

Catcher in the rye character analysis of holden



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.. tors, both commenting on the problems of their times, and both novels have been recurrently banned or restricted (Davis 318). John Aldrige remarked that both novels are "study in the spiritual picaresque, the joinery that for the young is all one way, from holy innocence to such knowledge as the world offers, from the reality which illusion demands and thinks it sees to the illusion which reality insists, at the point of madness, we settle for" (129). Harvey Breit of *The Atlantic Bookshelf* wrote of Holden Caulfield: "(He) struck me as an urban, a transplanted Huck Finn. He has a colloquialism as marked as Huck's . .

. Like Huck, Holden is neither comical or misanthrope. He is an observer. Unlike Huck, he makes judgments by the dozen, but these are not to be taken seriously; they are conceits. There is a drollery, too, that is common to both, and a quality of seeing that creates farce" (82).

It is possible, in theory, to do an entire character study comparing Holden and Huck. Both are adolescents, runaways from society, seeking independence, growth, and stability in their lives. Another character that Holden Caulfield is compared to, though to a lesser degree than Huck Finn, is Hamlet. Like Hamlet, as Charles Kegel wrote, Holden is a "sad, screwed-up guy" (54), bothered by words which only seem true, but are really quite phony. The honesty and sincerity that Holden cannot seem to find in others he tries to maintain within himself. Holden often makes a point of using the word "really" to assert the fact that something is really so, to prove to the reader that had not become a phony himself.

Holden is distressed often by the occasional realization that he too, must be phony to exist in the adult world. With regard to the insincere "Glad to've met you" formula, he comments that "if you want to stay alive, you have to say that stuff, though" (qtd. in 54-5). It is evident by studying the reviews of *The Catcher in the Rye* that most critics enjoy picking apart the character of Holden Caulfield, studying his every action and the basis for that action. Reviewers of the novel have gone to great lengths to express their opinions on Salinger's protagonist. Some consider Holden to be sympathetic, others consider him arrogant, but the large majority of them find him utterly entertaining. In her review of *The Catcher in the Rye* for the *New York Herald Tribune*, Virgilia Peterson commented on Holden Caulfield's innocence.

Peterson wrote that Holden was on the side of the angels, despite his contamination by vulgarity, lust, lies, temptations, recklessness, and cynicism. "But these are merely the devils that try him externally," she wrote, "inside, his spirit is intact" (3). Holden does not tilt against the entire adult world, for he knows that some decent citizens still remain, nor does he loathe his worst contemporaries, for he often hates to leave them. Peterson commented: "For Holden Caulfield, despite all the realism for which he is supposedly depicted, is nevertheless a skinless perfectionist." In addition, Peterson wrote that Salinger speaks for himself as well as his hero when he has Holden say to little Phoebe: "I keep picturing all these little kids playing some game in this big field of rye and all. Thousands of little kids, and nobody's around- nobody big I mean- except me. And I'm standing on the edge of some crazy cliff."

What I have to do, I have to catch everybody if they start to go over the cliff. I mean if they're running and they don't look where they're going I have to come out from somewhere and catch them . . . I'd just be the catcher in the rye and all.

. . ." (qtd. in 3; Salinger 173). In essence, Holden Caulfield is a good guy stuck in a bad world. He is trying to make the best of his life, though ultimately losing that battle.

Whereas he aims at stability and truth, the adult world cannot survive without suspense and lies. It is a testament to his innocence and decent spirit that Holden would place the safety and well-being of children as a goal in his lifetime. This serves to only re-iterate the fact that Holden is a sympathetic character, a person of high moral values who is too weak to pick himself up from a difficult situation. S. N. Behrman, in his review for *The New Yorker*, also took a sharp look at Holden's personality. Behrman found Caulfield to be very self-critical, as he often refers to himself as a terrible liar, a madman, and a moron. Holden is driven crazy by phoniness, an idea under which he lumps insincerity, snobbery, injustice, callousness, and a lot more.

He is a prodigious worrier, and someone who is moved to pity quite often. Behrman wrote: "Grown men sometimes find the emblazoned obscenities of life too much for them, and leave this world indecorously, so the fact that a 16-year old boy is overwhelmed should not be surprising" (71). Holden is also labeled as curious and compassionate, a true moral idealist whose attitude comes from an intense hatred of hypocrisy. The novel opens in a doctor's office, where Holden is recuperating from physical illness and a mental

breakdown. In Holden's fight with Stradlater, his roommate, he reveals his moral ideals: he fears his roommate's sexual motives, and he values children for their sincerity and innocence, seeking to protect them from the phony adult society.

Jane Gallagher and Allie, the younger brother of Holden who died at age 11, represent his everlasting symbols of goodness (Davis 317). A quote by Charles Kegel seems to adequately sum up the problems of Holden Caulfield: " Like Stephen Dedalus of James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Caulfield is in search of the Word. His problem is one of communication: as a teenager, he simply cannot get through to the adult world which surrounds him; as a sensitive teenager, he cannot get through others of his own age" (54). When critics consider the character of Holden Caulfield, many point to the novel's climactic scene, when Holden watches as Phoebe rides the Central Park carousel in the rain and his illusion of protecting the innocence of children is symbolically shattered. Critics regard this episode as Holden's transition into adulthood, for although the future is uncertain, his severed ties with the dead past have enabled him to accept maturity. James Bryan observed: " The richness in the spirit of this novel, especially of the vision, the compassion, and the humor of the narrator reveal a psyche far healthier than that of the boy who endured the events of the narrative. Through the telling of the story, Holden has given shape to, and thus achieved control of, his troubled past" (qtd.

in Davis 318). S. N. Behrman noted in his critique of *The Catcher in the Rye* that the hero and heroine of the novel, Holden's dead brother Allie and Jane Gallagher, never appear in it, but they are always in Holden's mind, together

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with his sister, Phoebe. These three people constitute Holden's emotional frame of reference -- the reader knows them better than the other characters Holden encounters, who are generally, except for Phoebe, nonessential (71). When asked for a final comment on the character of Holden Caulfield, John Aldrige stated that the innocence of the main character was a combination of urban intelligence, juvenile contempt, and New Yorker sentimentalism. The only challenge it has left, therefore, is that of the genuine, the truly human, in a world which has lost both the means of adventure and the means of love (130). One of the most intriguing points in Holden's character, related to his prolonged inability to communicate, is Holden's intention to become a deaf-mute. So repulsed is he by the phoniness around him that he wishes not to communicate with anyone, and in a passage filled with personal insight he contemplates a retreat within himself: " I figured that I could get a job at a filling station somewhere, putting gas and oil in people's cars.

I didn't care what kind of job it was, though. Just so people didn't know me and I didn't know anybody. I thought what I'd do was, I'd pretend I was one of those deaf-mutes. That way I wouldn't have to have any goddam stupid useless conversation with anybody. If anybody wanted to tell me something, they'd have to write it on a piece of paper and shove it over to me. They'd get bored as hell doing that after a while, and then I'd be through with having conversations for the rest of my life. Everybody'd think I was just a poor deaf-mute bastard and they'd leave me alone .

. . I'd cook all my own food, and later on, if I wanted to get married or something, I'd meet this beautiful girl that was also a deaf-mute and we'd get married. She'd come and live in my cabin with me, and if she wanted to

say anything to me, she'd have to write it on a piece of paper, like everybody else" (Salinger 198). Caulfield's inability to communicate with others is also represented symbolically in the uncompleted phone calls and undelivered messages which appear throughout the novel . .

. On fifteen separate occasions, Holden gets the urge to communicate by phone, yet only four phone calls are ever completed, and even those are with unfortunate results (Kegel 55). The final step in the critical analyzing of *The Catcher in the Rye* is to look at what has occurred at or near the end of the novel. John Aldrige wrote that in the end, Holden remains what he was in the beginning- cynical, defiant, and blind. As for the reader, there is identification but no insight, a sense of " pathos but not tragedy." This may be Salinger's intent, as Holden's world does not possess sufficient humanity to make the search for humanity dramatically feasible (131). Other critics, however, have taken a slightly more optimistic view of the novel's conclusion. For example, S. N. Behrman remarked that Holden knows that things won't remain the same; they are dissolving, and he cannot allow himself to reconcile with it. Holden doesn't have the knowledge to trace his breakdown or the mental clarity to define it, for all he knows is that " a large avalanche of disintegration is occurring around him" (75).

Yet there is some sort of exhilaration, an immense relief in the final scene at Central Park, when we know Holden will be all right. Behrman quipped: " One day, he will probably find himself in the mood to call up Jane. He may become more tolerant of phonies . . . or even write a novel.

I would like to read it. I loved this one. I mean it- I really did" (75-6). Charles Kegel wrote that Holden will not submit to the phoniness of life, but will attain an attitude of tolerance, understanding, and love which will make his life endurable. There is no doubt that when he returns home to New York, for he will return home, he will be in the mood to give " old Jane a buzz" (56). In the end, *The Catcher in the Rye* will continue to be a point of great public and critical debate. One must remember, however, in the study and critique of the novel, particularly for a researcher or critic in 1996, that the story was written in a different time.

If originally published today, the novel would probably create little publicity and garner only average book sales. The fact that a novel of such radical social opinion and observation was written in a time of conservatism in America made it all the more controversial. Some critics scolded the novel as being too pessimistic or obscene, too harsh for the society of the 1950's. Others, however, nominated Salinger himself as the top-flight " catcher in the rye" for that period in American history (Peterson 3). They argued that Salinger's concerns represented an entire generation of American youth, frustrated by the phoniness of the world, just like Holden was.

The popularity of the novel and debate over its redeeming social value have never faltered since its initial publication, due in no large part to the fact that J. D. Salinger is now a recluse. It would be conclusive to say that critics of *The Catcher in the Rye* have legitimate criticisms of the novel, while advocates and supporters of the story's message also have expressed veritable praise.