

# **Student Essay**

## **Catcher in the Rye: the Naivety of Childhood by J. D. Salinger**

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# Catcher in the Rye: the Naivety of Childhood

In the novel, "The Catcher in the Rye" by J.D Salinger, the main character, Holden, is a teenager who refuses to grow up because he is naively fixated on childhood. Throughout the novel, Holden struggles through teenage life because he cannot accept the given responsibilities that come with growing up. Holden is obsessed with childhood because he chooses to be wedged between a world of the innocence of children and the complex world of adulthood. Holden deities his two younger siblings as if they're candidates for sainthood because of his fixation.

Holden is a teenager who refuses to grow up because he is afraid of gaining the responsibilities that come with it. So, Holden struggles hard to stay childish. For example, throughout the book, he does not want to take responsibility to communicate with others that may want to help him. He refuses to go home and confront his parents and face the consequences. Along with this, he also pulls the childish silent treatment toward his parents; because that's the only knife he has to hurt them: "...she wouldn't've been the ones that answered the phone. My parents would be the ones. So that was out." (pg. 59) He is afraid to talk to people close to him because they'll be critical to him. This would also explain his lack of interaction with Jane Gallagher: "...I kept standing there, of giving old Jane a buzz- I mean calling her long distance at B.M... The only reason I didn't call him was because I wasn't in the mood." (pg. 63) Since he is afraid of interaction with people close to him, he tries to get strangers to talk to, so the conversations he has with them won't go too into depth. He does not want to face the world of reality. For example, in chapter nine, Holden asks his cab driver, who is a complete stranger to him, for a cocktail once he's done driving Holden to the Edmont Hotel: "Would you care to stop on the way and join me for a cocktail" (pg. 60) Therefore, Holden will try to get some random stranger for a beer, as they won't criticize him.

Among other responsibilities, Holden tries to set rules up for himself like an adult, but ends up breaking them right away: "Last year I made a rule that I was going to quit horsing around with girls that, deep down, gave me a pain in the ass. I broke it though, the same week I made it- the same night, as a matter of fact." (pg. 63) Holden cannot maintain his rules, and ends up acting like a child, who needs someone else to set the rules up for him.

However, Holden does show some transition toward adulthood. For example, he has a sexual temptation toward things he also considers perverted. When he stays at Edmont, he admits: "It's really too bad that so much crummy stuff is a lot of fun sometimes." (pg. 12) In some aspects, he does show that he is growing up into an adult, even if he doesn't want to. Holden's strong focus of the ducks in the lagoon is also symbolic to his life. He is constantly concerned about where the ducks will go when the lake freezes: "I was wondering where the ducks went when the lagoon got all icy and frozen over. I wondered if some guy came in a truck and took them away to a zoo or something. Or if they just flew away." (pg. 13) Just like the ducks, Holden is wondering where he's going to go in life. He wonders if someone will guide him to the right direction, or if he'll guide himself through it by instinct. In addition, the lake itself is also somewhat symbolic to Holden's life. When Holden visits Central Park to see if there were any ducks still around, he mentions: "Then, I finally found it. What it was, it was partly frozen and partly not frozen." The lake is transitioning into two different states, frozen and not frozen, while Holden is transitioning between childhood and adulthood. Since Holden chooses to be frozen between the transitions, Holden hates change. When Holden goes to visit the Museum of Natural History, he states that he likes the museum because it will always be the same each time he visits:

"The best thing, though, in that museum was that everything always stayed right where it was. Nobody'd move. You could go there a hundred thousand times, and that Eskimo would still be just finished catching those two fish, the birds would still be on their way south, the deer would still be drinking out of that water hole, with their pretty antlers and their pretty, skinny legs, and that squaw with the naked bosom would still be weaving that same blanket." (pg. 121)

Therefore, Holden would love to live in a world where everything stays frozen, where nothing changes. This way, Holden can never grow up to be an adult.

Holden is a growing teenager who chooses to be frozen between a world of the innocence of children and complex world of adulthood. He is wedged between these two worlds because he possesses a fixation with childhood. Throughout the novel, Holden sounds like he is some grumpy old man who's angry about everything in the world as he narrates his story. However, when Holden constantly shows his curiosity for the ducks in the lagoon at Central Park, we see his genuine, more youthful side: ". . . I was thinking about the lagoon in Central Park, down near Central Park South. I was wondering if it would be frozen over when I got home, and if it was, where did the ducks go." (pg. 13) This shows that Holden does have thoughts and concerns that others would consider being childish. At the moment, he is fastened between the world of innocence and the adult world.

Holden finds the adult world very repulsive. In chapter ten, when he is in the lavender room of Edmont, he makes several comments that support this. For example, he finds the band, which consists of adults, as putrid: "The band was putrid." (pg. 69) Among this, he also states that the older guys in the lavender room were old and show-offy: "They were mostly old and show-offy looking guys" (pg. 69) He looks around the room, and sees these adults around home, and all he could state, is negativity toward them.

Since Holden has a strong attraction to the innocence of childhood, Holden struggles to stay as a kid, and ends up doing childish things. For example, in chapter ten, in the lavender room, he looks like a kid trying to act grown up when he tries to impress the three thirty year old at the table: "I started giving the three witches at the next table the eye again. That is, the blond one... I just gave all three of them this very cool glance and all." (pg. 70) To try and impress the ladies, he tries to create a cool façade of himself by trying to act older. However, even if Holden thinks he knows what's going on around him, he ends up knowing nothing, which shows innocence in his character. Throughout his time in the lavender room with the three girls, he says the trio is of lower intelligence than him: "You could hardly tell which one is the stupidest of them." (pg. 73) However, at the end of the chapter, they leave him to pay for their drinks, which actually is pretty witty: "I think they should've at least offered to pay their drinks they had before I joined them..." (pg. 75) So, in the end, due to his innocence, Holden is left as the dumb one, with a bill to pay.

Holden wants to be the "catcher in the rye." In chapter twenty-two, Phoebe asks Holden what he's going to do in his life. Holden then states:

"Anyways, 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. That's all I'd do all day. I'd just be the catcher in the rye and all. I know it's crazy, but that's the only thing I'd really like to be. I know it's crazy." (pg. 173)

Metaphorically, Holden wants to be the person to save the children before they fall out of their innocent knowledge into the repulsive world of adults.

Throughout the book, Holden constantly praises his two siblings, Allie and Phoebe, as if they were candidates for sainthood. This is a very big example of Holden's attraction for childhood. In chapter 5, Holden is writing a composition for Stradlater, and states many wondrous things about Allie: "He was two years younger than I was, but he was about fifty times as intelligent. He never got mad at anybody." (pg. 38) Holden exaggerates that Allie is fifty more times as Holden is, but, how smart can one kid really be? Also, he says that he never got mad at anyone, but, every kid has been mad at least once to their friends and family, unless they're not human. When Holden was up in his hotel room, she explains for the first time in the book, what Phoebe is like: "You should see her. You never saw a little kid so pretty and

smart in your life. She's really smart." (pg. 67) Similar to Allie's description, Holden deities his sister as if she's a child prodigy. Seven if she was smart for her age, it really doesn't say much. Again, how smart can a ten year old really be? Holden overrates his two siblings considerably, which is because of his fixation of childhood.

However, Phoebe is the only person alive that he seems to actually love throughout the novel. Phoebe is the family connection to Holden, and becomes the catalyst for Holden's metamorphosis to adulthood. She is the only one throughout the book that is actually critical toward Holden and tries to push him to do better by agitating him: "You don't like any schools. You don't like a million things." (pg. 169) When Holden hears this, he becomes very upset: "'I do! That's where you're wrong-that's exactly where you're wrong! Why the hell do you have to say that'" I said. Boy, was she depressing me." When Holden's only connection of comfort is lost, he becomes knocked back into reality, and ends up saying that he's going to apply himself better at the end of the novel:

..this one psychoanalyst guy they have here, keeps asking me if I'm going to apply myself with I go back to school next September. It's such a stupid question, in my opinion. I mean how do you know what you're going to do till you do it? The answer is you don't. I think I am, but how do I know"" (pg. 213)

Holden cannot accept the responsibilities and consequences that come with growing up, so to avoid the painfulness of maturing, Holden struggles to remain childish. He finds the adult world perverted and repulsive, but does not realize that he is slowly growing into the world. Due to his struggle to remain immature to society, he is fixated on the incorruption that children possess. He wants to be the 'catcher in the rye', which is a person who will catch kids that unintentionally run off a cliff covered in rye. Metaphorically, he wants to save the kids before they fall into the corruption that the adult world will entrap them in. Since Holden has a strong attraction to the innocence of childhood, he then worships his two younger siblings as if they were mini gods. When he finally gets to talk to the only close person he has, he is rudely awakened back into reality, by his kid sister, and is pushed to succeed.

Work Cited:

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