

The unanswered  
question: holden  
caulfield, john  
yossarian and the  
fate of innocen...



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J. D. Salinger's novel *The Catcher in the Rye* and Joseph Heller's novel *Catch-22* reveal a concern for innocence within each protagonist. Salinger and Heller center their novels on questions relating to innocence: Holden Caulfield's "where did the ducks go" (Salinger, 13) and John Yossarian's "Where are the Snowdens of yesteryear?" (Heller, 35). Both Holden and Yossarian state a central question early in the novel. Each question develops with the protagonist's experience throughout the novel, revealing widespread ignorance in relation to innocence. The characters' interactions with others provide no help, so they must go on their own search for truth. This search, however, leaves both Holden and Yossarian with no answer. Holden Caulfield and John Yossarian introduce central questions that develop to reveal a single truth within each novel: the attempt to solve the disappearance of innocence will only lead to series of unanswered questions, and the only available conclusion is that the loss of innocence cannot be prevented in a hostile world. There are minor differences to address between the protagonists in *The Catcher in the Rye* and *Catch-22*. At sixteen years old, Holden is much younger than Yossarian (who is twenty-eight), and therefore has a slightly different perspective on life. Holden has a desire to stop all change to save innocence (which he reveals in the museum), while Yossarian is torn between his desire to save his own life and the desire to save others. At sixteen, Holden's most unfortunate situation is getting kicked out of prep school. At twenty-eight, Yossarian's worries are centered on everyone being out to kill him. Yossarian is an adult, while Holden is still an adolescent. Yossarian has experienced more than Holden has experienced: Yossarian has been to Europe, has had sexual experience, and has experienced war, while Holden has been confined to the world of adolescent

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male prep-school life. Once the differences between the two protagonists are recognized as minor, the striking similarities can begin to be understood. The central questions of the novels, at first glance, appear unrelated. How can Holden's question relating to ducks combine with Yossarian's question about a human to reveal the fate of innocence? Holden's concern for ducks appears to be of less importance than Yossarian's concern for humanity. Holden asks his question to different people, then searches for the answer on his own, while Yossarian leaves his question hanging throughout *Catch-22*, attempting to figure out an answer in his experience, leading to a startling revelation at novel's end. Yossarian's revelation in relation to innocence at the end of *Catch-22* is a more elaborate example of the disappearance of innocence than Holden's search for the ducks. Upon further examination, however, these questions are only different on the surface. Once these differences are set aside, the similarities between Holden Caulfield and John Yossarian come into view. The focus on one central question arises early in each novel, and each contributes to the revelation of the universal fate of innocence. Holden Caulfield introduces the question, "where did the ducks go," early in his narrative. Instead of listening to Spencer's explanation of why he should care about failing, Holden thinks about whether or not the ducks in Central Park will freeze in the winter. Holden wonders "if some guy came in a truck and took them away to a zoo or something. Or if they just flew away" when the lagoon freezes (Salinger, 13). To Holden, the preservation of life becomes important early in the novel. He worries that the ducks may not know where to go in the winter, freezing in the lagoon in Central Park. To Holden, failure is the inability to protect the innocent, and the ducks freezing in Central Park would be a calamity. He, however, is not

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only worried about protecting ducks. This concern for the ducks is a metaphor for Holden's concern for humanity. His true question in this: who will nurture and protect the innocent in a world that is freezing around them? Holden takes his question with him on his journey, and the answers he receives along the way reveal the fate of innocence. When Holden takes a cab downtown, he asks the driver, " You know those ducks in that lagoon... do you happen to know where they go, the ducks, when it gets all frozen over? Do you happen to know by any chance?" (Salinger, 60). The response Holden gets is indicative of the world around him. Holden describes the driver: " He turned around and looked at me like I was a madman" (60). The cab driver's response reveals that those who care about preserving the innocence of a species will be seen as insane. This attitude prevents progress in the same way it prevents Holden from finding out what happens to the ducks in Central Park. The second time Holden asks about the ducks, he asks Horwitz, another cab driver. Horwitz's response is, " How the hell should I know a stupid thing like that...The fish don't go noplac" (Salinger, 82). Horwitz discards Holden's concern as stupid, and he doesn't even provide a coherent answer to Holden's question. Horwitz answers a question about ducks with a statement about fish, and thus represents the illogical world around Holden. Not only will people look at Holden as a madman for caring about the innocent, they won't even provide coherent responses to his concerns. This experience is what David Castronovo describes as " something wrong with the world, something essentially dead and phony and disgusting about the arrangement of things" (Castronovo, 181). The world surrounding Holden is dead in the sense that it has no care for the innocent, as the drivers disregard the fate of the ducks. It is phony because it provides

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answers about fish to questions about ducks. It is disgusting because it cannot find meaning in questions like Holden's. This "dead, phony, and disgusting arrangement" is a hostile environment in which Holden is left alone, with very little hope. By the end of the novel, Holden searches for an answer on his own, unable to rely on the hostile people who view his questions as insane and stupid. After leaving the Wicker Bar, Holden states, "I figured I'd go by that little lake and see what the hell the ducks were doing, see if they were around or not. I still didn't know if they were around or not" (Salinger, 153). Holden needs to know what happens to the innocent. It is the main worry in his life. Holden reaches the lagoon, seeing it "partly frozen and partly not frozen" (153). He "walk[s] around the whole damn lake...but [doesn't] see a single duck" (153). Holden can't find an answer, and retires to a bench, "shivering like a bastard" (153), wanting to "come to terms with his despair" (Svogun, 112), and immediately thinks of his grandfather's funeral. Holden relates his inability to find an answer to death. Not only does the possible death of the ducks worry Holden, but the possibility that innocence itself may disappear like the ducks leaves him shivering. Holden feels like he may die after finding no hope that innocence may be saved. So, Salinger shows, the attempt to save the innocent will only reveal an unexplainable disappearance of the innocent, and the lack of an available answer to Holden's question shows that the problem of the disappearance of innocence has no solution. The fate of innocence is its unavoidable disappearance; this is revealed in Holden's unanswered question and is solidified by Yossarian's inability to find an answer to his own question. John Yossarian introduces the central question in *Catch-22* early in the novel: "and then there was Yossarian with the question that had no

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answer: ' where are the Snowdens of yesteryear?'" (Heller, 35). Snowden's question develops throughout the novel, as Holden's does in *The Catcher in the Rye*. Yossarian thinks " of Snowden...a vaguely familiar kid who was badly wounded" (436). As Holden reveals a concern for the preservation of life early in *The Catcher in the Rye*, Yossarian reveals the same concern early in *Catch-22*. To Yossarian, Snowden is the embodiment of innocence, a " kid" brought into war and destroyed by his environment. His question is not a desire to physically find the Snowdens of yesteryear. Yossarian wants to know what has happened to the innocent. He wants to know why he does not encounter more Snowdens. Yossarian searches for an answer throughout *Catch-22*. The first time he asks the question, the immediate response is, " I'm afraid I don't understand" (35). The corporal whom Yossarian asks has no ability to comprehend the question because he is oblivious to the loss of innocence in the world around him. Yossarian holds on to the question, hoping that somewhere he can find a solution to the problem of how to save the innocent. Yossarian, unable to find a comforting answer by asking his question, studies the people around him for answers. Kid Sampson, Nately, and Nately's Whore's Kid Sister are all characters who hold on to innocence and may provide an answer to his question. Their survival would provide Yossarian with the hope that innocence can, in fact, survive in the world around him. This would mean the Snowdens of yesteryear have not disappeared. However, the fates of these three people combine with Yossarian's experience of Snowden's death to show the hopelessness of an attempt to save the innocent. Kid Sampson's innocence is revealed in his name. He is the " kid" who is supposed to develop into Sampson in a society that expects the innocent to turn into men. His naïveté reveals itself in his <https://assignbuster.com/the-unanswered-question-holden-caulfield-john-yossarian-and-the-fate-of-innocence/>

first statement. Yossarian asks, "What's wrong with the plane?" (Heller, 140). Kid Sampson replies, "Is something wrong...are we bailing out?" (140). Kid's first reaction is fear, a fear that comes from inexperience. Kid still possesses the inexperience of an innocent youth. To further display his innocence, Kid "look[s] for moral support toward Nately" (141). Kid looks to the most innocent character in the novel for support and guidance. Linked to this high level of innocence, Kid's fate disturbs Yossarian more than any other character's. Kid's death is "one of many deaths which take us completely by surprise.... and convey an awful contingency, a callousness of God, nature and human depravity" (Young, "Deadly Unconscious Logics in Joseph Heller's Catch-22"). Kid's death disturbs Yossarian the most because "Kid Sampson had rained all over" (Heller, 338). Kid Sampson seems to be innocently enjoying a day at the beach, and stands on the raft while McWatt flies overhead. He is described as "blond, pale Kid Sampson" (337), like a child who has not yet been out in the sun, and his innocence is exposed when he doesn't think about the consequences of jumping up to touch McWatt's low-flying plane. McWatt's plane flies "just low enough for a propeller to slice [Kid] half away" (337) as Kid jumps. Like Kid Sampson, sliced in half by a plane, innocence is destroyed by those who don't pay attention to where they are, paying as much attention to the innocent as McWatt pays attention to where he is flying. Kid Sampson's fate is the first sign that innocence cannot survive in Yossarian's world, as even the strongest (the "Sampsons") of the innocent can be "chopped" down. Kid's death is the first opportunity for Yossarian to find the Snowdens of yesteryear that disappears, and shows that the innocent may die before he finds them. Nately is the main figure of innocence in Catch-22, as he "had <https://assignbuster.com/the-unanswered-question-holden-caulfield-john-yossarian-and-the-fate-of-innocence/>

lived for almost twenty years without trauma, tension, hate, or neurosis” (Heller, 248). He reveals his innocence in his conversation with the old man in Rome. Nately holds firm to the ideas introduced to him in the army, without questioning anything. Nately is unconvinced by the old man, stating “ There is nothing so absurd about risking your life for your country!” and “ Anything worth living for is worth dying for” (247). At nineteen, Nately accepts his job in the army as one that may involve death. Nately, an innocent character accepting death, expands the focus of Yossarian’s question. Now, the innocent are accepting death as a part of being a soldier instead of fighting the establishment with hopes of staying alive. Because Nately accepts the orders to keep flying missions, he is killed in a plane crash, when another plane “ chewed off” (376) his plane’s tail. Nately, one of the innocent figures Yossarian hopes to save, is sent spiraling and crashing to the ground and “ there were no parachutes” (376). Nately has no means of escape chewed up and spit out by those with no regard for the innocent. There is no hope for Yossarian to save Nately. The innocent continue to disappear. The ambivalent world around Yossarian keeps sending the innocent crashing to their deaths without wondering how their innocence could be saved. Nately’s Whore’s Kid Sister becomes Yossarian’s last hope to find the Snowdens of yesteryear. Yossarian visits Rome and finds the kid sister “ flushed away...out into the street” (Heller, 403). Yossarian is appalled that a kid would be allowed into that environment, fearing that her innocence would be lost. His immediate response is, “ But she’s only a kid!” (403). Yossarian sees another innocent human slipping away, and hopes to finally have the chance to save one. He asks around hoping he can find her, worrying that “ she’s just a little kid, and she’s all alone in this city with no

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one to take care of her" (409). He states, " I want to protect her from harm. Don't you know what I'm talking about?" (409). Yossarian sees that the world does not understand his desire to save the innocent. His search for the Snowdens of yesteryear will receive no aid from those around him. The one chance he has to save the innocent is lost, and a child is left to wander in a world that destroys innocence. At the end of his search, " Yossarian walked in lonely torture, feeling estranged" (413). Yossarian's search for the Snowdens of yesteryear reveals the ambivalent attitude of a hostile world: innocence may be lost forever, and nobody notices enough to try to save it. Because of this attitude, the fate of innocence becomes clear. Yossarian's final discovery is as disturbing as Holden's: the Snowdens of yesteryear are nowhere to be found, just as the ducks in the park have disappeared. There is no answer to his question, as Robert Young explains, " Yossarian asks many questions about the war, but they all boil down to one ' which had no answer': ' Where are the Snowdens of yesteryear?'" (Young, " Deadly Unconscious Logics in Joseph Heller's Catch-22"). The lack of an answer describing how to save the innocent shows that the deterioration of innocence will continue, and attempting to save the innocent will be futile. Holden Caulfield and John Yossarian reveal that the world will never provide an answer to the disappearance of innocence. The ducks on the pond and the Snowdens of yesteryear will not be found. Both go on a quest to find the answer to their question, yet, in the end, there is no answer. Holden is left shivering on a park bench, and eventually ends up in a mental hospital. Yossarian is left to flee his situation in search of peace in Sweden. Thus, the desire to solve the disappearance of innocence only leads to instability, and will send men to states of insecurity. Holden demonstrates this at the end of <https://assignbuster.com/the-unanswered-question-holden-caulfield-john-yossarian-and-the-fate-of-innocence/>

The Catcher in the Rye: " About all I know is, I sort of miss everybody I told about" (Salinger, 214). Holden misses the opportunity to try to salvage the innocence of all the people he meets. He misses the opportunity to at least try to save the innocent now that he knows there is no hope. He wants to return to his dream: " if they're running and they don't look where they're going I have to come out from somewhere and catch them" (173). In the same way, Yossarian knows that he will never find the Snowdens of yesteryear, but wants to return to some form of hope by running to Sweden. When Snowden dies, Yossarian realizes the inevitable fate of the innocent: Man was matter, that was Snowden's secret. Drop him out a window and he'll fall. Set fire to him and he'll burn. Bury him and he'll rot, like other kinds of garbage. The spirit gone, man is garbage. That was Snowden's secret (Heller, 440). In the end, insecurity prevails. There is no solution to the question of how to save the innocent. Holden Caulfield demonstrates the beginning of the insecurity when he finds no ducks in Central Park, knowing he will never figure out how to protect the innocent. Yossarian takes the fact that one will never figure out how to protect the innocent and proceeds to reveal the harsh reality that, after innocence disappears with the ducks on the lagoon, it is allowed to die with the Snowdens of yesteryear with man deteriorating into garbage. Thus, the questions combine. The ducks in Central Park become part of the story of the Snowdens of yesteryear. The lost innocent succumb to Snowden's secret, their potential protectors' questions unanswered, and innocence deteriorates, revealing that the fate of innocence is its disappearance.