25). By the 1950s and 1960s, many of these children were going through their

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teenage years (24-25). The Catcher in the Rye reflected their unexplainable sensations and changes of adolescence (24-25).

The Catcher in the Rye was considered a controversial book in the 1950s because it portrayed the image of a rebellious teenager who engages in profanity, sexuality, and misanthropy (Kallen 32). In many communities, the book was banned (32). Although controversial, The Catcher in the Rye continues to be recognized as a classic story of the 1950s. With its intensive use of imageries, motifs, and other literary devices, The Catcher in the Rye captures the essence of teenage angst through the eyes of Holden Caulfield. Holden is an individual who views the world in a completely different light, acknowledging the phoniness of society and experiencing disappointments from the people around him.

After failing multiple schools, he is once again failing Pencey Prep High School in Pennsylvania. After a fight with his roommate, he decides to leave school early, but he does not return home until Wednesday to avoid the interrogation from his parents about his failures at Pencey Prep. In the meantime, he spends two days in New York City. On the last night, Holden visits his sister, Phoebe, on account that he misses her and is seeking to borrow money from her. When Phoebe meets him, she is quite excited to have his company and offers all of her money to him.

When their parents return home, Holden sneaks out of the house to avoid seeing them until Wednesday. On his last day of freedom, Holden plans to run away from home to a forest, but Phoebe disrupts his intentions. To appease his sister, Holden promises that he will return home with Phoebe.

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The story ends with Holden realizing that no matter how much he hates someone, he still misses that individual afterwards. Through the two-day journey of Holden Caulfield, *The Catcher in the Rye* artfully expresses a teenager's struggles to face reality. Throughout the book, the settings reflect many of Salinger's personal experiences and beliefs.

For instance, Salinger was born in New York City and spent most his childhood there (Telgen 117). It is no coincidence then that most of the novel takes place in New York City. To demonstrate the mastery of understanding the struggles of a teenager, it makes perfect sense for Salinger to choose a setting where he was familiar with as a teenager. When Holden describes New York, he states, " In New York, boy, money really talks—I'm not kidding" (Salinger 69). The statement demonstrates the author's fluency in the local culture of New York. Another factor that influences Salinger's development of the settings is his beliefs in Buddhism.

Death, old people, and sickness, three fundamental sufferings in Buddhism, all appear in the novel as an indication of Eastern influence on Salinger's writings (Rosen 161). When Holden visits Mr. Spencer, his schoolteacher at Pencey Prep, he describes a scene that aligns with this notion: The minute I went in, I was sort of sorry I'd come. He was reading the *Atlantic Monthly*, and there were pills and medicine all over the place, and everything smelled like Vicks Nose Drops. It was pretty depressing.

I'm not too crazy about sick people, anyway. What made it even more depressing, old Spencer had on this very sad, ratty old bathrobe that he was probably born in or something. I don't much like to see old guys in their

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pajamas and bathrobes anyway. Their bumpy old chests are always showing. And their legs.

Old guys' legs, at beaches and places, always look so white and unhairly. (Salinger 7) The diction, the mood, and the impression of this short narrative illustrate the influence of Buddhism on Salinger's construction of the settings. Evidently, Salinger's personal values and encounters have a major impact on his formation of the scenes. In the novel, Holden Caulfield resembles J. D. Salinger in many different aspects.

The most direct example of the connection is that Salinger himself managed his school's fencing team (McGrath). Similar to Salinger, Holden is also the manager of Pencey Prep's fencing team. When Holden is talking to the readers in the beginning of the novel, he states, " The reason I was standing way up on Thomsen Hill, instead of down at the game, was because I'd just got back from New York with the fencing team. I was the goddam manager of the fencing team" (Salinger 3). In addition, Holden also resembles Salinger in the academic front.

One of the first pieces of information that he reveals to the reader is that he is expelled from school: " I forgot to tell you about that. They kicked me out. I wasn't supposed to come back after Christmas vacation, on account of I was flunking four subjects and not applying myself and all. They gave me frequent warning to start applying myself...but I didn't do it" (4). Likewise, Salinger never did finish his post-secondary education; he placed minimal emphasis on his academic performance (Hipple 106; Telgen 117).

Evidently, the construction of Holden's academic attitude in the novel mirrors Salinger's experiences in his lifetime. Furthermore, the author's beliefs influence his literary creation. Once again, Holden Caulfield carries many notions that parallel Buddhist perceptions. Holden's attitude towards to the "phoniness" of society illustrates these notions (Salinger). When Holden is answering his sister, Phoebe, about what he likes, he reveals this attitude: "Lawyers are all right, I guess—but it doesn't appeal to me," I said. "I mean they're all right if they go around saving innocent guys' lives all the time, and like that, but you don't do that kind of stuff if you're a lawyer. All you do is make a lot of dough and play golf and play bridge and buy cars and drink Martinis and look like a hot-shot." (Salinger 171-172) This signifies Holden's denial of Western's culture and values. He does not trust many people around him, as he expresses during this conversation. He conveys deep despise and dissatisfaction in society.

Similar to Holden, Salinger also lacked interest in Western religions and culture, and he was more interested to Zen Buddhism (Kallen 27). Moreover, this quote also illustrates the parallel between Holden's and Salinger's family's financial situation. According to the conversation, Holden's father is a lawyer, which signifies that the family is at least educated and possibly wealthy. Salinger also grew up in a wealthy family (Telgen 117). As demonstrated, Salinger's image is embed into the behavior and attitude of Holden Caulfield.

Similar to the settings and character, J. D. Salinger's Buddhist beliefs also impact the development of the novel's themes. One such influence manifests

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in the paradoxical view of non-touching. In Zen Buddhism, there is a paradox of obtaining without obtaining (Takeuchi). According to many critics, Holden's hesitation to prevent his friend, Jane Gallagher, from infiltrating her purity with Stradlater, Holden's roommate at Pencey, expresses this principle (Takeuchi).

Holden is trying to save her innocence by not interfering with her decision. Salinger makes this concept absolutely clear at the end of the novel. When Holden is watching Phoebe riding the carousel, he remarks, " 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. If they fall off, they fall off, but it's bad if you say anything to them" (Salinger 211). This quote explains the notion of helping without helping.

Holden expresses how important it is to let one be himself or herself without interfering, no matter for what cause. Also, another motif of the book that suggests its connection to Salinger's beliefs is the association of sex with death. Sex signifies the deepest physical and emotional connection between humans, but as Salinger made it absolutely clear in the book, Holden wishes to withdraw himself from society. Because Buddhists consider this world to be unrealistic and unreliable, it is one of their fundamental principles to escape from worldly illusions (Rosen 158). For example, after the fight with Stradlater, Holden tells the readers that he " felt so lonesome, all of a sudden.

I almost wished I was dead" (Salinger 48). The fight with Stradlater is associated with Holden's concerns of Stradlater's sexual activities with Jane  
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Gallagher. Another instance of this motif occurs when Maurice, the procurer at the hotel, strikes Holden to demand more money for the prostitution. Afterwards, Holden expresses that he feels like “ committing suicide. I felt like jumping out the window. I probably would've done it, too, if I'd been sure somebody'd cover me up as soon as I landed” (104).

This remark shows Holden's tendency to associate sex with death. Not only does this demonstrate Holden's reluctance to involve in the most powerful type of human connection, but it also illustrates the parallel between Holden's attitude and Salinger's beliefs in Buddhism. Through the development of the themes, Salinger integrated his beliefs into the novel. For most of his later years, Salinger's literary career did not make tremendous progress. For more than 5 decades, Salinger lived in seclusion, denying his fame as an author (McGrath). He considered publications as an invasion of his privacy (Hipple 105).

On January 27th, 2010, J. D. Salinger passed away in Cornish, New Hampshire due to natural causes. Up until this point, his health was in excellent condition (McGrath). Even though Salinger's collection of works is quite limited, it gained him widespread popularity and earned him a respected reputation as an icon in American literature of the 20th century (French 434). His works particularly appealed to high school and college students (434).

Although Salinger is no longer alive, his literary creations will always live in the minds of the readers. In *The Catcher in the Rye*, J. D. Salinger drew upon his experiences and principles to construct Holden's two-day journey. For <https://assignbuster.com/j-d-salingers-the-catcher-in-the-rye-connections-to-literature/>

instance, he created scenes in the novel that resemble settings to which he was familiar.

He developed a character, Holden Caulfield, whose attitude and values are comparable to his. He also built the central themes of the novel through the implementations of motifs that illustrate his own beliefs. In conclusion, through the usage of his own experiences, Salinger created one of the greatest portrayals of teenage struggles amidst a confusing and unappealing society. Works Cited French, Warren. " J.

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